

8 Knowing, Not-knowing, Fiction: Remembering Ross David Burke

BRENDAN STONE

This paper considers a remarkable and largely forgotten narrative text which sheds light on the complexities and limitations of self-narration, and in doing so challenges overly simplistic understandings of narrative as a means of knowing or presenting the self. The text is *The Truth Effect* by Ross David Burke (1995) - a publisher's note on the dust jacket of the American edition bluntly summarises the circumstances around its production:

As soon as Ross David Burke finished his autobiographical novel in November 1985, he took a massive overdose of drugs and ended a life that had been plagued for more than ten years by paranoid schizophrenia.

Even in this short summary a hint of the challenges posed to the reader and the difficulties encountered by Burke in writing the text is apparent. But while classifying *The Truth Effect* as an 'autobiographical novel' may be a useful shorthand description, it does not do justice to what transpires in the course of this organic and extraordinary record of Burke's psychosis. A more accurate, but less tidy, description might be to call this text a narrative which *sets out* to be a fictionalised account of Burke's life, but in which the architecture of fiction gradually collapses, and the central character's descent into schizophrenic psychosis increasingly shadows Burke's own breakdown. Moreover, in my view, it is in this collapse of fictional distance and the eventual coalescence of narrator and narrated that the 'truth effect' of the text is consummated. At its close an unmanageable and terrifying distress invades and destroys the narrative - the force of which is inimical to the spirit of fiction as construction, artifice, art. Yet, despite, or rather because of, this failure to maintain the distancing effect of fiction, the remarkable achievement of *The Truth Effect* is to bridge that gap or silence which Foucault (1999) famously asserted separates and polarizes the realms of reason and madness: this *rapprochement* is achieved through the text's inconsistent and labyrinthine narrative economy. As the fictional architecture of the text crumbles, the reader is cast adrift in a disorienting narrative realm, and in that abyssal moment may understand that s/he is dimly glimpsing the interior world of its author.

The plot of *The Truth Effect* is fairly simple. The story tracks the adventures of the narrator (a character named 'Sphere') and his group of hippyish friends. Sphere records his experiments with hallucinogenic drugs, his brushes with the police, a spell in prison, his sexual relationships, and the birth of his daughter. At first the narrative's tone evokes the counter-culture and 'hippy-texts' of the early 1970s in which it is set (see Farina, 1972; Thompson, 1972). Thus, narrative oscillates between the fantastic and the prosaic, layering myth, mysticism, science-fiction, drug-fuelled hallucination and paranoia, and graphic sexual imagery on top of a more recognizable narrative universe (ie. the 'real' world). The laconic, stoned tone is exemplified at the beginning of the story when Sphere describes a trip into town with his friends:

We were on our way to the local hotel to get the monetary system into our septic system. In other words, we were high out of our minds on hallucinogenic mushrooms and we were on our way to the pub to get drunk and forget our sexual problems. (p.26)

As the story unfolds, however, this nonchalant tone is gradually eroded by intrusions of distress and disturbance. The reader begins to realise that the narrated realm does not represent the reality of Sphere's life and that he is actually living through intense psychological suffering. It becomes clear that Sphere is trying to transform his life into a counter-cultural fantasy/fiction by *re-writing* his distress.

The true story of *The Truth Effect* emerges gradually, but is prefigured even at the start of the book, where, in what then appears to be an oddly anomalous passage, Sphere declares:

I live in a psychiatric hospital [...] Society is out to kill me and already my thoughts have begun to hallucinate about this place. [...] I was out of control. Lost in my world of confusion. I realized that something was going wrong with my reasoning. I was talking shit again. My thoughts jumped. (pp.25 and 26)

The full significance of the narrative is evident in its form rather than its content: to grasp the true story we need to study the text's complex narrative mechanics, and in particular the multi-layering of narrative - a central means by which the disintegrating self is (perhaps involuntarily) signified. At first this layering appears unremarkable, but as the layers gradually split violently apart or, inversely, coalesce into an anguished howl, their value to understanding Burke's/Sphere's true story becomes obvious.

In the story-world, Sphere is writing a book about his life: a central textual conceit is that the artefact we are reading was written by Sphere. Thus, *The Truth Effect* is a book by Ross Burke, about a character named Sphere who is also writing a book about his life. This, as I shall go on to show, is crucial to the import of the work. Furthermore, there are narrative layers within the story-

world. Sphere is both narrator and protagonist, but these 2 roles are often at variance,¹ with the teller and the told-of occupying shifting and inconsistent sites. At times Sphere-narrator understands more about the realities of his distress than Sphere-protagonist; but at other times narrator and protagonist are indistinguishable and the text becomes akin to an agonized diary entry. As narrator/‘author’, Sphere seems sometimes to believe in the fantastic realm he is spinning, yet at other moments he appears aware that it represents a fiction or delusion. Thus, Sphere’s position as narrator shifts restlessly throughout, creating an impression that he is continually making ineffectual attempts to find a coherent subject position. All of this can make the narrative structure seem like a hall of distorting mirrors: frequently the text appears to be divorced from any stable narrative ground, that is, any narrative grounded in ‘reality’, fictional or otherwise.

Burke’s/Sphere’s attempt to re-write distress by transforming it into fantasy is addressed in frequent metafictional asides in which the difficulties and possibilities of narration are addressed. Indeed, in retrospect, it becomes clear that even the opening sentence of the book is tacitly acknowledging that a process of fictionalization is beginning:

Once upon a time, the story began with our hero, hereafter called Sphere, answering the unasked question. (p.25)

Here the explicit *naming* of an alter ego is foregrounded (“hereafter called Sphere”). We might stop to ask: so what was the hero’s name *before* this ‘hereafter’? And an answer might be: Ross Burke. There is a sense of Burke drawing a curtain aside to reveal his self-created alter, renaming himself, and directing attention toward his fictional protagonist - thereby trying to remove the exigencies of his actual existence from the reader’s view, and perhaps his own too.

As the narrative unfolds and the existential tactics on which Burke’s writing are predicated become clearer, such metafictional asides accrue poignancy and resonance. The ‘persons’ of Sphere and Burke become hard to distinguish. Thus, when Sphere addresses his writing in a passage which veers towards dislocation from the diegetic context, little decoding is needed on the reader’s part to deduce that the sentiments may not just be Sphere’s, but Burke’s too.

It’s a book about the things a man couldn’t face but, once faced, their significance fades into insignificance. It’s about the meaning of a word, Sphere, that means nothing, zero or perfection. I wanted a reason to live so I invented a reason. (p.198)

Here, the fictionalizing of the self is invoked as potentially therapeutic: for Sphere-Burke the strategies of ‘invention’ and creating an alter-ego are

attempts to manage “the things a man couldn’t face”. Furthermore, a considerable investment has been placed in the fictionalised narrative economy: Sphere declares that his reason for living is situated in an invented realm and is itself an ‘invention’. This powerful declaration brings to mind the work of theoreticians like Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney on the dynamics of narrative identity. Ricoeur’s statement (1991: 26) that “to speak of the world of the text is to stress the feature belonging to every literary work of opening before it a horizon of possible experience, a world in which it would be possible to live,” or his assertion (ibid: 33) that “by means of the imaginative variations of our own ego ... we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves” accord with aspects of Burke’s project here. However, in the light of the failure at the heart of this book to maintain the narratively remade self, one is drawn to Kearney’s warning (2002: 95) that “story-telling can also be a breeding ground of illusions, distortions”. In his account of the *ethics* of the narrative self, Kearney maintains (2002: 96) that the “process of narrative critique takes the form of a cathartic clarification whereby the self comes to know itself by retelling itself”, and that this stands opposed to the bad faith of a narrative emplotment which serves “as cover-up”. In this, he argues (2002: 96), “narrative concordance may mask discordance, the drive for order and unity [displace] difference, happy endings [conceal] contradictions”. For the individual living with acute distress, stigmatized by his culture, and whose very existence invokes disapprobation, the motivation to produce an acceptable story instead of one which fits with his experience may be intense. Burke’s narrative reconfiguration of himself as the drug-addled Sphere may seem on the surface to be less socially acceptable than a story of schizophrenia; however, in the narrative’s context - that of a group of 1970s counter-cultural ‘freaks’ - dropping-out and drug use are normative, while Sphere’s ‘real’ madness disturbs the fabric of this micro community.

The rejection of the ‘real’ Burke-Sphere by his hippy comrades, in which his attempts to signify the truth of his disturbing counter-reality are rebuffed, is repeatedly invoked in the text. Here are three examples:

I was flipping out into a science-fiction nightmare. “Rainbow, did you say that we had been captured by an unidentified flying saucer?” I asked.

“No, mate.”

Shit, the meaning of the universe lost. [...]

“You and your dreams usually make no sense. You’ve got a disturbed head.”

(pp.38-9)

My conviction is for all of our thoughts to be free.

“Bullshit,” Wasteland says.

(p.112)

I said, “[...] I’m a sorcerer and we will live in lightning flashes for ever.”

“Footrot, mate,” [Cane Toad] replied. “When are you going to talk straight?”

(p.118)

Such episodes are frequently followed by moments of intense anguish for Sphere in which he appears to be left, as both narrator and protagonist, anxiously grasping for certainty as his faith in his fantasy existence is undermined. For instance, after one such rejection, Sphere-as-protagonist withdraws from his friends and internally recites an anxious mantra:

I crossed the room and looked into the mirror and thought, Whoever knows the rules can play the game, Whoever knows the fear words can control the universe. (p.91)

But following this, his withdrawal is reproduced in the narration as it also withdraws (from the story-world) and switches to the present tense:

Still I know that nobody controls the universe. In the end it comes and goes and we're going back to where it comes from. Now it comes back on me as five years ago it was the culmination of acid rock and now I have become disco. (p.91)

Here, it is as if Sphere no longer narrates but rather speaks to himself (to Sphere-Burke) of lonely delusion. This pattern recurs throughout the text, until, at the end, narration barely engages with the story-world or its characters at all. The impression is produced that both protagonist and narrator are becoming increasingly isolated within and from their creations; and that Sphere is realising that the foundations underpinning his narrative reworking of the self are unsound. Narration comes to resemble less a reliable window onto a consistent realm and more the outworking of a lonely pathology. Moreover, and fashioning a deeply unsettling experience for the reader, the growing conflicts between Sphere and his friends signifies one of the most obvious ways in which the fictional architecture of the text collapses. The 'consensuality' of the story-world (that is, its quality of being shared and participated in by all of its characters) erodes - not by means of clever postmodern narrative trickery, but rather because of an uncontained narrative entropy. Thus, as we have seen, at first Sphere speaks of 'we' and 'us' - implying that all the characters participate in the same story-world, and that the text is structured around a singular mutual 'reality'. Yet, as his characters increasingly reject the vision of reality that Sphere offers, it becomes apparent that he inhabits a different realm to his creations, and that, in addition, Sphere-as-narrator and Sphere-as-protagonist inhabit different realms to each other. That the characters in this text become increasingly autonomous from, and hostile to, their 'author', can be read as a powerful image of the dislocated self - whose imaginative creations have come to assume a terrifying life of their own.

Burke's choice of name for his protagonist is significant; and again sheds light on the fictionalizing process. There are several revealing moments in the narrative when its etymology and connotations are invoked.

It's a book about the things a man couldn't face but, once faced, their significance fades into insignificance. It's about the meaning of a word, Sphere, that means nothing, zero or perfection. I wanted a reason to live so I invented a reason. (p.198)

The symbol is sphere. When the last sphere, the sun, the earth rolls into its ordered place, you will see before your eyes all the days of your life. (p.195)

Go to the centre of the Sphere. I am the perfect ego self [...]. (p.180)

In the first of these quotations, 'Sphere' is denoted as a "word" rather than a name, emphasizing that the choice has emerged from a process of narrative and lexical *craft*. In addition, allusions to fictionalization ('invention' and 'the book'), are interwoven with references to the connotations of the name 'Sphere', here deemed to signify "zero or perfection". 'Sphere', then, has been selected firstly because of its connotations of negation and emptiness whereby what is present and painful is reconstituted as nothing. To recall Blanchot, narrative appears here as that "constitutive re-move whereby imagination negates given states of affairs" (Clark, 1992: 77). Secondly the name invokes wholeness, perfection, plenitude, and completion. We might think here of the Copernican notion (1976) of the heavenly spheres, or Heidegger's discussion (1971: 123) of the symbolism of the sphere:

But only Presence itself is truly present - Presence which is everywhere as the Same in its own center and, as such, is the sphere.

Such connotations are pertinent because a defining motif of *The Truth Effect* is Burke's/Sphere's longing for a salutary wholeness of self. But the desire for wholeness can be also linked to a view of fiction as self-sufficient or separate from the world - in which what is painfully 'significant' may be transformed into trivia through the process of fictionalization. In such a reading the 'wholeness' and perfection of the (mythical) sphere align with an image of the fictional text, and, by extension, the narratively transformed self, as separate from the painful contingencies of existence.

However, the mythical perfection of the self-sphere is symbolically violated - again, even on the first page of the narrative.

Once upon a time, the story began with our hero, hereafter called Sphere, answering the unasked question. I wonder why I answer when the answer presents itself? I answer because I am a little-known secret that is soon to become a well-

known secret. I answer because I am [...] Let me again introduce myself. I am Sphere, and this is the book of fear. It is a book of years. It is a book of power and here is its strength. It is about non-reality and reality and dreams and nature and truth. (p.26)

Sphere's declaration, "I answer because I am", has echoes of the Cartesian *cogito* ('I think, therefore I am'), and all of its attendant implications of the self as contained, atomistic, and whole. Yet this image of the self-contained self/sphere/fiction is immediately punctured. "I am Sphere, and this is the book of fear" foregrounds the phonetic proximity of 'Sphere' and 'fear'; connotations of wholeness and self-sufficiency inhering in 'Sphere' are undercut by a tacit acknowledgement that it co-exists with its binary opposite. After all, *fear* is catalysed by the possibility of being overwhelmed by something other - something 'outside' our *sphere* of reference. Thus, the sphere's/self's smooth periphery is overshadowed by threat and vulnerability.

The Truth Effect ends with a shocking narrative collapse. Following the end of Sphere's relationship with his lover, the story-world suddenly vanishes and is replaced with a series of bizarre and delusional passages apparently detached from any diegetic context. The only way that this section might be assimilated into the story as a whole is as an immersion of the narrator into his madness and his complete separation from any social context. Finally, even the fragile cohesion of delusion seems to shatter into despair, with Burke-Sphere attempting to reach out to his readers from both the fantasy of the text-world, and the loneliness of madness.

Cursed. My life is a living hell. The book is a lie. Do you fucking understand, creeps and cretins? It's a lie. I am a liar. It's a fantasy. (p.217)

Here Burke-Sphere relinquishes fiction/fantasy, and signals its failure as a strategy to manage and transform distress. He goes on:

This is the world I love being murdered by the beasts of more. This is our salvation and our destruction [...] Do you want more? Shall I go on? More, more, more. The child molester came out of hell. Do you want more? (p.217)

The following page is entirely filled with the italicised word 'more' arranged in lines and columns. This textual fracture consummates the complete failure of narrative, suggesting that it can no longer contain suffering - that there is, and always will be, 'more', an unmanageable excess, or, to borrow from William Styron's description (1992: 83) of mental illness, that 'behind' this page is "a horror [...] so overwhelming as to be quite beyond expression".

Opposite the final page of the narrative, the editors have included a transcript of Burke's suicide note; reading it, one realises that Burke and Sphere have indeed moved ever closer, until by the close they are

indistinguishable. Sphere also decides on suicide and his declaration that “My life is a living hell [...] I never will escape from paranoid schizophrenia” (p.217) shockingly anticipates Burke’s explanation: “I cannot live in insanity and that is the only reason why I die. I’m a paranoid schizophrenic and for us life is a living hell” (p.221).

In the final paragraph of *The Truth Effect*, Burke-Sphere writes that “the book has died” (p.220). The statement is closely hemmed in by the textual signs of Burke’s and Sphere’s deaths. The ‘death of the book’ signifies, for me, the failure of the narrative project by means of which Burke has attempted to transform his existence. Yet, in part because of this ‘failure’, his text stands as an extraordinary and terrible record of a mind at the end of its tether. The truth effect of Burke’s narrative is produced precisely in the collapse of his intended narrative strategy: it is in the erosion and overwhelming of narrative intention, the transgressions of shifting narratological boundaries, that we perceive the figure of Ross Burke and his suffering.

Notes

1. In any narrative - even when the narrator is telling his own story, there are two separate entities at work: a teller and a told-of. And these can never wholly coincide (the famous autobiographical doubling in the self, the inherent split in autobiography).

References

- Burke, R. (1995) *The Truth Effect*, published as: *When the Music’s Over: My Journey into Schizophrenia* (R. Gates and R. Hammond eds), New York, Basic Books (Originally published: Armidale, University of New England, 1993).
- Copernicus, N. (1976) *On the revolutions of the heavenly spheres* (A.M. Duncan trans.), Newton Abbot, David and Charles.
- Clark, T. (1992) *Derrida, Heidegger, Blanchot: Sources of Derrida’s Notion and Practice of Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Farina, R. (1972) *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, London, New English Library.
- Foucault, M. (1999) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (Richard Howard trans.), London, Routledge.
- Heidegger, M. (1971) *Poetry, Language and Thought* (Albert Hofstadter trans.), New York, Harper and Row.

- Kearney, R. (2002) 'Ethics of the narrative self', in M. Verdicchio and R. Burch (eds) *Between Philosophy and Poetry: Writing, Rhythm, History*, London, Continuum, pp.91-8.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991) 'Life in Quest of Narrative', in D. Wood (ed), *On Paul Ricoeur*, London, Routledge, pp.20-33.
- Styron, W. (1992) *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, London, Picador.
- Thompson, H.S. (1972) *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, London, Paladin.

