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The Blurred Narrators of
Douglas Coupland's *Life After God*

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Abstract:

This essay examines the construction of narrator identity in Douglas Coupland's short story composite *Life After God*. It suggests a reading of blurred narrators, a narrator identity positioned in between one and several. This is created through the omission of distinguishing qualities in the narrators of the different chapters. The narrators are blurred further by there being no causal links between the chapters.

The narrators of the text have experienced an ideologically homogeneous environment while growing up and are poorly equipped to tackle free choice as it looks in their adult lives. The loss of stability renders crises and confusion in the narrators. The blurred narrators allow the implied reader to experience a similar confusion in the reading experience. The confusion relies on reader-expectation of a traditional discourse where a distinct narrator is conventional in a first-person narrative.

The blurred narrators are a metafictional construction, imperceptible by the characters in the text. This shows the reality presented in the fiction to be structured by an outside force, the author. To readers, this deconstructs the possibility of perceiving realism in the text.

The blurred narrators are also discussed in relation to the recurring Christian imagery and the theme of *self* and *self-perception*. The fluid narrator identity presents the image of narrated thoughts, emotions and events as equally shared between the narrators. This is interpreted in relation to the implied reader of the text.

1 Introduction

Douglas Coupland's novels are currently positioned in between what is considered popular literature and what is considered good literature¹. In the anthology *Postmodern American Fiction* Coupland's name appears next to the likes of Thomas Pynchon, Norman Mailer, Toni Morrison and Joyce Carol Oates. In spite of this, no major critical work has devoted attention to his texts. A similarly curious contrast is his ability to retain popularity without resorting to lightweight entertainment. His texts often discuss large themes like identity and crises and had in the year 2000 been translated into 22 languages (Chung).

Coupland's short story composite *Life After God*, on which this essay will focus, was published in 1994 and consists of eight chapters/short stories². Read separately, each short story is a self-sufficient narrative presenting its own distinct narrator. Looking at criticism from the time of publication it is striking how confused critics are with the number of narrators in the text. One reviewer says that the book is 'narrated by young white males'³ (Sheremata) while another says that the 'short stories [are] told by a narrator named Scout' (Richardson). Yet another critic talks about the '[t]he narrators of these tales, each told in the first person' (Kinch). A final critic says that 'the book ponders a world and a narrator who have nothing to believe in' (Katz). No critic has to my knowledge discussed this confusion—all seem to have found their own way of fitting either alternative into their interpretation, and have conveniently over-looked all other options. This essay will examine how the narrators' identities have been constructed and suggest interpretations of how narrator identity relates to other aspects of the text.

1.1 Project Description

Both of the readings that previous critics have made (of one and of several distinct narrators) are invited by the text. Few distinguishing details are provided for the narrators of the different chapters and no causal links exist between the events of different chapters. Distinct narrators are also favoured by a strong literary tradition, and thus what readers initially will expect to find.

However, in a more careful reading of the text, readers are likely to find passages which point to a more complex narrator identity. These play with singularity and plurality both in

¹ Although the distinction between these categories today is indeed fluid, they still affect the literary debate.

² Henceforth references will be made to *chapters*. When referring to *the text* this will mean *Life After God* as a whole.

³ Interestingly enough, there is no mention of skin-tone in the text.

form and theme. Such a play would be unmotivated and inexplicable in a reading of distinct narrator identities. Since both possible versions of such a reading are similarly and equally affected, I will argue that the text positions its narrator identity in between *one* and *several*. The narrators of the different chapters are neither separate, nor the same; they are blurred.

Because of the blurred status of their narrators, the chapters consequentially also function as autonomous short-stories and one united text simultaneously. The construction of narrators places the text in the short story composite-genre. This genre is defined by Rolf Lundén as a ‘form of narrative consisting of interlocking, autonomous stories, a narrative consciously constructed around the tension between simultaneous separateness and cohesion’ (33). The short story composite-genre is at present a marginal genre of fiction, heavily overshadowed by the novel and the short story proper. In light of this, we can assume that the form of the text is more likely to be connected to the themes of the text, than in the case of a collection of short stories or a novel.

This essay will use the method of close reading in combination with discussion to explore how the blurred narrators are constructed. It will analyze the relationship between the blurred narrators and the themes of self-perception and Christianity. The image of shared experiences in a group is presented through the blurred narrators. This will also be analyzed and discussed. Furthermore, the implications of the blurred narrators as a metafictional trait, deconstructing the realism of the text, will be examined.

1.2 Previous Research

In its discussions of generic specificities, this essay relies on the work of Rolf Lundén who I am indebted to for greatly improving my understanding of the short story composite-genre. His work, *The United Stories of America*, surveys previous research on the genre and attempts to shift focus from the unifying to the disruptive aspects specific to texts partaking in this genre. The outline of the short story composite is not closed in Lundén’s text, thus encouraging and forecasting a creative evolution of its form. Lundén’s definition of the short story composite as a ‘form of narrative consisting of interlocking, autonomous stories, a narrative consciously constructed around the tension between simultaneous separateness and cohesion’ (33) highlights several important aspects of *Life After God*.

Lundén outlines the genre in part by an extensive discussion of the shortcomings of previous attempts at defining it. He avoids producing a neat list of characteristics obligatory or exclusive to the genre and instead approaches the texts, recognizing their openness and possible contradictions. In support of his open approach to generic definition, Lundén argues

Austin Wright's view of genre as a cluster of characteristics of which a text can partake, rather than a group of works that it belongs to (32). Lundén describes the short story composite-form as reflecting characteristics which are essential in the contemporary concept of an American identity. This is done in the chapter *E Pluribus Unum*. To illustrate his point he examines two short story composites that overtly deal with illustrating a cross-section of the American population. However, due to this unfortunate choice of texts, no real link between American culture and the form of the text (without American culture being a part of the theme of the text) is made.

There is a relatively small amount of literature available that discusses Coupland's work. It consists mainly of reviews and shorter articles in connection with book-releases. As stated above, the texts of this popular writer have as of yet not been the subject of any major critical work. What has been written focuses mainly on *Generation X*. The most scholarly piece of critique devoting attention to *Life After God* is an article found in *Literature and Theology*, discussing its use of epiphany and ritual as recurring imagery. This article is deserving of credit for its thorough research and for paying this popular authorship academic attention. It discusses three of Coupland's texts: *Generation X*, *Life After God* and *Girlfriend in a Coma*. The author sees the use of religious imagery in these texts as informed by the Puritan and Transcendentalist traditions in North America. Use of religious imagery (primarily Christian) in Coupland's authorship has also been quoted on several other occasions in American religious press (Tate, Goode).

The anthology *Postmodern American Fiction*, in which Coupland is included, is introduced by Geyh, Leebron and Levy. In their text, they discuss the bearing that events such as the atomic bomb and the assassinations of leaders like Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy have had on fiction written in America after the Second World War (xi-xvi). Although I feel that *Life After God* invites such contextualization, I will refrain from including this in my analysis since the limited scope of this essay does not require it.

2 The Construction of the Blurred Narrators

To those readers who are in the habit of analyzing literature (in addition to reading for pure personal enjoyment) discussing the *construction* of literature is as natural as anything. To other readers a meticulous analysis of a text may seem destructive to the suggestive force of the fiction. If we do not wish to dissect and analyze the text, we will in most cases be left blissfully unaware of its artifice. We will be allowed to immerse ourselves in the fiction with

strong emotions like empathy and affection or disgust and aversion. This is not the case with *Life After God*.

The blurred narrators of the text are its most important metafictional trait, existing above the individual chapters, imperceptible by the characters and not causally linked to any of the events that are described. We see from this that the construction of blurred narrators is the work of a force acting from outside of the fiction, the author's structuring hand. It shows the text as a product of the author and the truth of the fictional universe to be subject to a greater truth (the one in which the author creates the text). As the reader realizes this, the degree to which he is able to perceive the text as realistic is heavily reduced. The meta-level of *Life After God* enjoys a very important status. As will be shown in the analysis of the blurred narrators' relation to other aspects of the text, *Life After God* becomes considerably more rewarding and complex if its meta-level is taken into consideration.

As has been stated above, readings of distinct narrators are initially invited by the text and little information is provided that contradicts them. The strongest indicators to a more complex reading of the narrators are found in 'The Wrong Sun'. The chapter is divided into two parts – 'Thinking of the Sun' and 'The Dead Speak'. The two parts have similar structures. 'Thinking of the Sun' retells fantasies of seeing the flash of a nuclear blast and moments where a fear of such a situation has come over the narrator. In 'The Dead Speak' this is doubled by descriptions of dying moments encountering a nuclear blast (as these are carried out in first person, we know that the narrators change). The single narrator of the first part is doubled by the plural narrators of the second part.

'Thinking of the Sun' ends with comments on how such fears are common and stay with many people throughout life, thus uniting (by generalization) the experiences of individuals into a collective experience. 'The Wrong Sun' ends with the dead speaking in one voice. In a similar way it unites distinct voices into one voice. Coupland creates a play with the modes of singularity and plurality. Both concluding passages are illustrated with similar pictures of a black sun.

The chapter is placed fourth out of a total of eight—a symbolic middle, emphasizing its relevance. The text's implied reader⁴ will perceive a stable narrator identity until Coupland intervenes and throws the identities into question. The text's implied reader is one that shares the experience of childhood fear of nuclear apocalypse. He will feel the emotive force of this

⁴ The implied reader is an ideal reader without relation to the text's real readers. It is with this reader in mind that the author has structured his texts. The implied reader is equipped with the correct frames of reference, previous experiences and general disposition to experience the text as it was intended by the author. The term was coined by Wolfgang Iser (Rabinowitz).

fear as it is presented and therefore further consider the implications of this chapter. The implied reader will at the intervening 'The Wrong Sun', stop and ponder the seventy pages he has read to go on reading with a new perception of the text.

Coupland writes in a minimalist style. He is consistent in providing his readers with very little information on what he describes. This differs to a conventional mode of writing prose, where authors most often attempt to give readers a good perception of what is described. The implied reader of the text will expect to find such a conventional use of mimesis and will inevitably be provoked by the perceived incompleteness of the mimesis in *Life After God*. Such a provocation will, according to the theories of Michael Riffaterre, cause the reader to analyze the text further. When writing on intertextuality, Riffaterre says that there are 'literary representations almost devoid of descriptive content [...] And yet these texts not only lend themselves to interpretation but they are especially apt to trigger and control the reader's hermeneutic behaviour' (141). A great discrepancy between the mimesis of *Life After God* and the amount of descriptive content which the implied reader expects to find is created. The increased hermeneutic activity can be what allows the reader to detect the overlapping identities of the narrators.

2.1 Differences and Similarities in the Narrators

The minimalist style in which *Life After God* is written is its most powerful means to creating the blurred narrators. It allows names and distinguishing qualities in the narrators to be omitted. The text is also consistent in its use of the first-person form. Grammatically the same anonymous narrating *I* stays with the reader during the course of the whole text. From the perspective of a reading of one distinct narrator, what is present in one chapter can have been omitted in the next if not instrumental to the events described. It can also have disappeared due to a separation in time.

Here follows a survey and discussion of qualities that are shared by narrators of different chapters and those that signal a possible change in narrator to readers. I do not claim to have exhausted the investigation of common characteristics and I will not at any greater length discuss the more obvious facts, like age and gender of the narrators. Narrators are male and seemingly in their thirties throughout, with the exception of 'The Dead Speak'. The same exception applies to all narrators having been raised in, or in the narrating present living in Vancouver⁵.

⁵ Although sometimes vague, references to Vancouver and British Columbia are made in all chapters.

Melancholy⁶ - All chapters of *Life After God* describe the narrator with feelings of sadness (with the exception of 'The Wrong Sun' discussing fear). In most cases this is stated at the beginning of the chapter. The narrator of 'In the Desert' does not openly state such feelings, but contemplates lack of hope and faith in himself. A general disposition of melancholy is not a signifying feature like an amputated arm or a facial tattoo as most people have occasional moments of sadness and melancholy. Therefore, the narrators of the different chapters cannot be argued to be the same character on the grounds of this; it simply blurs their identities.

The child - The narratees of 'Little Creatures' and 'Gettysburg' are both children of the narrators, and the narrator of 'In the Desert' says that he has a family (170). In 'Gettysburg' the child is specified as female (114). In both 'Little Creatures' and 'Gettysburg' the children remain nameless to the reader. The anonymity of the children and the similar form of address in the two chapters tempt readers to see the chapters as mediated by the same narrator. Considering the anonymity of both narrator and child, there is no final answering this; their identities are blurred, neither separate nor the same.

Parents - All narrators would have parents; all parents are however not present in the text. The narrators' parents appear in 'Things that Fly', 'The Wrong Sun', 'Gettysburg', 'Patty Hearst' and '1,000 Years (Life After God)'. The parents are described with few specific features other than a middle class life-style. All parents remain nameless and bear resemblance to one another in their traditional gender-roles. In 'Things That Fly' the narrator says that his 'mother was in the kitchen making 1947-style cream cheese sandwiches with pimentos' (60). In 'The Wrong Sun', a cherished family story is retold of when the narrator's father was stationed in Germany in 1962. His wife and family had come with him. In 'Gettysburg' the mother visits the narrator who says that 'she talks while she washes my dishes' (122). She also affirms a belief in marriage—even a loveless one. This is a thought that seems foreign to the ideology of the narrators of the text. In summary – although the parents that are presented in the text share many characteristics, these are all general and described in vague ways. They are indistinguishable from one another. The descriptions that are provided further blur the identities of the narrators.

Siblings - Two of the narrators have siblings present in the text (and none is said to be an only child). These are the last two, of 'Patty Hearst' and '1,000 years (Life After God)'. Brent, Wendy and Laurie are the narrator's siblings in 'Patty Hearst'. In the last chapter there

⁶ I refrain from using words such as depression as the character-descriptions do not invite psychoanalysis. Although a vague term, *melancholy* today belongs to the same sphere of representational art as fictional characters.

is only a short mention of the narrator's brother. 'I called an old college friend of my brother's' (257). The narrator also says that he is 'the youngest of many children' in the same chapter (278). Since Brent in 'Patty Hearst' is called the 'younger brother' (178) these narrators are clearly separated. In a superficial reading, such short mentions of distinguishing qualities can be missed.

Friends - The narrator's relationships to childhood friends take up a great part of '1,000 Years (Life After God)'. Their relationships seem to have had a great impact on the narrator. As there is no mention of these characters elsewhere in the book, this could signal a change in narrator to readers. Considering the minimalist style of the prose this can be accepted as an omission on the grounds of relevance, since they are not immediately instrumental to any of the events in the other chapters. Since this is the last chapter of the text, a reader decided on a reading of one distinct narrator will have a hard time changing his perspective at this point, unless immediately contradicted.

Employment - How the narrators support themselves is stated in vague ways. The general theme of the text is very focused on *being* rather than *doing*. The narrator's function in the economic equation of society is less relevant to such a theme. Employment can of course come and go and unemployment ('My Hotel Year') does not contradict the narrator working in an office at another point in time. In '1,000 Years (Life After God)' the narrator works in the sales department of a software company (248) and the narrator of 'Gettysburg' is a traveling software salesman (114). The office in 'Patty Hearst' is only mentioned in passing: 'left my office early' (183).

The narrator of 'In the Desert' supports himself smuggling steroids across state borders. This is the most contradictory occupation described in the text. A criminal life-style is a striking contrast to regular employment, which should signal a change in narrators to the reader. To summarize—no absolute contradiction is created. However, signals implying the possibility of several narrators are given throughout. The narrators are blurred, but not entirely indistinguishable from one another.

Biography - Several chapters of 'Life After God' incorporate parts of Douglas Coupland's own biography. Although Coupland himself has a successful career as an artist and writer, the story of Squirrely the Squirrel (20) discusses a worry that any professional artist/writer would have to deal with. The story mentions the Vancouver Art Gallery, which hosted a sculpture exhibition of Coupland's in November 1987 (Chung).

Coupland was born on December 30th 1961 in Baden-Sölingen (Ibid.). He shares both birth-day and birth-place with the narrator of the first part of 'The Wrong Sun' (76). Sentinel

Senior Secondary is mentioned in the same chapter (78). This is the school from which Coupland graduated in 1979 (Chung). Like the narrators of 'Patty Hearst' and '1,000 years (Life After God)', Coupland is from a large family. He has however no sister (Mortensen).

Since these biographical details appear in several of the chapters, they can (for those familiar with them) be considered to blur the identities of the different narrators. Identifying narrators with the author is made easier by the fact that they remain nameless with the exception of Scout and Louie—both of which are likely nick-names.

2.2 Uniting and Separating Factors, Other Than the Narrators

As stated in the project description, this essay focuses on the tension of simultaneous separateness and similarity in the narrators. The construction of the narrators is however not a lone means of creating the unity and separation that is in the text. The text contains several factors that emphasize its status as a divided fiction. One example is the division of the text into chapters, each provided with its own chapter-title. The chapter-title is given both in a table of content and again on a separate page preceding the actual chapter. A fiction which is divided in this way would be difficult to consider as one text if it was devoid of coherence. Specific to the genre of short story composite is, however, that its form is one of disruptions, including a degree of incoherence in its poetics. For a better understanding of the unifying and separating powers of the narrators, other factor bringing similar effects to *Life After God* should be discussed.

One of the factors that bring unity to this divided fiction is its illustrations. These are simple ink line-drawings made by the author. Their naïve style is a conscious choice which alludes to children's drawings (or possibly illustrations to a children's book). Childhood is associated with emotiveness, vulnerability and dependence but also with the process of finding one's identity. The latter makes the technique in which the illustrations are carried out suitable to the text they are illustrating. What has been modified in the borrowed style is the color. Where children's own drawing and drawings intended for children often abound with color, Coupland's drawings are monochrome black on white. This seems illustrative of the general disillusion and dissatisfaction that the narrators experience.

The majority of the illustrations show a single object separated from its textual context. The object is simplified and the illustrations can be said to show stereotypes. This works in a similar fashion to the minimalism of the text. Little information about what the text describes is provided and a similarly small amount of descriptive content is presented in the illustrations. Narrators as well as other characters are often anonymous in the text. The same

anonymity echoes in the fact that the illustrations only show objects and scenery, and never characters (the feet of the desert drifter are the closest we get). When not illustrating mimetic impressions, the ink-line drawings illustrate metaphors used by the narrator (e.g. the coat in the text's first illustration, 3).

Since Coupland avoids depicting characters, and removes the textual context from a majority of his illustrations, they are unable to affect the interpretation of textual content in any definite way. The interplay between the text and its paratexts (the illustrations) are kept at a minimum. The illustrations can only provide a general sense of unity between the chapters, but are ultimately unable to unite the chapters (and their narrators) into one text.

Similarly separated are style and content. The style in which the text is written is consistent throughout, presenting the image of one narrative voice. Since the narrators of the different chapters are of the same age, sex, geographical and social background no distinguishing qualities can be provided through traits like dialect or sociolect. Furthermore, no idiolectal traits are revealed. This means that the diction of the narrators only can provide a general unity between the chapters, but are ultimately unable to unite the chapters (and its narrators) into one text.

In its syntax the style of the text draws on the oral with long sentences with hypotactic and paratactic constructions. The vocabulary is equally influenced by oral discourse with contractions like *wouldn't*, *here's* and *don't* and repetition of the pronoun *I*. The uniting effect of consistent style would be less affective if the text had been written in a style more associated with written texts. Such a style would adhere to convention and audience anticipation and thus be more transparent to the reader.

Both illustrations and style blur the chapters into functioning as one and several texts simultaneously. These factors are however secondary to the more tangible blurring created by the narrators.

3 Interpretations of the Blurred Narrators

Life After God presents its narrators as going through three stages. The stages are presented as such with the use of symbols. The first stage is the middle-class childhood that a majority of the chapters describe. It is protected, safe and ideologically homogeneous. 'Ours was a life lived in paradise and thus it rendered any discussion of transcendental ideas pointless' (220). In the second stage (from which the text is narrated), the previous one is experienced as essentially different and foreign by the narrators. The narrator of 'My Hotel Year' describes the area where he grew up as 'far enough away from my present life as to seem like China'

(34). Furthermore, the residential areas where narrators grew up are recurrently described as situated above the place where the narrators now exist (34, 58, 78, 177, 220). The frequency and similar phrasings of these descriptions suggest that their significance is symbolical rather than geographical.

The second stage is the confusion and crises that follows when the middle-class lifestyle is realized to be a cultural construct instead of a universal truth and that the world, in fact, contains a plethora of possible choices, both ones that are helpful and ones that are destructive to the individual. The third stage is one of an obtained stability which is more valid than that of the narrators' childhood, as it relies on the essence of their characters. Symbolically the transition between the second and the third stage is marked by a ritual performed by the narrator of the last chapter. From this rite of passage the view of the narrators as passing through stages gains further support.

Coupland allows the implied reader of the text to participate in a confusion similar to that experienced by the narrators while in the second stage. The blurred narrators are impossible to distinguish from one another and will inevitably provoke the reader. The provocation relies on reader-expectation of a conventional narrative discourse. Coupland's discourse is different from the one conventionally used in prose, where a narrator in a first-person narrative is the stable hub around which the text is constructed. The discourse of *Life After God* is one that shows its own inefficiency. It is unable to convey even the base premises of fiction, like distinct characters. Since blurred narrators illustrate and thus is related to the loss of stability experienced by the narrators, one can say that the text strives toward dissolving its own malfunctioning discourse, in the same way as narrators attempt to exit the problem-filled second stage. The entry into the third stage means a stabilization of narrator identities and will change a fundamental aspect of the text's discourse. Therefore, the text must end at this point. Anything adding to the text would be essentially different and thus difficult to consider as belonging to the same text.

Resolving the problems that narrators experience in the second stage is the major conflict of the text. The text suggests an obtained stability as the solution. This can be found through true self-examination, without distractions from culture. All chapters overtly discuss narrators' relationship to solitude, symbolic of such self-examination. The narrators of all chapters show impulses to seek solitude and examine themselves, but also a fear of the same. Instead they distract themselves with means linked to the cultural and artificial.

In 'Little Creatures' the narrator says that 'time only frightens me when I think of having to spend it alone' (17). In 'My Hotel Year' the narrator seeks loneliness but does not leave

society and the culturally artificial outside his solitude. He settles in a mid-town hotel saying, 'I had cut all my hair off, stopped shaving, and had thorns tattooed on my right arm'. He discusses his fellow tenants as being a 'suitably glamorous backdrop' (25). The tattoo and the shaved head are, in conventional discourse of representational art, signifiers of a drop-out lifestyle. They could have been lifted out of many different contexts—Emmet Grogan's *Ringolevio* or Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, to only give two examples. Being unshaven inarguably functions similarly.

Post-break up, the narrator of 'Things That Fly' is alone, distracting himself from experiencing solitude with food and TV. The TV is on MUTE, which is significant of its distractive function. He says that 'after hours of this pointlessness I finally had to admit I couldn't take being alone one more moment' (58). Facing his own emotions in solitude is, to the narrator, unbearable.

The fear of seeing 'the flash' expressed in 'The Wrong Sun' also associates to self-awareness. The text shows human beings in possession of a possible source of their own annihilation. The logical fear of always impending apocalypse experienced in childhood is in adult life distracted with means of culture. In the second part of 'The Wrong Sun' this is illustrated by the environments: a kitchen with a counter-top TV, plastic cups from Burger King, Post-it notes, a hair salon, a mall, rush-hour traffic and an office. 'The Wrong Sun' has a parallel in a later passage of the text, '*In Ten minutes you are going to be hit by a bus, and so in those ten minutes you must quickly itemize what you have learned from being alive*' (121). The narrator asks why this should be so hard, implying that we are unaware of what we do and why we do it.

The narrator of 'Gettysburg' faces loneliness as the woman with whom he has a child (the narratee of the chapter) has left him. He repeats the routine of the narrator of 'Things That Fly' trying to distract himself, 'I sit at the kitchen table in my flannel housecoat eating toast with peanut butter' (109). The house physically marks out boundaries for his solitude. It is an isolation which he attempts to break by naming what is going on outside, 'The neighbor's German shepherd barks at ghosts and the occasional redneck guns an engine down Lonsdale Avenue a few blocks away' (109). His attempts are futile, 'Being alone here now, all of my old fears are erupting - the fears I thought I had buried forever by getting married: fear of loneliness' (110). The narrator's marriage has functioned as a frame on which he has built his identity. The artifice of this frame becomes clear as their mutual home, the 'grey-and-pink 1950s box' loses stability after their separation—'it now makes no sense - stairs run into the

ceiling; rooms are walled off' (109). This suggests that a *self* can not be constructed on an exterior artifice, but must be built on the essence of one's character.

The narrator of 'In the Desert' says that he is used to loneliness, that it is no longer new or frightening (138). In spite of this he employs strategies of distraction, similar to those of the other narrators. He creates a distinct cell of culture and society (car radio and his crime) in the nothingness of the desert. 'Perhaps the nothingness outside was trying to seep into the car [...] I rolled up my window [...] as high as possible [...] and again pressed the SEEK button' (138). He takes the project of avoiding self-examination further by attempting to reduce his own perception of possessing an identity. 'I sang loudly and forced myself to listen to my voice: flat and hopefully generic [...] a voice that has no regional character - a voice from nowhere. [...] I have never really felt like I was "from" anywhere' (140).

The narrator of 'Patty Hearst' idealizes the original relationship between himself and his sister and the all-encompassing symbiosis that it signifies, the stability experienced in the first stage. This completeness is again desired by the narrator. We see that it signifies symbiosis in their shared name *Louie* and their moment of clairvoyance. The narrator desires interdependence and symbiosis instead of independence and free choice. The narrator realizes the impossibility of returning to the first stage and mourns the linearity of human life. He shows two idealized and romanticized options to linearity. These are the present-tense of dogs (181) and the geese inevitably returning to their yearling grounds. Both of these are unattainable since he is 'trapped inside time' (206).

The narrator of the last chapter has stopped taking his antidepressants and finds himself beginning to feel again. The antidepressants and their effects are described as a personal low of disconnectedness. Through medication and compromise, the narrator has attempted to obtain the economic and cultural stability of the first stage. He realizes the failure of this project; 'I have lost the ability to recapture the purer feelings [...] in exchange for a streamlined narrow-mindedness that I assumed would propel me to "the top." What a joke' (250). As has been stated above, the narrator of the last chapter succeeds where the narrators of previous chapters have failed. He confronts himself alone, a symbol of self-examination. This is a thematic climax to the text which also provides a sense of closure, as the project of self-confrontation is carried out successfully.

3.1 The Blurred Narrators and the Group Experience

Since identity is fluid and shared between narrators, the text implies that the narrated experiences, thoughts and emotions are shared by a group of North Americans in a specific

age-span. The distinctness of the group of narrators is marked out by a separation of the group from both past and future. Examples of separations from the past is the pastiche portrayal of the narrator's parents in 'Things That Fly' (showing an inability to actually relate in a sincere way to their life-style), and also Donnie wearing his shirt open like a '1976-person' (47). Both passages have clear allusive qualities (referring to another cultural context or text via readers' connotations), reducing the past to TV-clichés. Mother's pimento cream-cheese sandwiches (60) seem taken from the television show *Happy Days*, and Donnie's shirt alludes to John Travolta's character in the film *Saturday Night Fever*. A possible misrepresentation of themselves is also recognized as possible in the future. 'do you think they'll get it *right*? I mean, "There was once the Great Madonna and She was so fabulous that She lived on the 500th floor of the Empire State Building and consumed 1,000 Pepsis every day." Stuff like that.' (275). A separation from the future is created in the fear of apocalypse. The experienced fear also means that it is perceived to be a real threat. The group is separated from past and future to the extent that it is uncertain whether or not the future will take place at all.

It is tempting to interpret Coupland as making claims to what is described as being generational, painting a picture of a dissatisfied and victimized generation with a broad generalizing brush. He has however opposed such views of his texts on several occasions (Chung). I find the most suitable approach to the image of shared experiences to be one that does not attempt to relate it to a sociological reality. Its greatest effect is rather an outlining of the text's implied reader.

The text does not show any ambition to convey an impression of objectivity (which would be necessary in order to make generational claims). Instead it uses fixed internal focalization in its diegeses, thereby assuming an ultimate subjectivity. The narrators' experience of contemporary society as confusing and crises-inducing (being the only one presented to readers) is a presupposition of the text, shared by the implied author⁷ and the implied reader.

The idea of commonness is sympathetic to whoever is involved in the group the commonness refers to. Whether it be experiences of love, career, home-life, family-life or some other experience, it is comforting to know that we are not alone. My interpretation of the image of group experience is that it is meant to be experienced by the reader. The text's implied reader is one that feels this comforting function of the blurred narrators as he shares similar experiences.

⁷ The implied author is distinguished from the real author as an analytical stance, attempting to avoid a biographical reading. The real author is the person Douglas Coupland, while the implied author is the author as he appears in our interpretation of the text.

Lundén allows himself, after some explicit hesitation, to voice the opinion that the form of the short story composite reflects a large group experience. He claims that it expresses essential characteristics of the concept of American identity as it looks today. This is done in the chapter 'E Pluribus Unum'. I believe Coupland's text should be addressed in this discussion although it is written by a Canadian and set primarily in Canada. The two nations have many similarities and Coupland receives much attention in American media. He was also considered an important spokesperson for an American generation with his first novel, *Generation X*⁸.

What Lundén argues to be essentially American and reflected in the form of the short story composite is biformities – a paradoxical pairing of opposites that co-exist without a loss of uniqueness. In the form of short story composite, this co-existence is the relationship between the chapter/short story and the text as a whole. In *Life After God* this also means the relationship between the single distinct narrator of one chapter and the blurred narrator identity of the whole text. Examples of biformities in American culture are, according to Lundén, corporatism and individualism, state and nation, capitalism and democracy (112-113).

However, *Life After God* does not reflect the working symbiosis of Lundén's biformities. The goal of the text is for narrators to examine themselves in order to achieve stability, thereby ending the in-between status of both the narrators and the text. In his text, Coupland provides critique of both societal and literary discourses prone to oversimplifying the complex human experience.

3.2 The Blurred Narrators and Christianity

The Christian imagery in *Life After God* is important, as its title would imply. The title and the last chapter of the text overtly mention God, enclosing the rest of the text inside a Christianity which can not be overlooked in an analysis of the text. Several factors suggest that it is not a traditional metaphysical system of explanation which the title and the last chapter refer to.

As has been discussed above, the narrator of the last chapter performs a ritual which is symbolic of self-examination. This implies that God (as called out for) to a greater extent is connected to the self-perception and the stability that the narrator wishes to obtain than a traditional Christian God.

⁸ *Generation X* is set in the Californian desert and its protagonist is from Portland, Oregon.

An example of a similar modification of the traditional Christian God lies in the imagery of nuclear catastrophe in 'The Wrong Sun'. *Wrong* presupposes that there is also an opposite, the right sun. In the chapter this is allusive to Jesus Christ. The wrong sun, synonymic to a nuclear blast, is linked to distractions by the cultural and artificial through the environments as they are presented in 'The Dead Speak'. The narrators confront death in offices, cars, hair salons etc. Both the environments and the nuclear apocalypse are artificial products of contemporary society.

Jesus Christ signifies a denial of the worldly in favor of the essential and is also the most divine and perfect form of the human subject. The link to Jesus Christ gains further support from *sun* being a homonym to *son*. This is a modification of conventional Christian imagery where the opposite of the divine good would be an evil greater than man. If evil is man-made, than God should also be equally close to the human subject. It is my interpretation that God in the text is connected to the stability that narrators attempt to reach.

Furthermore, the Christian imagery is only one out of several registers of symbols that are utilized in the text. Other myths and cultural texts are referred to throughout. 'Little Creatures' uses the American emblem of the bald eagle (4) and also creates its own cautionary fables (18-22). In 'My Hotel Year' time travel and stopping time is mentioned in two passages (16, 37). This borrows from the texts of science-fiction. The myth of a platonic idea-world is described in the same chapter (31).

The Christian imagery that is presented is often alloyed with or contrasted by the worldly and profane, i.e. its sacred status is not left intact. One example of this is when the narrator of 'Little Creatures' is asked where people come from by his daughter. He reflects on the ark (which is shown in the illustration, 5), but the discussion ends abruptly as his daughter is distracted by 'a blotch of raccoon-based road kill' (5). This is a vulgar image considering that it follows the biblical image of the ark. Even the final passage, which in its symbolism alludes to christening, is blended in its imagery. It uses the profane image of the inauguration to accentuate the symbol of christening.

Similarly curious is the narrator's admiration for superman in 'Things That Fly'. 'I have always liked the idea that there is a person in the world who doesn't do bad things. And that there is one person in the world who is able to fly' (66). Superman is here raised from mere entertainment to being a deity. The passage discusses that Superman is *scheduled* to die which links him to Jesus Christ knowing that he would die on the cross.

To summarize, Christianity is linked to self-perception in the text. Although Christian imagery is the most important register of symbols being used in the text, its sacred status is

not left intact. Christian imagery exist side-by-side with other symbols and worldly or vulgar descriptions in a way that traditional Christianity would not allow.

4 Conclusion

Coupland's popularity shows that a large buying audience appreciates his interpretations of large themes like crises and identity. He has also acquired critical recognition without having been the subject of any major critical work.

His 1994 fiction *Life After God* is a short story composite which creates a simultaneous unity and separation between its different chapters through the use of blurred narrators. Since this is a marginal genre, the form of the text is more likely to be illustrative of its themes than in the case of a novel or a short story. Previous critics have read the text as having either one or several distinct narrators. None have discussed the confusion that exists regarding the number of narrators in the text. Both possible readings of distinct narrator identities are invited by the text. It provides the narrators of the different chapters with few distinguishing qualities and no causal links exist between the events of different chapters.

There are, however, passages that point to a more complex understanding of the narrators. In the chapter 'The Wrong Sun', Coupland plays with the modes of single and plural narrators. The chapter is placed fourth out of eight, in a symbolic middle, emphasizing its relevance. It uses the child-hood fear of nuclear apocalypse, present in the text's implied reader, in order to draw attention to the play between single and plural that is in the chapter. From the viewpoint of a reading of distinct narrator identities this chapter would be considered an unmotivated inconsistency.

The blurred narrators are a metafictional construction in *Life After God*. It is above the individual chapters and imperceptible by their characters. This inevitably shows the text's artifice, and the text as a product of the author. The truth which the reader is presented with in the fiction is shown as subject to the greater truth from which the author structures and transforms it. As the reader becomes aware of the overlapping identities of the narrators, the possibility of perceiving realism in the text decreases greatly.

There is a large discrepancy between the amount of information that the text provides on what it describes and the amount of such information that we expect to find in fiction. This minimalism is the texts most important means to creating the blurred status of its narrators. Names of characters, fuller descriptions of objects and characters and distinguishing qualities in the narrators are omitted. According to Riffaterre, a text with little descriptive content will

increase the reader's hermeneutic activity (141). Such an increased hermeneutic effort on behalf of the reader can help him detect the blurred narrators.

The narrators of the different chapters share many characteristics. They are all male, come from privileged middle-class backgrounds, are in their 30s and have a connection to Vancouver. They also possess a similar disposition for melancholy. Several chapters also include parts of Douglas Coupland's own biography, which further blurs the narrators.

Other factors that unite the different chapters of the text are its illustrations and the consistent style of the text. The consistency in style unites the different chapters and also increases the impression of one narrator. The illustrations are consistently done in the same technique and present stereotyped images of what they depict. The illustrations provide an equal amount of descriptive content as the style of the text. The technique is ink-line drawing in a naïve fashion. The drawings allude to childhood and being in the process of finding one's identity. This is similar to the narrators experiencing an identity problematic in lack of stability. The anonymity of the narrators (and other characters in the text) echo in the illustrations not showing characters, only scenery and inanimate objects.

While growing up, the narrators have experienced a cultural and economic stability which they have now lost and come to perceive as artificial. The middle-class identity which they possess is insufficiently equipped to deal with the lack of stability and the free choice which is adult life in the text. As solution to their experienced problems, the final passage of the text suggests a self-examination, a charting of the own identity through which a stability will be obtained. This stability will be more valid than that of the narrators' childhood as it is based on essential qualities in their characters.

All narrators have impulses to perform such an examination but distract themselves from the impulse with means of culture. As the narrator of the last chapter succeeds in this project, the text comes to an end. Considering the positive symbols of purity and untouched nature in the last passage of the text, readers can safely guess that he has found stability in his identity. The blurred status of the narrators has acted illustration of the experience of lost stability and will disappear as this happens. Since the blurred narrator identities have disappeared, anything written after this point in the text would be essentially different and difficult to consider as belonging to the same text. The malfunctioning discourse of the text (unable to convey even the base premises of fiction, like distinct characters) has worked to dissolve itself and ultimately succeeds.

The Christian imagery of the text is important, as the title of the text implies. The narrator of the final chapter openly asks for God. As he performs a ritual, symbolic of self-

examination, we see that God in the text is connected to the narrator's self. Furthermore, the Christian imagery of the text is not treated as sacred and holy. It is mixed with or contrasted by pop-culture and descriptions of worldly and/or vulgar events.

The image of similarities in a specific group is presented through the fluid narrator identity. This is not claimed to reflect a sociological reality, but rather outlines the implied reader of the text. The image of commonness will be comforting and empathetic to the reader as he shares similar experiences to those of the narrators.

In conclusion, I believe to have shown the relevance of the blurred narrators in *Life After God*. They are highly illustrative of its theme and fundamental to the construction of the text. The meta-level of the text enjoys an unconventionally important status as a consideration of its content in an analysis of the text will make it exceedingly more rewarding and complex.

Even though no thorough analysis of Coupland's texts as of yet has been written, the complexity, popularity and general themes of his authorship suggest that it is only a matter of time until it will be given the academic attention that it deserves.

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