“Is there a story? That’s another story.”

Reading Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Out* as an indictment of realism

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Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Out* (1964) is an experimental novel which contains numerous challenges to reader expectations. This paper uses close reading of some of its narratological and thematic elements to conclude that the novel systematically denies access to a referent that could be read as a coherent reality, and thus cannot legitimately be read as serving a programme of representation. Research on *Out* has failed to fully consider the novel’s radical uncertainty and ambiguity, as well as the ways in which it undermines and defers meaning, when reading the novel in e.g. post-colonial or post-histoire terms. This paper argues for a purely metafictional agenda to *Out*, which uses its particular features to question realism’s narrative conventions as well as the discourses that feed into it. Whereas *Out*’s radical uncertainty enables a huge array of interpretational possibilities, it simultaneously takes them all away, highlighting in the process the degree of reader agency involved in any interpretation of the novel.

Scholars of Christine Brooke-Rose’s oeuvre have often placed her 1964 novel *Out* at the beginning of a second, ‘experimental’ phase in her work (cf. Martin 1989: 114, McHale 1992: 209, Canepari-Labib 2000: 161, Williamson 2010: 60), and the novel is certainly anything but a straightforward read. The narrative’s world is both idiosyncratic and challenging. *Out* is situated somewhere in Africa, in a post-apocalyptic world order, and presents us with feeble, relocated white people suffering the effects of nuclear radiation, whereas people of colour, who are either resistant or immune to radiation, are the socially privileged. An elderly, unemployed white man originally from the UK is the novel’s protagonist and main narrator; he and his wife live in dismal poverty in a small shack on the outskirts of a town, and he is shown in constant attempts to get employment, with only partial success. Their precarious economic situation is
widespread among other ‘colourless’ immigrants he encounters, who hail from all over the world (e.g. Iran, USA, Russia), and it is clear that unemployment and food issues are widespread all over ‘Afro-Eurasia’. However, the situation is said to be even worse in the other geopolitical blocs the world is divided into: ‘Seatoarea’, ‘Chinese Europe’, and ‘Sino-America’. In addition to these ominous geopolitical blocs, there are further dystopian echoes of Orwell’s 1984, including a set of government slogans such as “We won’t demand satisfaction until we satisfy demand” and “Exalting all colours to the detriment of none.” The latter slogan denies a racism which is clearly present in the novel’s world, and which is inverted: colourless people are rejected and treated with suspicion, in part due to the possibility of their having ‘radiation illness’, and they live segregated in slums or settlements.

The novel’s experimental and challenging nature, however, lies much less in its plot than in its form. The narrative unfolds in such a way that it is often unclear if a series of events takes place or is only imagined by the main narrator, if events imagined are in preparation for a situation about to occur or if they refashion an event that has already happened, which of the several versions provided for a single event actually happened (if any), and so on. In other cases, the events’ broad outline is clear, but contradicting versions of their details are provided, again without resolution. This uncertainty is possibly the main, but by no means the only, challenge to reader habits. Readers are also faced with descriptions that are completely unrelated to events, continuous repetition of the exact same phrases in very different contexts, descriptions that challenge the imagination as to what is being described, dialogue that defies the conventional wisdom of conversational exchanges, a plot that hardly moves (and whose only movement would be best described as circular), and so on.

This paper is premised on the idea that these characteristics are linked to some of the novel’s main concerns, which I understand as epistemological and metafictional, and which I read as an exploration and critique of the premises and limits of novelistic narration itself. My reading foregrounds these aspects and concerns: I read the novel in formalist and literary theory terms, and see it as an indictment of the possibilities of literary realism, for which the novel’s world of (narrative) inversions provides an extremely fruitful playground. Different traditional possibilities for exploring reality in prose – the narration of observation of external phenomena, narration-based accounts of identity, scientific explanations for the constitution of the physical world, scientific theories for the workings of the psyche – are all applied repeatedly in the novel, but none of these forms of discourse provides results that are of use to the protagonist. This character, hailing from an old, extinguished world order, enacts the failure of realist means to describe reality in this new world, which remains incomprehensible and uncertain. He is doggedly committed to
the observation of phenomena, but his failure to integrate them into a meaningful whole is shown throughout – *inter alia* by use of novelistic conventions which in this use are continuously broken and/or ridiculed.

The metafictional questions described above are often addressed within the novel’s metaepistemic moments. However, pure metaepistemic is hardly ever the case in the novel, I argue below; rather, we find statements which can be said to be located ‘between’ a homodiegetic narrator (such as the protagonist) and one located at a higher diegetic level. These statements thus find themselves in a kind of irresolvable double allegiance, closer to one or the other of both poles according to each case. But metafiction is not limited to the indictment of literary discourse and to metaepistemic: I also read repeated questions of the protagonist – such as ‘Is there an answer?’ and ‘Is there a story behind the story?’ – as a reference both to his epistemological homelessness and to a certain understanding regarding the possibilities of significance and meaning in narrative representation. Rounding up this essay, I argue that just as the realist means of the protagonist are disavowed, so is his metafictional questioning, which is treated as inconsequential by the inhabitants of his world. This paper’s structure follows the points outlined above, each chapter addressing one main topic.

*Out* has not received the same amount of critical attention as Brooke-Rose’s other novels, particularly *Thru* and *Amalgamemonon*. Most scholarship on the novel is found in papers or book-length studies that cover all of her novels to that point in time (e.g. Martin 1989, Birch 1994, Canepari-Labib 2002), or that analyse a set of novels of different authors from a particular theoretical vantage point (e.g. Heise 1997, Malina 2002)1. However, most of these studies posit interpretations of *Out* that fail to consider one or more dimensions of the radical uncertainty, ambiguity and undermining of meaning that are constitutive of the novel. Canepari-Labib for instance holds that the unfamiliarity of the world depicted in the novel is irrelevant (2002: 171), and suggests parallels between social and political processes in the novel and in contemporary reality. In so doing, however, she attributes elements of the narrative to the novel’s world, whereas the narrative leaves unresolved if they are part of the novel’s world or located in the narrator’s imagination. Birch performs the same operation in the opposite direction – attributing elements of the narrative to the peculiarities of the main character’s consciousness – when she takes his narration as evidence of his schizophrenia (60). Her reading thus disregards the possibility, which the text also supports, that the particular nature of his perceptions is not a product of

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1 To my knowledge, the only published research dealing exclusively with *Out* is Canepari-Labib (2000).
illness, but rather of the changed parameters in the novel’s world\(^2\). These (as well as many other) readings of Out have in common their performing unjustified attributions, hypostasising elements of the narration which more careful consideration shows to be indeterminate and open.

Heise’s book chapter on Out – one of the more careful and thoughtful readings, also unencumbered by an effort to relate it to Brooke-Rose’s other novels – takes the particular features of the narration seriously when she questions the ‘reality’ of many of the novel’s elements and scenes. She recognises the novel’s radical indeterminacy when she holds that two characters key to plot development, Mrs Mgulu and Mr Swaminathan, lead an ambiguous existence in the text, and that the narrative “suggests that they are perhaps mainly or exclusively figures in the protagonist’s mind rather than actual characters” (244). Heise also recognises that the protagonist’s daily life is in doubt, the narrative providing episodes in alternative versions and in other cases leaving open whether they are actual occurrences or the protagonist’s fantasies (253). In a beautiful formulation, she highlights that the text is structured by different “unrealities” (244). However, I would argue that Heise is trying to have it both ways when she holds that, although the reality of the novel’s events is uncertain, “the political power structure and the existence of a conspiracy if not against the protagonist, then at any rate against his race in general, is not in question” (253). Just as there are no means to determine the reality of elements, scenes and characters in the novel, I argue that the novel provides no means to distinguish which elements of the social institutions can be considered ‘real’, and that this ambiguity is constitutive of the novel’s world.

Some research understands the main narrator’s particular perspective, which in the novel is sometimes related to illness\(^3\), as the postmodern condition\(^4\). This research shares with this essay that it does not dismiss his particularities as due to illness, mental shortcomings, or alienation. However, in my more literature-centred reading, I argue against his malady being a proxy representation of a philosophical condition or existential experience. In my reading of the novel there is no such embracing of a programme of representation; rather, I take his particular perspective to be yet another inversion which allows for further testing and playing with the assumptions behind narrative and language. His particular per-

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\(^2\) Heise argues this point convincingly, when she says that “the peculiar disjunctiveness of perceptions in Out does not seem due to illness so much as to a world whose basic functional parameters have changed so radically that conventional reasoning cannot account for them anymore” (229).

\(^3\) The protagonist is often described as ill and poorly by many of the novel’s characters, including his own wife.

\(^4\) E.g. cf. Malina, Chapter 2: “Sometimes you vanish into a linguistic edifice you have erected”: Christine Brooke-Rose and the postmodern condition, particularly 70-71.
The indeterminable nature of (literary) phenomena in Out

It is strongly characteristic of the novel that, in innumerable moments distributed throughout it, its readers are systematically denied footholds which would allow them to ascertain different aspects of the narrative itself or of its world. It starts with the question of whose is the narrating voice: long sequences are narrated in such a way that no singular attribution is possible, but rather a plurality of possibilities is systematically maintained. Through long passages and possibly most of the novel, there are many indications that it is the elderly white protagonist who is narrating – which is why I refer to him in this paper as ‘main narrator’. However, I hold that some critics go too far when they suggest he is the narrative's only narrator, ascribing any ambiguities to an effect of his malady. In numerous sections most signs point to a narrator that other critics have called a “disembodied narrative voice”, and in yet other passages narration seems to have been taken over by one or even two higher-level, both hetero- and extradiegetic narrators. The crucial point is, however, that practically throughout the whole novel it is impossible to ascribe the narration with certainty to one of these possible narrators. The following excerpt shows an example in point.

A psychoscope might perhaps reveal the expression to be one of pleasure in beauty, rather than self love. The scene might occur, for that matter, in quite a different form. The personal maid, for example, could be Colourless after all.

– Oh, no. I mean, she’d have to assist me in my bath. Oh, no.
– Why not? says somebody or other representing something dead, but there is no person in the mirror.
– Even my husband Dr. Mgulu, who stands on an Internationalist Platform, would not let his white boy assist him in his bath.
– And yet, says somebody or other, his eyelids are the right colour. (26)

This passage can be read as an internal monologue of the main narrator, who in his fantasy describes an imaginary situation and then involves Mrs Mgulu in his imagination, who takes issue with the changes to the scene he has just envisioned. It can also be read as a disagreement between a narrator at a higher diegetic level, rewriting one of the scenes, and one of

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5 E.g. Canepari-Labib or McHale. The latter holds that “we are always ‘inside’ his [the protagonist’s] consciousness” (209).

6 Martin sees Brooke-Rose’s novels after The Dear Deceit (1960) as characterised by this kind of narrative voice (113).

7 All quotations and page numbers refer to The Christine Brooke-Rose Omnibus: Four Novels: Out, Such, Between, Thru. Carcanet: Manchester, 1986.
the characters in it. A third possibility would be a disembodied narrator, very much devoid of omniscience, running through different possibilities for events. This passage also provides a further example of how the text quite purposefully undermines typical narrative attribution, in this case by involving a character in a conversation with a voice that is not part of the scene – “there is no person in the mirror” – but whose attribution is left wide open, as “somebody or other representing something dead.”

Similarly to how it attaches uncertainty to the narrating voice, the text also opens up and systematically maintains various possibilities regarding narrated events. It is very often unclear how events occurred in the novel’s world, and even if described events occurred at all. The excerpt quoted above also provides an example of this feature: the section preceding it described a scene, the quoted excerpt then questioning if this was the way it occurred (“The scene might occur, for that matter, in quite a different form.”). Also frequent is the repeated narration, with variation, of what one would assume to be a single event, as in the following excerpts:

The man stands in the road, shabbily dressed. He is Colourless.
– Who was that, Ingram, did you see?
– I’m afraid I didn’t, ma’am. (52)
The man stands in the road, blue through the glass.
– Who was that, Ingram, did you see?
– No ma’am. (53)
But then, she will complicate life for herself, sitting back in the cushions of the vehicle as it glides towards the tall wrought-iron gates. Her face is cavern-blue.
– Who was that, Ingram, did you see?
– I don’t know ma’am, a Colourless man. (56)

Three times a dialogue and series of events start off, all of them sharing the same first line of dialogue, but both dialogue and events end up taking different paths. The narrative provides no basis to decide which, if any, of these three excerpts actually occurred in the novel’s world, but also no evidence to rule out some or all of them. It is worth noting that these three versions of events each start off with a different narratological point of view. Whereas the first one is indeterminate, the second excerpt can be read as having a point of view from within the vehicle (the white man being seen as blue through the tinted glass windows), whereas the third one can be read as having a point of view from outside of the vehicle, for instance located in the consciousness of the main narrator (Mrs Mgulu’s black face being not blue but ‘cavern-blue’ through the glass).

Whereas none of these three excerpts is given a prerogative, in numerous cases the narrative establishes one, substantiating a version of events or phenomena as deserving credibility, for instance by repeated description or by predicating posterior events on them. However, this prerogative can then be taken back at a later point in the text, a narrative
strategy which has been dubbed ‘denarration’ (Richardson 2001). An example of this approach is found close to the novel’s ending, in a dialogue between the main narrator (who asks the questions) and the new head gardener, in which the extensive previous descriptions of the Manor House gardens are authoritatively contradicted:

– But what about the watering? Have you got anyone for the watering?
– The watering? It’s being done all the time. As you should know if you’ve been here before. […]
– But what about the flowers? […]
– We don’t have any. […] The lawns are sprayed automatically anyway. You should know that if you’ve been here before.
– Yes. I suppose so. One gets confused. (179)

There is also a plethora of smaller instances of denarration throughout the novel, often in the shape of simple contradictions. At times the second, contradictory statement occurs in the immediate vicinity of the first one, whereas in other cases a significant number of pages may lie between both. Contradictions not only affect material like a focalisor’s position or understanding of things (which could after all be read as a change of opinion or due to new information) but even affect physical phenomena in the novel’s world. This is the case in the first pair of quotes presented below, both describing Mrs Ned’s bungalow as seen through one and the same kitchen window.

At eye-level through the window, about three metres away, and to the left of the fig-tree which overlooks the road, there is Mrs. Ned’s bungalow. (20) At eye-level through the window, about four metres away, and to the right of the fig-tree which overlooks the road, there is Mrs. Ned’s shack. (68)

It is easy enough in the negative. It is more difficult to bring about than to prevent. Is this proposition true? (47) It is more difficult in the negative, more difficult, that is, to stop than to bring about. (48)

Yet another way readers’ attributions are undermined is through repetition of narrator statements in different contexts, which gives the statements’ meanings radically different possibilities. Because the main narrator can be read as prone to imagining and refashioning events in his mind, the repetition of the same formula in different contexts with different meanings could be read, in a mimetic understanding, as pointing to the existence of an original event, and its posterior imaginative reworking. However, the text undermines the possibility of such a narratological hierarchy: the different versions seem all equally plausible, and all equally weakened in their plausibility, due to this echo between them.

From this position in the gutter, the paving stones look large as tables. The trousers widen slightly at the bottom, most of them brown or black. Shoes are dusty or caked with mud. […] Some people are always left, kissing the gutter. (85-86)
[...] the staggering is unsteady, [...] the paving stone moves up. Innumerable trousers widen slightly at the bottom, grey or buff-coloured [...]. From this position in the gutter the paving stones look as large as tables.

– Are you all right, man? (158)

The benzene-ring is enormous, the energy-rich bonds stretch interminably to the right. From this position the trousers are buff-coloured, widening slightly at the bottom like trees. The shoes match and shine, too glowing to be gripped. [...] 

– Get up, man, get up! (180-181)

The first reference to 'gutter' in the novel is the one in the first excerpt, in which it seems part of a figure of speech which describes the social position of white people in Afro-Eurasian society. Nearly a hundred pages later, the reference to paving stones and gutter is repeated, this time taking on a literal meaning, as the white narrator gets involved in a fight and lands on the pavement. The third excerpt again repeats elements of the previous ones – the benzene rings being a reference to the elongatedly hexagonal pavestones. Without using the word gutter, it describes the large benzene rings and what trousers and shoes look like, until it becomes clear that the narrator is begging on his knees to his interlocutor.

Readers are thus confronted with an initial, apparently purely figurative use of a phrase, which is later overlaid by accounts in which the same phrase is motivated by turns of events that seem real rather than imagined, and where the phrase takes on literal meanings. The status of these statements is thus thrown into an uneasy light, and the text does not provide clues regarding the question of their relationship, causality, and temporality. As a result of this repetition, it becomes unclear for both figurative and literal uses if they can be taken at face value, if they are echoes of other statements (and if so of which), or if their relationship should be thought of in other terms.

Over the course of the novel it also becomes impossible to take at face value the main narrator’s statements about himself – as indeed it becomes hard to conceive of the narrator himself as a single and coherent person⁸. There are for instance the various self-descriptions of his professional background previous to his relocation: gardener, broad-based liberal humanist, messenger, doctor, welder, builder, electrician, student of chemistry, student of creative thought...⁹ One identification which is stable over

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⁸ Fludernik has also pointed out that the identity of the main protagonist, as that of his various stories, are in doubt in Out (205).

⁹ Some critics take a position on this point, suggesting e.g. that the reader must assume the protagonist to have been a chemist (Canepari-Labib 2000: 170). However, this judgement, based on the use of chemical terminology, disregards the fact that the protagonist also uses many other types of specialised terms (e.g. from biology and gardening), goes against other statements of the protagonist, but most importantly fails to read this ambiguity as a constitutive to the narrator’s occupation and identity, as well as to the novel’s world.
the novel is that of his being ‘Lilly’s husband’, but in a dialogue with his wife Lilly he is given three different names (“George”, “Bill”, and “Charlie”) over the space of two pages (92-93). Indeed, the narrator himself questions his identity, which is shown recurrently throughout the novel, but most poignantly when he questions his wife: “– Lilly, who am I, who was I?” (170).

The devices presented above are but a subset of all the devices with which Out undermines reader attributions, but I would argue that the range of their effects on the status of different narrative elements has been covered. From the readers’ perspective, the devices either make it impossible to establish phenomena or events with certainty, or they de-narrate by negating events and descriptions that had seemed firmly established10, or they provide readers with an array of different alternatives to a singular event or phenomenon, all of them more or less on a par regarding plausibility. As a result, every element of the narrative becomes questionable, the holder of only a preliminary and temporary character, open for denial or reversal11. In this way, the novel denies access to a referent that could be read as a stable reality; it is not a question of ease or difficulty of access, but of impossibility. The effects of these devices can be seen as diametrically opposed to the characteristics Roland Barthes ascribed to his ‘reality effect’ (Barthes 1984: 186-7): the textual devices analysed above work against aesthetic verisimilitude (and thus aesthetic illusion), and make a direct collusion between referent and signifier impossible for readers.

However, the undermining of a stable referent is not solely due to the extensive use of these narrative devices. I argue that this undermining is also effected by the novel’s treatment of different discourses – which in addition to impinging on their validity in the novel’s world, doubles up as their metafictional critique. The next chapter analyses how different discourse forms – narrative realism, the discourse of identity, natural sciences, psychology – are questioned in the novel.

2. Down the cul-de-sacs of discourse

As just mentioned, both the impossibility of certainty in the novel’s world and Out’s undermining of its narrative referent are achieved using two kinds of means, narrative devices and the critique of discourses – howev-

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10 Richardson makes the case for a continuum between ‘local’ denarration, which does not affect the stability of the narrative, and a ‘global’ one which undermines the world it purports to depict (171). I would argue that the denarration in Out is clearly on the ‘global’ side of the scale.

11 McHale reads the novel in a similar way when he says that “the phenomenological organization of this novel undermines the reliability of every narrative proposition in it” (210).
er, drawing an analytical line between both kinds can at times be arbitrary.

Regarding the first form of discourse to be analysed – narrative realism (as discourse) – I suggest the undermining occurs mainly through irony, aimed at traditional formulas of realist description, at conventional forms of reader reception, and at language use. In the case of the latter, two devices used repeatedly in Out are the play with and the literal interpretation of idioms. A recurring formula in the novel involves Mrs Ned, the protagonist’s neighbour, with variations on the following theme: “Her arms throw her voice about, it rebounds against the walls and she catches it” (30-31). Further examples follow this same principle of blending literal and figurative meanings, such as the repeated description of the Manor House’s gently curving white wall, which makes it impossible to know “whether things are any different round the corner” (e.g. 107). This idiom, which in its conventional usage has space function as a metaphor for time (just as in the related ‘to turn the corner’ or ‘just around the corner’), is used to humorously pose a literal (spatial) question of whether things are different around this particular (and in this case actually non-existent) corner. Using language this way – highlighting the multiple meanings and ambiguities that are part of everyday language use – again undermines the creation of stable significance in the novel.

Realist descriptions are treated similarly: well-worn realist formulas are parodied and deconstructed by analysing them literally for content. Both excerpts below begin by using a commonplace of novelistic description, to then debunk the informational content their conventional use supposedly conveys:

The vein must seem like a rampart to the fly, unless perhaps the fly has no conception of a rampart, any more than it has of love, and does not even know that the vein is blue. (43)

The gesture is one of helplessness, palms flat and briefly facing upwards, paler, almost pink, and heavily lined. The gesture would be the same if the helplessness were faked. (62)

This ironic treatment affects not only the particular description, but the realist formula itself, and shows up the ambiguities that this use of language contains. In addition, it shows how taking these literary formulas at face value rests on a complicity of readers with narrators – a complicity which could be described as an unquestioning ‘wanting to believe’. (As

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12 This play would highlight the materiality of language and thereby contribute to disrupt the illusion of medial transparency that is associated with realism.

13 In another variation it is her laughter that Mrs Ned’s arms throw about, in yet another her arms throw her voice about but it is her laughter that rebounds against the walls; there are also instances of her arms not throwing her voice about any longer, but her voice being quiet and her arms resting.
well as questioning these formulas, the novel is, of course, also breaking aesthetic illusion in these passages.\(^{14}\)

The typical reader reception of realist fiction is also parodied, I would argue, in several passages that deal with the subject of identification, and which poke fun at the hermeneutical approach of \textit{Einfühlung} towards literary characters. There is, for instance, the head gardener’s instruction to identify with each plant individually in order to understand its needs, and his advocating for introductions between the plants and the protagonist (61, 62). Another example is the passage where the protagonist’s wife Lilly explains how she likes to identify with inanimate things like the night wind, which “has the rhythms of strength” (89), whereas the narrator questions this practice and states that “the wind is only the wind” (90). To sum up, I read the novel as undermining the discourse of narrative realism through a questioning of language forms, through its parodic treatment of realism’s stock formulas, and through an ironic perspective on how readers engage with it. All three approaches share in common their questioning of \textit{what} is actually conveyed in realist narration, and of \textit{how} it is conveyed, this is, of the linguistic means with which a realist text comes to establish a certain illusion of a transparent, ‘objective’ representation of the world.

A further form of discourse questioned as fundamentally is the language of observation and its memory. Both their reliability and their validity as sources of knowledge are thrown into doubt innumerable times, as in the following excerpt:

Through the trellis the winter sky is blue and pale, paler than the summer sky. But it is difficult to re-visualise the exact degree of blueness in the summer sky without interposing picture postcards as sold in the city streets. No sky is as blue as that, not even here in the South. It is difficult to re-imagine the exact degree of heat, and picture postcards are cold. (14)

This excerpt is exemplary for a frequently used device, which starts off with a conventional description, but which is then shown to fail the narrator’s consistency checks. In a further example, an originally straightforward description of the bloom of a certain tree gets messy when it is checked against the time of year, then deemed incompatible with bloom and fruit of a second kind of tree, and finally related to the observation of winter flies making love (which would also have implications for the time of year). The debate on the reliability of the tree description extends over a number of pages (21-29; sometimes only in the background), and is further difficulted by the fact that the main narrator is not a native of the region, and thus not altogether certain of the facts he uses to try to determine its consistency.

\(^{14}\) Fludernik reads many of Christine Brooke-Rose’s devices, in \textit{Out} and other novels, as “anti-illusionist” (205).
Memory’s unreliability also affects the discourses of personal identity and intimacy. Memory, however, is not the main source of unreliability, as intimacy and identity are shown to be particularly open to wilful manipulation. *Out’s* protagonist and his wife get intimate by making “mental love” (161), titillating each other with stories of when they met. However, these memories – exchanged in sex-like encounters treated with bucketloads of irony (“Don’t stop, don’t stop” (94)) – are riddled with corrections, editions, differing versions, and petitions to change the script. In *Out*, intimacy and its common memory do not provide access to deeper levels of truth, in this case of the self; rather, the common past is instrumentalised as a source of pleasure for the present, a story to be shaped and edited according to the desires of the moment. Moreover, individual personal memory is found just as wanting and is also disavowed as a source of identity and truth. This is my reading of the semi-existential conversations the protagonist has with his supervisor, Mr Swaminathan, an authority figure with an Indian name and humorously linked to Indian mysticism. Mr Swaminathan categorically discards the possibility of memory providing identity, and the protagonist’s struggle with his own identity seems to prove this point in practice.

The discourse of objective science fares no better than the previously analysed ones – in spite of the prominent role played by science and its machines in the novel. Science’s disavowal occurs on several levels. To begin with, natural science is shown to be unable to provide answers to the uncertainties of day-to-day observation. Whereas the senses may not be perceptive or precise enough to apprehend certain events, scientific instruments (of which there are literally dozens in the novel) only provide the answers to these events’ occurrence in theory. In practice, in a recurring argument which works analogously to the Heisenberg uncertainty principle, the setting up of the corresponding scientific instrument would influence the phenomena being observed. For instance, the question as to whether Mrs Ned looked up at the protagonist as he approached her shack could not have been answered by his carrying a camera with a telescopic lens at eye level, as this fact would in itself have made her look up (29). In other cases, the machinery that could be set up would provide information completely unrelated to the context: “A telescope might perhaps reveal a planet off course, a satellite out of orbit.” (18)

*Out* adds to these limitations a further, more fundamental one, in its insistence that scientific phenomena do not have an equivalent in external reality, but only exist in the brain of the person behind the machine. Literally dozens of questions are given this double treatment: it is impossible to answer the question, as setting up the scientific machine would

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15 E.g. Mr Swaminathan is connected with “unscientific” levitation (103).
disturb the phenomenon being observed, and the answer itself would only exist in the brain of the machine operator.

Science’s relevance is also cast into doubt in that most questions for which its help is considered (and most often found wanting) are systematically irrelevant to the story, its protagonists, and the novel’s world. An example of these pointless questions is the question if the innumerable eyes of flies making love show ecstasy or not (11). On top of this, the facts of scientific reality are shown up as certifiable knowledge, but irrelevant and useless for practical purposes. This is how I read the following excerpt:

We can make our errors in a thought, and reject them in another thought, leaving no trace of error in us. No evidence at all is needed for a certainty acquired by revelation. Yes, but what relation does it have to the real thing? The number of molecules in one cubic centimetre of any gas, at sea-level pressure and at a temperature of fifteen degrees centigrade, is approximately twenty seven million million million, and each molecule can expect five thousand million collisions per second. (125-126)

The first sentences of this excerpt ponder the question of attaining truth, but once the question of the ‘real thing’ is posed, readers are submitted to a litany of unhelpful scientific facts. The novel thus suggests, I argue, that the discourse of the natural sciences is incapable of providing answers of relevance to humans in their quest for knowledge.

This would mean that the natural world’s phenomena in Out cannot be determined with certainty, neither as a result of personal observation nor due to natural sciences and their machines – and the same holds true for identity and the psyche. As discussed above, personal identity is inaccessible to individuals (on their own or within intimate relationships), but the same applies to the science of the psyche in Out’s post-apocalyptic world. This science, as well as its machinery and doctors, take up a special position in the novel. Readers are presented with psychoscopes, complex machines only available for the privileged, which perform, in one session, many of the steps of lengthy Freudian psychoanalysis – and some of them at distance (141). However, psychoscopy and its biogrammes also contain a bias, somewhat similar to the Heisenberg principle in that the use of the method influences the scientific outcome. In the words of one doctor, “diagnosis prognosticates aetiology”, or, as it is also put, “diagnosis provokes its own cause” (both 139). The medical practice, made up of its discursive and machine components, would in the process of profiling the personality actually mould it. Thus there is no possibility of accessing an objective truth regarding identity: in the process of accessing

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16 These scientific facts can be read as deconstructing the identity principle as they atomise the object into its innumerable parts – thus giving a complex statement about the possibility of truth statements, as well as their necessary framing/abstraction of an object.
it, identity is already changed. The protagonist protests that this self-knowledge is false, built up by the instruments and the minds behind the instruments, but he is told its resemblance to the real thing is close enough (168).

It is as if all possible sources of knowledge fail the protagonist. His own observation of external phenomena quickly runs into contradictions and the impossibility of making comparisons; he finds it impossible to determine any truth about himself, as his interrogation of his wife regarding his identity shows; the natural sciences provide answers that are true but completely irrelevant; the science of the mind moulds the patient, and the diagnosis will deliver its own causes. In addition to this, the protagonist is considered ill by many of the novel’s characters: he seems not to be in total control of his face and bodily movements, for instance, and also seems prone to talking to himself. All these limitations of the protagonist are shared by Out’s readers, who find themselves in a very similar position to his. This is all the more so because, as one critic has noted, the protagonist himself is a reader in this world, a focaliser who sees rather than a protagonist who acts (Malina 2002: 63-64). Out’s readers see mostly through the eyes of this possibly confused protagonist and face his same questions when trying to make sense of this world, unfamiliar to both him and them: one could say that they are re-enacting his situation. While all sources of knowledge also fail the readers, they are left with the additional question if events are confusing because they are perceived by a confused protagonist (as his possible shortcomings and failures become theirs), or if this confusion and uncertainty is part of the world he describes.

At least three of the novel’s repeated phrases deal precisely with these epistemological issues. The first holds that whereas no amount of positive evidence conclusively confirms a hypothesis, one piece of negative evidence is enough to conclusively falsify it. The second states that errors can be made in one thought and rejected in another, leaving no trace of error in consciousness, and the third highlights that no evidence is required for a certainty acquired by revelation. All three can be read in relation to the protagonist’s quandary: the first highlights the impossibility of empirical certainty in an unfamiliar world, the second refers to the process of adjusting to new information, and the third to the possibility of simply believing. However, this awareness of epistemology does not help the protagonist in his quest to make sense of things. Whereas his wife focuses on the domestic, and suggests the protagonist start with small things such as believing in a bowl of gruel, he doesn’t seem capable of simple beliefs by revelation; he faces the age-old question of how to acquire trustworthy knowledge, which morphs into an enormous challenge in the novel’s unfamiliar and shifting world. Readers can never be sure if the protagonist is the better or the worse for his unbelieving approach – or if it is what makes him go in circles.
3. **Metalepsis from the ‘space’ between protagonist and author**

In the introduction I noted that *Out* makes extensive use of different kinds of metalepsis. It is hardly ever a case of clear metalepsis, however, but metalepsis to varying, uncertain degrees: also in this point the novel works against clear attributions. The clearest examples of this are statements which have a form of double allegiance, as they can be attributed both to protagonist and a narrator located at a higher diegetic level, often discussing the process of writing (as discussed in Ch. 1). There is indeed a certain parallel in their activity, as the protagonist is continuously running through possible situations in his mind and constantly editing them. This is why the following dialogue can be equally read as an interior dialogue of the protagonist, who is self-statedly happy to talk to himself (161), as an ironic conversation between protagonist and higher-level narrator, or as a discussion (or self-dialogue) between two higher-level, hetero- and extradiegetic narrators.

– Look, since you’re inventing this dialogue you ought to give something to the other chap to say.
– But I must get all those facts in.
– He won’t let you, he exists too, you know.
– I suppose so [...] And the facts, anyway, are not true.
– I know. You must be more realistic. Say for instance that you were trained at a Resettlement Camp.
– I built the tower of Pisa and it leant.
– Inside it spirals. A bronchoscope might perhaps reveal
– Oh shut up. [...] 
– Well, you started it, your dialogue gets out of hand. [...] 

Once again the text makes a definite attribution impossible. There are numerous similar examples, which even when they centre on narrative topics such as the requirements of dialogue or of realistic narration can never be attributed undoubtedly to a narrator at a higher diegetic level – or, for that matter, to the main narrator.

There are also numerous instances of metalepsis of a more subtle kind, where passages work both as narration and metanarratorial comment. An example is given in the next excerpt, which discusses the set-up of the protagonist’s home. The specification of the lavatory door as ‘certainly

17 The discussion of this chapter can be seen as a parallel, ontological construction to that of the previous chapter with its focus on epistemology and discourse. The question of how to gain access to a world becomes one of how this access implies a clash of different worlds/world orders. In a sense, then, the epistemological uncertainty principle becomes ontological.
another possibility’ is part of a hesitating description of the protagonist’s shack, and seems a reference to the uncertain status of all things in the novel’s world. It stands in playful contrast to the description of the door to the front room as ‘not a possibility’, because off-limits now that the room is rented:

In the short passage, almost cubic in its brevity, the lavatory door to the left is certainly another possibility. To the right of the kitchen door, facing the lavatory door, the door to the front verandah room, where the lodgers live, is not a possibility. (18)

I read many of these instances as self-conscious (and subtly metaleptic) comment on the process of writing; again, their focus is often on what it takes to make description and dialogue have verisimilitude. The fact that the protagonist plays through hypothetical scenes in his mind again and again gives these passages a double meaning: on the one hand they could reflect e.g. an obsessive preparation of encounters with authorities on the side of the protagonist, or on the other show the back and forth of a higher-level narrator writing up a scene, criticising its make up, and deciding to modify it. This double possibility, in which events make sense both as a narratorial comment of the protagonist or as that of a higher-level narrator, also attaches to the repeated phrase that sometimes it is only necessary to imagine things for them to occur in the novel’s world – for instance gruel.

The novel’s repeated phrases themselves often develop metaleptic qualities through their use in different contexts. Whereas the narrative’s style means that it can accommodate nearly any sentence once as a statement of the main narrator, once a sentence is repeated its meaning often changes to involve a narrator at a higher diegetic level and/or become metafictional. The repetition that ‘the manor house’s tall wrought-iron gates can sometimes be opened by an effort of the will’ can be read as a realist statement of mechanical fact, or as the protagonist’s idea that imagining things can make events occur, or as a metanarratorial comment that mixes the above readings with a description of writing/reading. (This statement of fact is, not surprisingly, also contradicted a number of times: in other passages the gates can only be opened by remote control.) Other repetitions centre on the use of language itself, for instance the discussion of bungalow vs. shack as the better term for the housing in the ‘colourless’ settlement, or the game played with the double meaning of bungalows in the sunset being on fire/having a party. The constant repetition, often unmotivated, of this kind of formulas, which occur both in narratorial comment and as part of the dialogue of different characters, involves the possibility of a higher-level narrator and is thus a form of metalepsis.

A previous chapter had noted that the repetition of a phrase in different contexts makes it develop different meanings: the phrase works its
Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Out* as indictment of realism

way through a variety of different semantic meanings within the level of representation. As the previous paragraph shows, repetition can also generate different meanings by making a phrase relevant at different narratological levels. Metalepsis is thus also one of the ways in which the text opens up different semantic possibilities and works against the possibility of readers making certain attributions. On top of this, the metaleptical use of repetition, just as the other metaleptical moments discussed above, is anti-illusionistic, and thus a further instance of anti-realism.

4. **In search of lost meaning**

In reaction to all the undermining of attributions in *Out*, to its ever-shifting landscape of facts and events, in sum to the huge uncertainty attached to all things in the novel – and this in a novel which makes explicit epistemological concerns – I would like to finalise this paper by analysing *Out*’s treatment of narrative signification and meaning. Both are dealt with, I argue, in an approach similar to that described in previous chapters: these core elements of realist narration take a beating, mainly in the protagonist’s parodic search for identity and meaning, which no-one else but him sees as relevant, and which is performed in spite of his surroundings continuously showing him how ill-suited he is for the task in hand. The constant repetition of certain of the protagonist’s questions that are part of his search – some of them directly metafictional – again suggests a metaleptical involvement of a narrator at a higher diegetic level, and makes them relevant for an understanding of the novel itself. I argue that, *inter alia* in the way this questioning is dealt with, the novel takes a stand against a practice of literary hermeneutics that sees realism as a vehicle for socially or personally relevant ‘answers’.

As on both a literal and a metafictional level *Out* itself works as background for these questions (‘Is there a story behind the story?’ can also be asked of this novel), I will briefly describe further ways in which *Out* differs from traditional realist novels – in addition to the peculiarities of narrative style already presented. To begin, *Out* is characterised by a close to complete absence of plot and character. Events hardly move, and what movement there is seems circular; the repetition of phrases throughout the novel is mirrored by the repetition of daily situations, and an overall repetition of the protagonist’s situation. The space that character and plot take up in other novels is taken up in *Out* by an extensive description of surroundings, by a neutral, often unmotivated observation of phenomena such as the movement of pigeons on a roof, by interior monologue and dialogue, and so on. The protagonist is in himself extremely passive (more focalisor than protagonist, as mentioned before) and his actions are also described in the passive: conversations occur, and he doesn’t fall, but rather ‘the paving stone moves up’. The same applies
to many of his movements, which are not described as such, but rather as a change of size of the perceived objects. The novel’s world is thus to a large extent reduced to sense impressions, to things occurring and blobs of colour changing shape and size, much of which holds no significance for the story. The novel even makes explicit that passages can be devoid of significance, and seems to poke fun at readers’ search for significance in the process: “The number of the vehicle is 24.81.632. There is no numerical significance in such a number.”(42).

Whereas he questions his wife on his identity, the protagonist’s questions regarding a ‘secret’ and an ‘answer’, as well as his ‘is there a story?’ and ‘is there a story behind the story?’, are addressed to figures of authority and knowledge: Mr Swaminathan and different doctors (e.g. 91, 133, 140). I read these questions as referring to a hermeneutics of depth, metanarratively addressing the question of significance and meaning in texts, but also carrying existential currency, functioning as a sign for the protagonist’s epistemological homelessness in the novel’s drab world. While his wife talks mainly about gruel and recipes, the protagonist repeats these questions again and again, and the novel treats them just as it does him: as vestigial of a previous age and world. Even the fact that his voice can hardly be heard seems to point to the questions’ irrelevance and to the lack of mark they leave in this new world’s air. The clearest answer he gets is when his questioning is discarded by Joan, a white woman who has married a successful black man and thus belongs to the socially privileged.

– […] What did he say? I can’t hear him. An answer. What do you mean an answer? Don’t be so metaphysical. Do you mean an explanation of the origin? Or do you mean a cure? Surely you know that diagnosis only prognosticates aetiology. […] It’s a short way of saying that they don’t claim to find either the ultimate cause or the ultimate cure, but they do know exactly how it functions, and can prescribe accordingly. I mean every neurosis has its mechanics, which are absolutely predictable […]. (151)

No ultimate causes, no ultimate cures, and no answers either, but knowledge of the mechanics of all neuroses: Joan’s approach is cheerfully pragmatic, eager to enjoy the benefits of psychoscopy, which provides one with a “technique for living” (150). This world’s science and knowledge are untroubled by the hermeneutical questions of the protagonist, which are deemed irrelevantly ‘metaphysical’. Indeed, not even the elite of this world is capable of dealing with the ambiguities involved in hermeneutical questioning. Joan describes her dislike (shared by all her acquaintances) of artists, diplomats, and – more to the point – old books and old films, the latter screened at ‘film museums’. After a couple of minutes they would all cause an unnerving feeling because it would be impossible to tell “what view are we being urged to take?” (152).
However, Joan’s answer also shows that the scientific knowledge in the novel’s world is uncertain, delivering no causes or origins, but only temporary solutions: “Knowledge certain or indubitable is unobtainable” (60). Positive evidence cannot conclusively confirm a hypothesis, after all, whereas one bit of negative evidence conclusively falsifies it, as a repeated phrase states. Indeed, the only way around this problem seems to be to discard evidence-based knowledge and to settle for revelation, for which “no evidence at all is needed” (e.g. 115, 125).

One sense of the term ‘revelation’ would seem to be as code word for the conventional knowledge and opinions of a society (and possibly spread by its government): “[…] revelation is open to all regardless of age, sex, race or creed. It is not, however, compulsory. […] Just fill up this form and queue here” (115). I read revelation, however, also in a hermeneutical sense, as code word for a text’s ‘deeper meaning’. In its opposition to conventional novels and its both continuous and explicit refusal to engage with the question of a ‘secret’, an ‘answer’, or of a ‘story behind the story’, Out suggests, I argue, that realist novels provide answers to these questions by means of revelation without evidence. This kind of ‘knowledge’ or ‘truth’ of narrative realism, and even the ‘epiphanies’ of modernist texts, would actually be – the novel suggests – the product of complicity by uncritical readers, mistakenly relying on a hermeneutics of depth in their perpetual attempts to distil significance and meaning out of narrative.

Revelation of this kind is precisely what Out systematically denies its readers: Out’s continuous undermining of certainty, its different possibilities for singular events, its narration that simultaneously offers different possibilities for how it is constituted, and its treatment of the protagonist’s questions point to the fact that there is nothing in Out to be ‘believed in’ in the sense of conventional reading experiences. Out’s protagonist (as well as the novel’s re-enacting readers) searches throughout the novel for comprehension and a stable truth, but the novel’s world has no such things on offer. Truth in Out is available only in theory, in the army of machines that could hypothetically answer questions, but the machines are never available, and in their use truth is anyway influenced and changed.

As already mentioned, it is uncertain if the protagonist’s lonely struggle with the novel’s world is due to his malady (in which case his troubles could be easily dismissed as an account of sickness), or if it is due to the

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18 There are further moments in the novel that insist on this point. Mr Swaminathan for instance defines knowledge as conjectures that have passed stringent tests (83-84).

19 The novel’s use of the term ‘revelation’ with its religious associations can be seen as highlighting the lack of actual evidence for the beliefs held. ‘Revelation’ as a term highlights the fact that semiotic structures are bypassed, to privilege its recipient with a direct access to meaning and order.
novel’s world itself. Readers are placed in the same position as the protagonist – their fate is tied to his, in the words of a critic (Malina 2002: 64) – taking part in the same observation of phenomena and re-enacting his perceptual surprises. In this endeavour, however, they cannot resort to their day-to-day knowledge of an outside world as a corrective to the protagonist’s unfamiliar perceptions; instead, the text forces readers to rely radically on the information it itself produces. This is precisely why the question of cause (malady or world?) can be left open.

I suggest this is the reason why the text presents us with a dystopic world full of inversions: the non-applicability of their own day-to-day evidence forces readers to follow the protagonist’s narration, re-enact his jumps in judgements, and face the same epistemological questions. Unsurprisingly, the protagonist, as a discourse instance, fails to provide readers with certainty, just as all the other novel’s discourses did. It is thanks to its inversions – in the novel’s world and in its form of narration – that Out can ensure readers’ uncertainty and deny them the possibility of looking for the ‘revelation’ of stable significance and deeper meaning. Whereas the novel’s particularities make possible a whole myriad of interpretations, such as those posited in previous research, it is also relentless in its undermining of them, and readers will look in vain for interpretations which are not affected by this uncertainty. The novel’s world can only manage this because, in another of the novel’s repeated phrases, “it is easy enough in the negative” (e.g. 47, 49, 128, 174).

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