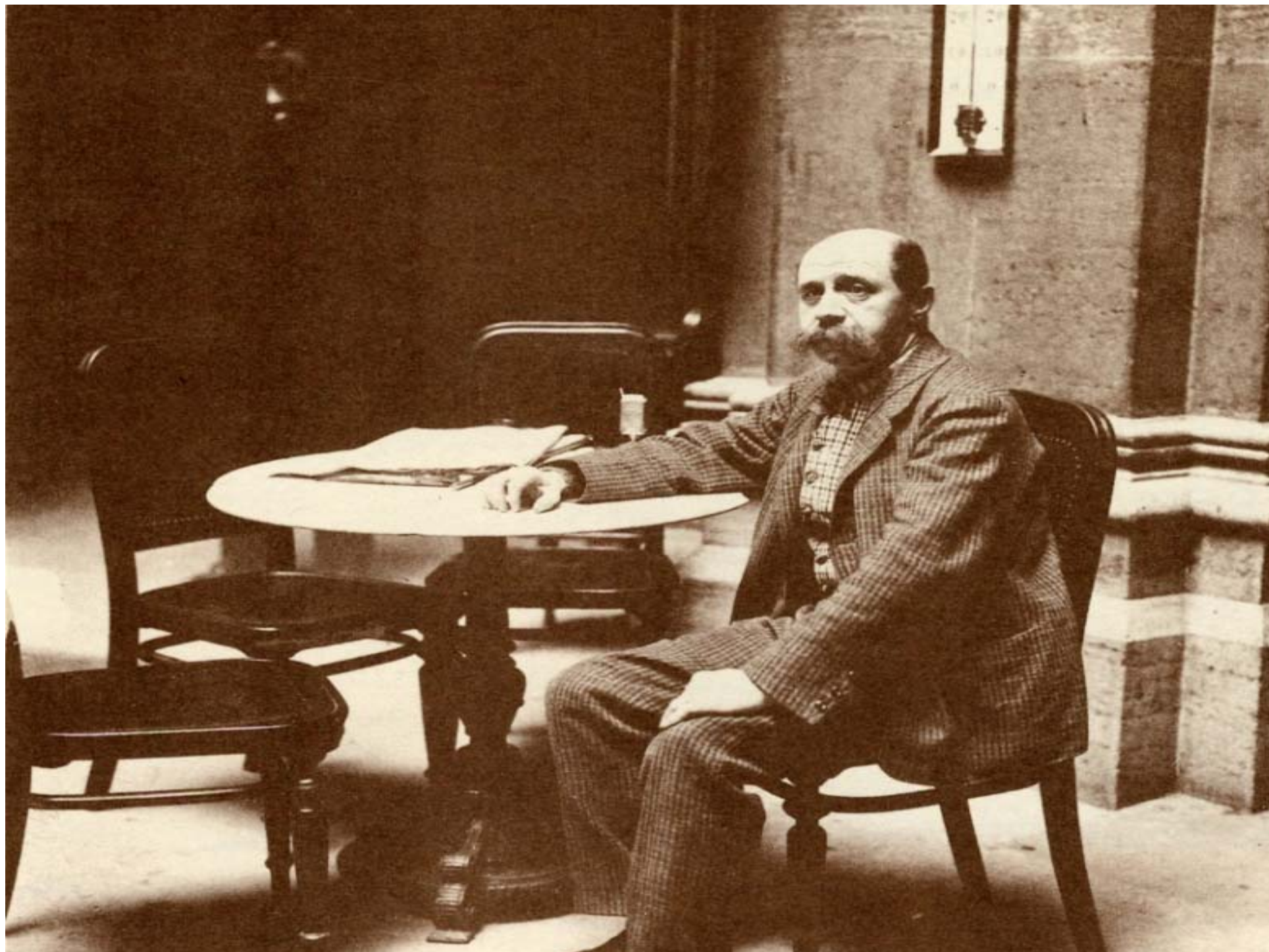


Peter Altenberg: An Outsider on the Inside

Per Simfors



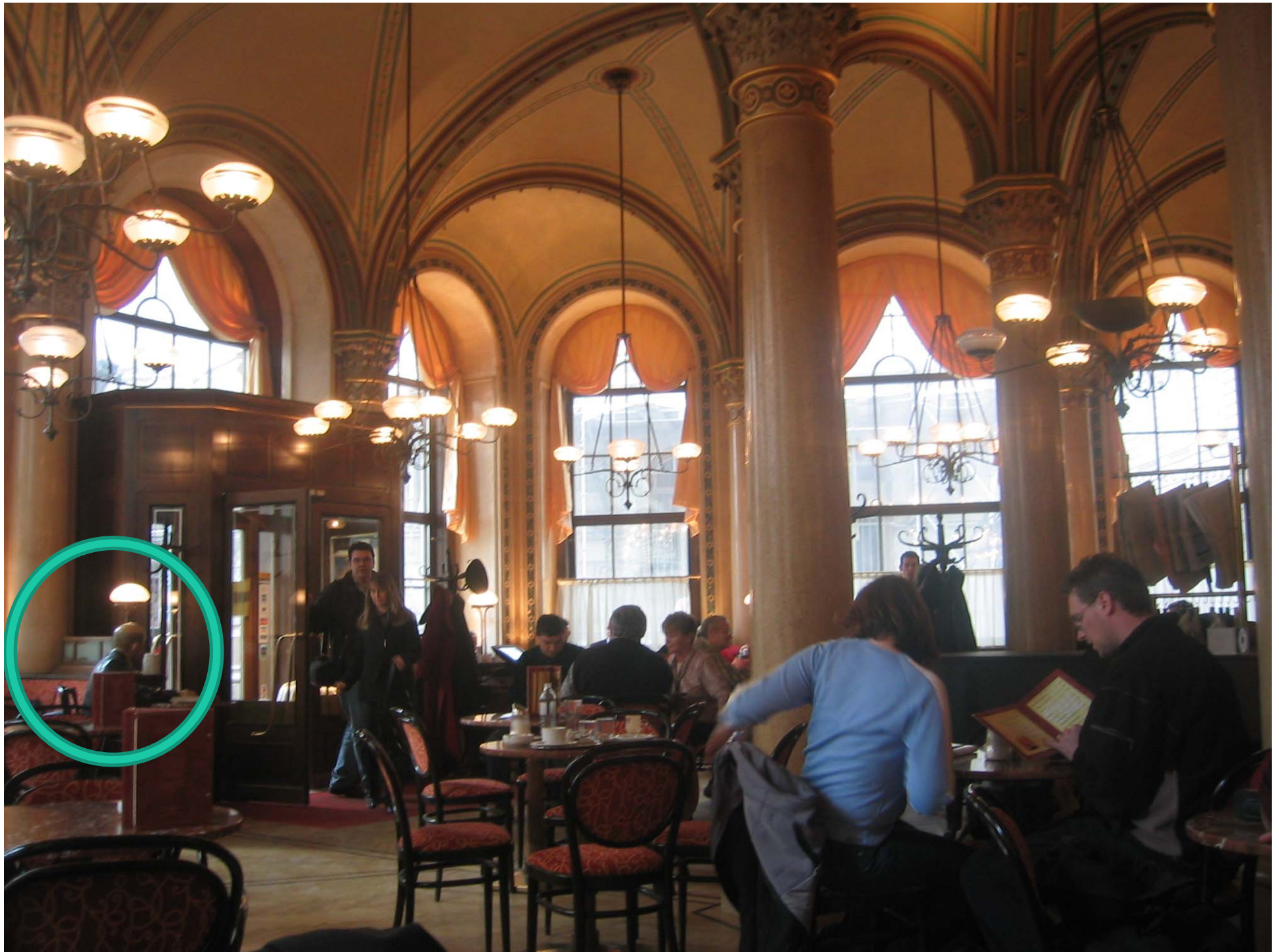
Fin de Siècle Vienna

- End of 19th century
- Flourishing time for Viennese Art, Music and Literature
- Famous writers around Altenberg: Karl Kraus, Arthur Schnitzler, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal, Adolf Loos
- “Kaffeehaus Culture”,
- Altenberg: An outsider and a well-known original in Vienna but also a typical Kaffeehaus-Author
- An outsider but also in some ways at the center of fin de siècle Vienna.

Peter Altenberg

Mostly very short impressionistic observations
and pictures from everyday life in fin de siècle
Vienna characterized by:

- fragmentariness
- openness
- very special tone





Altenberg on Outsideness:

Es ist traurig, eine
Ausnahme zu sein.

Aber noch viel
trauriger ist es, keine
zu sein,

It is sad to be an
exception.

But it is even more sad
not to be one.

Fechsung, S. Fischer, Berlin 1915

In the Amusement Park

»I want a blue balloon! I want to have a blue balloon!«

»There's a blue balloon for you, Rosamond!«

They told her it had a gas in it that was lighter than the air in the atmosphere, so that, etc., etc.

»I want to let it go –,« she said simply.

»Wouldn't you like to give it to that poor little girl over there?!?«

»No, I want to let it go –!«

She lets the balloon go and follows it with her eyes until it vanishes in the blue sky.

»Now aren't you sorry you didn't give it to the poor little girl?!?«

»Yes, I would have rather given it to the poor little girl!«

»There's another blue balloon; give it to her as a present!«

»No, I want this one to go up into the blue sky, too.« – She lets it go.

They buy her a third blue balloon.

Without being told, she walks over to the poor little girl, gives her the balloon and says, »You let it go, too!«

»No,« says the poor little girl and looks at the balloon, all excited.

In the room it floated up to the ceiling, stayed there for three days, turned darker, shriveled, dropped dead – a black little sack.

The poor little girl thought, »I should have let it go, up into the blue sky, and I'd have watched it go, watched it –!«

In the meantime the rich little girl received ten more balloons, and one day Uncle Carl bought her all thirty of them at once. Twenty she let go up into the sky, and ten she gave away to poor children. From then on she wasn't interested in balloons any longer. Not at all.

»Silly balloons –!« she said.

This made Aunt Ida think that she was a rather precocious little girl. The poor little girl kept dreaming, »I should have let it go, up into the blue sky, and I'd have watched it rise up into the sky, watched it –!«

Wie ich es sehe. Zwölfte vermehrte Auflage, 1919

The Mouse

I moved into the quiet small room, fifth floor, of the good, old hotel, with two pairs of socks and two huge bottles of slivovitz for unseen eventualities.

"Shall I have your baggage fetched?!?" asked the bellboy.

"I don't have any" I said simply.

Then he said: "Do you wish electrical lighting?!"

'Yes."

"It costs fifty hellers a night. But you can also have plain candles if you like."
he said, in view of the prevailing circumstances.

"No, I prefer electrical lighting."

Around midnight, I heard the sounds of wallpaper being torn and scratched. Then a mouse came in, climbed up onto my washstand and entered the washbasin, executed various well-mannered maneuvers, and immediately thereafter returned to the floor, since porcelain was incompatible.

Generally, though, he had no firm, far-reaching plans and finally regarded the darkness beneath the stand as rather advantageous under the circumstances.

In the morning, I said to the chambermaid: "There was a mouse in my room last night. Lovely housekeeping!"

"We have no mice here. Where would a mouse come from here? Nobody can accuse us of anything like that!"

I then said to the bellboy: 'Your chambermaid is a saucy creature. Last night there was a mouse in the room.'

"We have no mice here. Where would a mouse come from here? Nobody can accuse us of anything like that!"

When I entered the hotel lobby, the porter, the bootblack, the other two chamber maids, and the manager of the establishment all regarded me the way one regards somebody who checks in with two pairs of socks, two slivovitz bottles, and already sees mice that aren't there.

My book *What the Day Tells Me* lay open on my table, and I once surprised the chambermaid reading it.

In these unpleasant circumstances, my credibility with respect to mice was somewhat undermined. Because of it I had, after all, acquired a certain aura, and people no longer argued 'with me, took no notice of my little weaknesses, closed an eye to them, and conducted themselves exceptionally obligingly, the way one does with an invalid or, on the other hand, as one does toward those whom one respects.

Be that as it may, the mouse appeared every night, scratched the wallpaper, and climbed frequently onto the washtable.

One night, I bought a mousetrap along with some ham, walked ostentatiously with the instrument in hand past the porter, the bootblack, the manager of the establishment, the bellboy, and the three chambermaids, and set the trap in the room. The next morning, the mouse was in it.

I then thought of carrying the mousetrap down quite nonchalantly. Let the matter speak for itself!

But on the staircase it occurred to me how upset people become when you find them guilty of something, like a mouse being discovered in a guestroom of a hotel in which there simply "are no mice!" Moreover, my aura of a person without baggage, with two pairs of socks, two bottles of slivovitz, a book called *What the Day Tells Me*, and who sees mice at night, would be considerably shaken, and I would at once be relegated to the embarrassing category of a tiresome and highly ordinary guest. As a result of these considerations, I deposited the mouse in one of those rather appropriate places for such purposes and placed my mousetrap on the floor of my room, again empty.

From then on I was treated all the more considerately, nobody showed the slightest wish in such circumstances to annoy me, and all indulged me like a sick child. When I finally took my leave, it was in the friendliest of atmospheres, although I took 'with me as baggage just two pairs of socks, two empty bottles of slivovitz, and a mousetrap!

Prodromos, 1906. Original texts in *Prodromos*, 4th and 5th eds. (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1919;

(Quoted from <http://depts.washington.edu/vienna/literature/altenberg/texts.htm>; anonymous translator)

Studies on Altenberg

- Most studies on Altenberg deals with the relationship between personal life and literary work.
- Obvious connections – in fact impossible to distingusih between author and his work
- Narrator / author appears in many texts
- "Peter Altenberg" a creation of the author (Richard Engländer) **Marketing strategy?**
- But: His work is also interesting on its own merits, its textual qualities.

Characteristics of Altenberg's style

- [Elements of condensation](#)
- Spontaneity versus coherence
- Linguistic simplicity
- [Narrative structures](#)
- Rhetorical Figures
- Irony

Elements of condensation:

- ellipses and omissions
 - rhythmized sections
 - summaries
 - sudden changes of time or place.
 - recurrences and leitmotifs on different levels:
 - semantic
 - syntactic
 - lexical
- } invariant or in slight variation

Elements of condensation (2)

- direct quotes of third person speech
- incomplete utterances and implied meanings
- nonverbal communication

Contrasts

The predominantly condensed style is contrasted by:

- An impressionistic richness of detail which
 - gives an impression of authenticity
 - emphasizes the importance of the seemingly insignificant.
- Hyperboles and strong epithets

Narrative structures:

Two contradictory tendencies:

- Strive for dramatic mode and authenticity;
“Literature as excerpts of reality”
- Presence of narrative instance

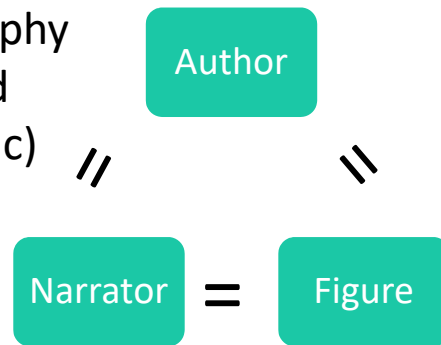
Narrative structures (2):

- Indeterminacy of aspects such as
 - voice
 - Perspective / Focalization (+ chosen perspective not upheld)
 - role and position of the narrator
- Omissions and recurrences of text elements often link the narration to a character perspective and contribute to the ambiguity of voice and focalization.

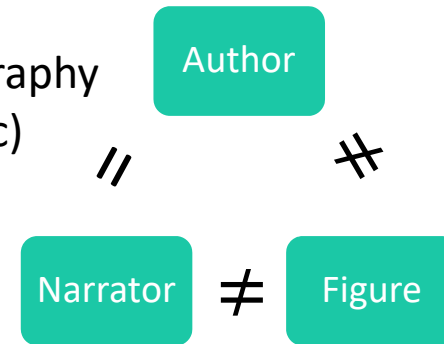
Narrator:

(Martinez & Scheffel 2005)

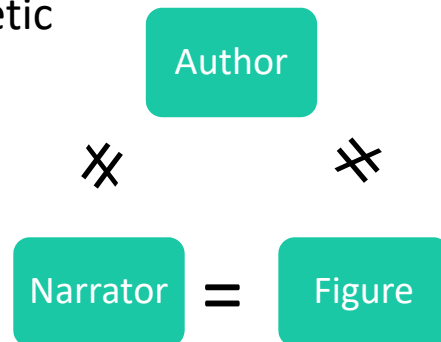
Autobiography
(homo- and
autodiegetic)



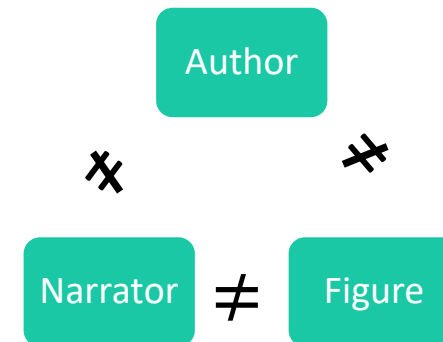
Historical Biography
(heterodiegetic)



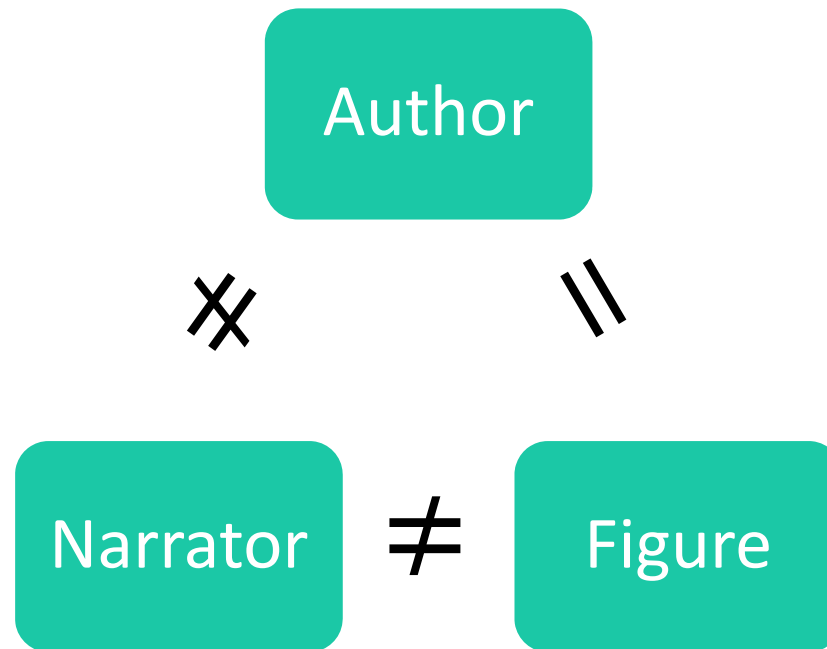
Homodiegetic
fiction:



Heterodiegetic
fiction:



In Altenberg's texts also:



Irony

- One of the most important stylistic devices
- On micro and on macro stylistic level
- Example:

*Was sind denn meine Skizzen?!
Extrakte von Novellen. Was sind denn
meine Aphorismen?! Extrakte meiner
Skizzen. Was ist denn, wenn ich gar
nicht mehr schreibe?! Extrakte meines
Heiligen Schweigens*

Per Simfors

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