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Narrate or describe?

Abstract
This article explores certain aspects of narrative construction in the light of theories and disciplines such as Structuralism and Narratology; and writers/thinkers including Marcel Proust, Balzac, Stendhal, Gérard Genette, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Georg Lukács. It investigates, inter alia, how certain kinds of narratives (in this case, 'free-indirect discourse') allow for a special, more fluid, means of registering and recording phenomena and presences in language, how such narratives come to be constructed, and how qualities such as lightness, speed, and multiplicity are harmonised to create the unique atmosphere, that is also the language, of a work of fiction. The essay looks at the techniques of narrative construction from several theoretical points of view, including, Structuralist, Postcolonial, and Marxist theory. The essay also deals with certain technical and stylistic considerations that may arise from the author writing outside his or her native language or tradition, and how, in at least the present case, employing 'free-indirect discourse' offered more creative freedom to negotiate the gaps between language and landscape while at the same time enhancing the texture of the narrative through multiple perspectives and temporal and spatial fluidity.
Keywords: narrative, description, multiplicity

Narrate or describe?

From the very beginning, at first without consciously realising, even less formulating it to myself, I came upon the notion that an investigation into this question could unravel for me one of the best techniques of making fiction. Why this was so, I could not say with any certainty, since in any book narration and description can never be, strictly speaking, separated. 'Every narrative,' writes Gérard Genette in his essay 'Frontiers of Narrative', 'in fact comprises two kinds of representations, which however are closely intermingled and in variable proportions: on the one hand, those of actions and events, which constitute the narration in the strict sense and, on the other hand, those of objects or characters that are the result of what we now call *description*' (Genette 1982: 133). (Every narrative, perhaps, except for works like those of Robbe-Grillet where narrative seems to arise entirely out of description, and for this reason alone, despite its frequent ingenuity, fills a reader with enormous tedium.) Narration, Genette continues:

> is concerned with actions or events considered as pure processes, and by that very fact it stresses the temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative; description, on the other hand, because it lingers on objects and beings considered in their

> simultaneity, and because it considers the processes themselves as spectacles, seems to suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space... Narration restores, in the temporal succession of its discourse, the equally temporal succession of events, whereas description must modulate, in discursive succession, the representation of objects that are simultaneous and juxtaposed in space. (1982: 136)

But description, per Genette, 'does not distinguish itself sufficiently clearly from narration, either by the autonomy of its ends, or by the originality of its means', and ultimately remains simply as an aspect of narrative (1982: 137). Here, Genette harks back to the sense conveyed by the Greek term *diegesis* as understood by Plato and later Aristotle.[1] As Genette himself had noted earlier:

> Literary representation, the *mimesis* of the ancients, is not, therefore, narrative plus 'speeches': it is narrative, and only narrative. Plato opposed *mimesis* to *diegesis* as a perfect imitation to an imperfect imitation; but (as Plato himself showed in the *Cratylus*) perfect imitation is no longer an imitation, it is the thing itself, and, in the end, the only imitation is an imperfect one. *Mimesis* is *diegesis*. (1982: 133)

So narrative ends up swallowing description whole. But leaving the Greeks behind and entering the modern era the terms (controversially) change contours, and every text, indeed all literature, is now divided into *narrative* (or *story*) and *discourse*. Discourse not only denotes 'utterance', as understood in its linguistic or common form, but includes direct imitation or description into its fold (Genette 1982: 137-38).[2] But, Genette cautions, 'it should be added at once that these essences of narrative and discourse so defined are almost never to be found in their pure state in any text: there is almost always a certain proportion of narrative in discourse, a certain amount of discourse in narrative' (1982: 140).

And from this point, discourse, as it must for Genette, begins to subsume the narrative aspect of the text, for he observes, discourse can 'recount' without ceasing to be discourse, narrative cannot 'discourse' without emerging from itself; or, narrative inserted into discourse is transformed into an element of discourse, whereas discourse inserted into narrative remains discourse forming a sort of cyst that is easy to recognize and to locate (1982: 141). This is so because 'discourse has no purity to preserve, for it is the broadest and most universal "natural" mode of language, welcoming by definition all other forms; narrative, on the other hand, is a particular mode, marked, defined by a number of exclusions and restrictive conditions' (Genette 1982: 141).

This ascendancy of discourse over narrative (including all the varying meanings of the terms) has been of significance not only to Structuralists or Poststructuralists, but also to writers who wish to compose fiction in free-indirect style. For all that can be said in typical French hyperbole about such ascendancy (for example, Foucault: 'discourse bound up with the act of writing, contemporary with its unfolding and enclosed within it'; or Genette: 'it is as if literature had exhausted or overflowed the resources of its representative mode, and wanted to fold back into the indefinite murmur of its own discourse' [Genette 1982: 143]), may well be said, with slight adjustments, about free-indirect style.

II

But in those early days, a decade ago, when I first began to write, I did not think like a literary theorist, much less like a Structuralist, except that in a larger sense one inevitably thinks, reads, and writes in structures. Why then did I instinctively prefer those novels that seemed to be narrating and only rarely describing? One reason, as Genette deduces, could be that the purity of narrative is more manifest than that of discourse (1982: 141), and hence easy to perceive and admire, even where it is not as prevalent as it may seem. Another reason, perhaps more personal and complex, was that at the time I was reading a fair amount of literature of the nineteenth century, a period when, as in Tolstoy, Stevenson, or Conrad, the harmony between narrative and discourse was artistically most realised. It produced not only a sense of authority, atmosphere, and quickness, but distance. And distance, instinctively, was what I was after. Distance, not least because there lay a rift between the material (landscape, practices, people) and the medium (language). Quite simply put, it may have had something to do with the curious psyche of a speaking subject from an erstwhile colony. In the Indian context, one would have to go as far back as Macaulay's dictum about introducing English to the native population (one could, of course, go back even further, to Crusoe teaching Friday a few words of English to make him useful), which, in essence, was meant only to train and prepare an indigenous workforce to serve in the vast machinery of the colonial state, and which, to a large extent, still happens to be the case nearly two centuries hence in free India. Even after six decades of independence, English remains largely a language of aspiration, a class barrier, spoken everywhere, yet tinged with foreignness. It is almost always the other language, unlike, say, Spanish in South America. (Had I been exposed to high theory at the time, I would have known that language itself is the *other*, the *fence* that must be crossed if thoughts and ideas swirling in mind's darkness have to mean anything in the outside world. However, whatever comfort I may have drawn from it would have been short-lived, for what is easy to theorise is more often difficult to practice. Stories are about people and places in which they interact, even when they are mostly psychological, and one language may remain, due to social or historical causes, more distant than another to permeate such a sphere, so that the gulf between medium and material remains, for the time being, intact and unbridgeable.) To know English then, even from childhood, to speak and write it better than your native tongue, to profit from it academically and professionally, is one thing, to make literature with it quite another.

And yet for nearly a century now there has been a growing canon of Indian writing in English, everywhere generously lauded and decorated. But so has been the rift, ever present and ever problematic. This concern, of using English to convey the distinctive cadences of Indian practices and landscape, surfaces as early as 1938 in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1967), and continues, taking evident or subtle forms, with every serious and successful practitioner of fiction since. Indeed it may be the one problem whose surmounting is the origination of a personal style. Rushdie, for example, arrives at the solution through satire and buffoonery, mixing not just forms but also languages and dialects, a present-day Rabelais, while others more often simply work with the assumption that a reader will read the original text as a translated one, not unlike the intention of JM Coetzee in his recent offering, *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013), where although the entire story takes place in an unidentified part of Spain with characters discoursing in Spanish, the text comes to the reader, with minor exceptions, in English.

But I was too full of the books I had been reading, too obsessed with their sense of authority and conviction, their authors' total grasp of not only the material but also the medium, indeed the homogeneity of the entire process

itself. No rift existed there, except perhaps in Conrad, who adopted English fairly late in life, but once this decision had been reached on his part, the material easily fitted.

So I was constrained to look for other models, other ways of depiction. If I could not possess English like Carlos Fuentes once said he possessed Spanish, namely, like he possessed a woman (though, as the Greeks knew, the analogy would be truer the other way round – a goddess possessing a mortal, and leaving behind as evidence of the heavenly union, the gift of the poetic word), if material and medium could not be homogenised, if they could not be satirised with profit or satisfaction like in Rushdie, if the Bakhtinian *heteroglossia* for the present remained merely an ideal (of course, in its more obvious manifestations such as outright parody or use of varying speech dialects, and not as a tendency immanent in novelistic discourse, indeed the very word, itself [see Bakhtin 1982: 259-422]), then at least they could be brought nearer, and the rift itself made the locus of the narrative, problematised. Without the consciousness of this rift, without the distance that was already there and that I sought evermore, without the awareness of the language's foreignness and the difficulty in using it to convey a landscape, a scene, a discourse that resisted it, I never would have taken up writing. For finding workable solutions to these very difficulties made the task worthwhile and exciting, ever new.

I moved on. I read the modernists, the surrealists, the French avant-garde, the postmodernists. I absorbed their strangely liberating use of spatial and temporal forms, their reflexivity, at times their overindulgence in lexical and stylistic resources, but I did not forget their (and my own) precursors. Slowly, I came to write in a kind of free indirect style that solved to an extent the problem of handling my material naturally in English, although the most natural of English writers, Virginia Woolf, had also used it throughout her career (see, for example, *To the Lighthouse*, particularly the opening paragraphs [Woolf 2006: 7-8]). As César Aira aptly puts it in his novella *Varamo*:

> Free indirect style, which is a view from inside a character expressed in the third person, creates an impression of naturalness, and allows us to forget that we are reading fiction and that, in the real world, we never know what other people are thinking, or why they do what they do. Naturalness, in general, is the confusion of the first and third persons. So, far from being just another literary technique, free indirect style is the key mechanism of trans-subjectivity, without which we would have no understanding of social interactions. (Aira 2012: 43)

Applying Genette's observations at the beginning of this paper, free indirect style mediates between the temporal and descriptive elements of a narrative, creating a delicate balance between the spread of description and the pace of what is being described, shifting from personal to supra-personal narration and back, and calmly absorbing any and all such changes in the texture of its own narrative reality. Simply put, it involves a double ambiguity: the confusion between speech and thought on the one hand, and character and narrator on the other (Genette 1990: 52), and having done so it energises not just the descriptive but also the dialogic element in a narrative, the latter being already in movement for it imitates life vis-à-vis the former, which has been traditionally seen to possess merely an ornamental or rhetorical function. Such a narrative takes the form of an overarching, continuous utterance, smoothing out any awkwardness that may arise from the conflict of colloquial and literal properties in respect of dialogue.

'While the conventional work of art,' writes Aira, 'thematizes cause and effect and thereby gives the hallucinatory impression of sealing itself off, the avant-garde work remains open to the conditions of its existence' (Aira 2012: 45). Avant-garde or not (and art that is dynamic is always avant-garde), the free indirect style creates an impression of rapidity in the text, a perpetual narration, description in movement, thereby granting objects otherwise dead a certain poetic quality. It is the style that one notices in the works of writers as different as Stendhal, Bohumil Hrabal, and Philip Roth, each of whom, it must be said, contrary to my own position, write from within their respective native languages. It is a style that creates the impression of being alive, that is palpable, a literary process akin to alchemy that seems to create, transform, and combine almost simultaneously. Compare, say, the fluid prose of Roth's *Sabbath's Theater* or Hrabal's *I Served the King of England* (2009) with the more traditional direct style found in Heinrich Böll's *Group Portrait with Lady* or Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fé*, and my argument may gain some ground (although as any reader of literature knows such classifications are never rigid, for we may repeat after Genette, 'there is almost always a certain proportion of narrative in discourse, a certain amount of discourse in narrative').

Here is Roth's famous opening of *Sabbath's Theater*:

> Either forswear fucking others or the affair is over. This was the ultimatum, the maddeningly improbable, wholly unforeseen ultimatum, that the mistress of fifty-two delivered in tears to her lover of sixty-four on the anniversary of an attachment that had persisted with an amazing licentiousness – and that no less amazingly, had stayed their secret – for thirteen years. But now with hormonal infusions ebbing, with the prostate enlarging, with probably no more than another few years of semi-dependable potency still his – with perhaps not that much more life remaining – here at the approach of the end of everything, he was being charged, on pain of losing her, to turn himself inside out. (Roth 2008: 3)

At the very beginning, within the space of just three sentences, Roth establishes for the reader not only the major themes and preoccupations of his long novel, but also paints the first broad strokes of its main characters, energising with its swift delivery not just the descriptive but also the dialogic elements of the narrative.

And then here is Böll beginning with a simple character sketch of his heroine, Leni Pfeiffer, in *Group Portrait with Lady* – a solid, traditional opening for a novel which in its overall conception is no less revolutionary than Roth's:

> The female protagonist in the first section is a woman of forty-eight, German: she is five foot six inches tall, weighs 133 pounds (in indoor clothing), i.e., only twelve to fourteen ounces below standard weight; her eyes are iridescent dark blue and black, her slightly graying hair, very thick and blond, hangs loosely to her shoulders, sheathing her head like a helmet. (Böll 2011: 1)

Admittedly, Böll employs this mock documentary tone because it is important to the plot of his novel, which alternates between information relayed in such a mock objective fashion and the direct speedy confessions of the surrounding characters, speedy simply because they *imitate* life, and not because they *narrate* it. But even where plot considerations are not paramount, and while making concessions for the differing nature of the two languages, Böll's prose

tends to be more traditional, lingering longer than usual on objects, slowing the narrative even as it spreads it about in space.

Canetti, too, offers us a similar style in *Auto-da-Fé*, while writing about his protagonist Professor Peter Kien:

> It was his custom on his morning walk, between seven or eight o'clock, to look into the windows of every bookshop which he passed. He was thus able to assure himself, with a kind of pleasure, that smut and trash were daily gaining ground. He himself was the owner of the most important private library in the whole of this great city. He carried a minute portion of it with him where he went. His passion for it, the only one which he had permitted himself during a life of austere and exacting study, moved him to take special precautions. Books, even bad ones, tempted him easily into making a purchase. Fortunately the greater number of the book shops did not open until after eight o'clock. (Canetti 1984: 10-11)

Could this quality, then, this preference for engendering fictional worlds in movement and multiplicity (and multiplicity is crucial as I hope to show in the case of Proust later), be first and foremost only a way of experiencing reality, irrespective of the depth or paucity of the literary resources at one's command?

III

Some years ago, while researching Homer, there fell into my hands a collection of essays that included one by the Hungarian Marxist scholar Georg Lukács called, rather fortuitously, '*To Narrate or Describe?*' It was not long, and it hit me like a revelation, like a belated confirmation of an old instinct. Essentially, it was a critique of the Naturalistic school of writers and their striving for greater factual 'authenticity', their desire to describe in ever-deeper detail, at times even adopting the professional jargon of the milieu in a given work (Lukács 1965: 86-87). It pitted the long, precise descriptions of Émile Zola against the fluid narratives of Homer and Tolstoy. But it also had something of wider significance to say about the writing of fiction. A poetry of things, wrote Lukács:

> independent of man and human destinies does not exist in literature. And it is more than questionable, whether the elaborate accuracy of description with its faithfulness to technical details which is so highly praised today, is able to convey a real idea of the object described. When a relevant action of a person who moves us poetically is properly narrated, then every object which plays a real part in this action becomes poetically significant by virtue of its very context... One need not know about horses to ride with Vronsky when he races... Objects have poetic life only through their relationships to human destiny. Therefore the true epic poet does not describe them. He speaks of the task objects have in the nexus of human destinies, and he does so only when the objects have a share in those destinies, when they partake in the deeds and sufferings of men. [Gotthold Ephraim] Lessing understood this fundamental poetic truth: 'I find that Homer paints nothing but actions in progress, and all bodies, all separate objects he paints only as they take part in these actions.'... Description as the

> dominant method, however, is an entirely different matter and merely points to the fruitless rivalry of literature with the visual arts. (Lukács 1965: 86-88)

'The fruitless rivalry of literature with the visual arts'. How well one knows this in our overwhelmingly visual age! And yet in book upon book one is swamped with long, tedious descriptions and processes which for their authors seem to be based on some antiquated idea of achieving verisimilitude in times where what appears to be true or real is often itself under scrutiny, and which do little or nothing for either the book or the reader, acting mostly as filler that is easily recognisable in the narrative structure. As if cinema hadn't happened, as if twenty-four hour television broadcast wasn't a reality, as if we were back in the eighteenth century, one reads staid, if not inert, descriptions of things and events with which one has for long been made familiar to the point of boredom.

But Lukács is by no means finished with the matter. In a longer, more nuanced variation on the above theme, he comes to speak again on the techniques of narration and description (Lukács 1970: 110-148). Unlike in the earlier version, where a generic comparison between writers as fundamentally different as Zola and Tolstoy could be called a false one, Lukács now makes his scrutiny more specific and justifiable by extracting an event common to both Zola's *Nana* and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, namely, the horse races. While praising Zola's virtuosity in describing the races meticulously and with sensuous vitality, he concludes that the event of the race in itself has no real significance for the plot or the larger story, but in *Anna Karenina* the race represents the crisis in a great drama (1970: 110-111). 'In Zola,' he says, 'the race is *described* from the standpoint of an observer; in Tolstoy it is *narrated* from the standpoint of a participant. Vronsky's ride is thoroughly integrated into the total action of the novel. Indeed it is no mere incidental episode but an event of essential significance in Vronsky's life' (1970: 111). 'Linking Vronsky's ambition to his participation in the race provides quite another mode of artistic necessity than that which is possible with Zola's exhaustive descriptions' (1970: 112). Lukács then applies a similar analysis to the treatment of theatre in Zola vis-à-vis Balzac, and it is not hard to guess that the latter emerges as the better writer.

All this is true, but there is something bigger that Lukács has been aiming at from the start. It is not a question of style or structure or artistry, but of ideology, of literature as an instrument of social emancipation. Put differently, new styles and new ways of representing reality, though linked to old forms and styles, never arise from any immanent dialectic within artistic forms, but are a determination of social development (Lukács 1970: 119). The opposition between experiencing and observing, then, is not accidental, but arises out of divergent basic positions about life and the major problems of society and not out of divergent artistic methods of handling content (Lukács 1970: 116). And here we are thoroughly established in the Marxist domain. Although this should not pose any serious problems to our investigations, for there exists a great tradition of Marxist literary/critical theory, by linking the descriptive/naturalistic style of writing to the rise of the bourgeois-decadent epoch alone, Lukács finds himself in a cul-de-sac from which the only way out is backward. In his eyes, therefore, Flaubert's decision to withdraw from active society to compose *Madame Bovary* classes him as a bourgeois writer, a mere observer of society and not a ready participant in it. Flaubert becomes an aesthete, a stylist, a teller of events from two removes, first, of physical distance from the society of men and women, and, second, of language, of his technical artistry in language, making literature a specialist affair. That *Madame Bovary* is an early and penetrating critique of the sham and emptiness of bourgeois life does not occur to Lukács. That the man, as Borges astutely observed, who with *Madame Bovary* forged the realist novel was also the first

to shatter it with *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (Borges 2001: 389) Lukács ignores. And thenceforth, for Lukács, the future can only be bleak. Proust becomes a bourgeois degenerate (who, incidentally, while arriving from a different (inward) route, comes to a similar conclusion in respect of the so called 'realist' novel [see Proust 2003: 196-204]), so does Joyce, their revolutionary ways of seeing and recording notwithstanding. The whole of the modernist movement vanishes in the blink of an eye, to say nothing of the Romantics, and the only writer Lukács finds worthy of praise during this entire period is Maxim Gorky. (Fredric Jameson has conducted a careful analysis on the causes behind Lukács's strained reasoning, observing: 'What is really wrong with Lukács's analyses is not too frequent and facile a reference to social class, but rather too incomplete and intermittent a sense of the relationship of class to ideology' [Adorno et al 2007: 201-204].)

It is not my place to spar with Lukács. Others, among them his friends and fellow Marxists Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, and Theodor Adorno, have done that ahead of me and to better effect (Adorno et al 2007). But it is surprising that for so much that is novel and true in his thesis, Lukács misses the point that newer, deeper forms of conceptualising reality in literature may stem from a better understanding of reality and thinking processes on the whole, and that such understanding arises naturally from the dialectic movement always at work in society. Brecht in his critique of Lukács says as much:

> Is the connection between things no longer so visible? Writers just have to keep to the Old Masters, produce a rich life of the spirit, hold back the pace of events by a slow narrative, bring the individual back to the centre of the stage, and so on. Here specific instructions dwindle into an indistinct murmur. That his proposals are impracticable is obvious. No one who believes Lukács's basic principles to be correct, can be surprised at this. Is there no solution then? There is. The new ascendant class shows it. It is not a way back. It is not linked to the good old days but to the bad new ones. It does not involve undoing techniques but developing them ... The fact that Tolstoy would have done it differently is no reason to reject Joyce's method ... Literature cannot be forbidden to employ skills newly acquired by contemporary man, such as the capacity for simultaneous registration, bold abstraction or swift combination. (Adorno et al 2007: 69-75)

It is for this reason that the works of Proust and Joyce are not a regression but a progression in the literary landscape. For what may appear specialist/formalist to a reader in an earlier age may become, from absorption and passage into common discourse, a natural and reasonable style for a reader (and writer) in a later one. Indeed it is not uncommon that within a given period different readers may respond differently to the same writer, and different writers differently to the same material. Borges, for instance, who could be called a contemporary of Lukács, does not pitch Balzac against Zola, but puts them, rightly so, in the same category (Borges 2001: 389), even if the narrative of Balzac's novels is generally more fluid than that of Zola's. Stendhal, writing at the same time as Balzac, could have well been writing for the twenty-first century reader.

IV

The question of fluidity of style, its aliveness, the quality of perpetual narration that creates entire worlds in movement, that renders the drama of life with a certain poetic effect, may not necessarily be a question of changing social conditions, or only partially. It is something one finds, *mutatis mutandis*, from Homer to Kafka to Thomas Bernhard, in the mature works of all great artists. It is a way of seeing and telling that comes with experience, the distancing that is crucial to construct atmospheric, believable worlds through language, the authority behind the narrative voice that arises out of a sense of the completeness of the events recounted. It does not level or contemporise such events, but narrates them with a total understanding of their effect and purpose. In a word, it is to be direct in approach, to be radical, which per Marx, is to grasp things by the roots. In genuine narration, observes Lukács:

> an author can render a chronological series of events lifelike and meaningful only by utilizing approaches of considerable complexity. In narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events. And only the experience of this causality can communicate the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence. (Lukács 1970: 133)

The speciality of the novel is that a writer can talk about his characters as well as through them, or can arrange for us to listen when they talk to themselves. He has access to self-communings, and from that level he can descend even deeper and peer into the subconscious, and he can show the sub-conscious short-circuiting into action (Forster 2005: 85-86).

Let me demonstrate this by narrowing our scrutiny further and focusing simply on the respective openings of Stendhal's two major novels, *The Red and The Black* and *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Stendhal writes like a true contemporary, but even within his own output it is not difficult to witness a growing limpidity in style between the former and the latter work. He opens *The Red and The Black*, for instance, with a detailed, anecdotal description of the small town of Verrières (2003: 3-5), in a manner strikingly similar to Balzac's, say, in *Old Goriot*, where Balzac describes the boarding house of Madame Vauquer, worrying at the same time that only those who reside between the heights of Montmartre and Montrouge can appreciate how exactly and with what close observation the story is drawn from life (Balzac 1951: 27-29). Reeling, perhaps, under the influence of Balzac's style, if not specifically *Goriot* since it was published after *Red and Black*, Stendhal begins like this:

> The little town of Verrières might be one of the prettiest in all Franche-Comté. Its white houses with their sharp pointed roofs of red tile stretch down a hillside, every faint ripple in the long slope marked by thick clusters of chestnut trees. A few hundred feet below the ruins of the ancient fortress, built by the Spanish, runs the River Doubs. To the north, Verrières is sheltered by a great mountain, part of the Jura range. The first frosts of October cover these jagged peaks with snow. A stream that rushes down from the mountains, crossing through Verrières and then pouring itself into the Doubs, powers a good many sawmills – an immensely simple industry that provides a modest living for most of the inhabitants, more peasant than bourgeois. (Stendhal 2003: 3)

Although a pretty, postcard-like description, there is a certain fixedness about this scene. It is all but an exercise in *ekphrasis* that at the time was very much

in use as an ornamental function in writing. Stendhal though tries to get the scene moving in the subsequent paragraphs by mixing details about sawmills, printed calico cloth, and a nail factory. He even brings the mayor in (2003: 3-4). But he is anxious to establish verisimilitude, and despite his desire to create distance and authority he remains but a step ahead of the reader.

Nine years later, in 1839, over an astonishingly brief period of fifty-two days, Stendhal was to compose his second major work, *The Charterhouse of Parma.* Perhaps because it was not written down but dictated, there is a sense of orality, of psychological complexity, of being right at the source of thought that is in flux, in brief a feeling of nearness about the writing which instantly seizes the reader and whisks him/her along. And paradoxically it is this nearness that creates both authority and distance. Gone is the anxiousness to play by the rules, trying hard to relate the scene in precise detail to the reader. Now it is the fluidity and complexity of the narration itself which makes everything believable at once. Stendhal here opens in this way:

> On May 15, 1796, General Bonaparte entered Milan at the head of that young army which had lately crossed the Lodi bridge and taught the world that after so many centuries Caesar and Alexander had a successor. The miracles of valor and genius Italy had witnessed in a few months wakened a slumbering nation: just eight days before the French arrived, the Milanese still regarded them as no more than a band of brigands who habitually fled before the troops of His Imperial and Royal Majesty: at least so they were told three times a week by a little news-sheet the size of a man's hand, printed on dirty paper. (Stendhal 2000: 3)

It is a confirmation of what I quoted from Lukács above, that in narration the writer must move with the greatest deftness between past and present so that the reader may grasp the real causality of the epic events.

But the opening paragraphs are a miniscule part of a novel, and to pass judgment on the whole based on an early episode, a tiny fragment, is neither reasonable nor correct. And yet it is in this very small space that the rhythm of the entire narrative arc is established, its problems posed and resolutions reached. Like a river at its source, the narrative rises forth in a complex mix of speed, perspective, voice, and situation. In the case before us, however, there can be little dispute, for it is generally agreed that *The Charterhouse* is a better novel than *The Red and The Black*, both in its material and in its treatment, and the beginning merely points to what is to come later.

The task before a writer is not to eliminate description from a narrative, which in a strict sense is inseparable from it, but to fuse the two in a dynamic whole. Genette, in this respect, taking the example of Proustian descriptions with their focalised nature, argues that they do not put a pause in the action of the story as much as they appear to approach the 'tempo of scene' (1990: 35). Like the famous description of Achilles' shield in *The Iliad* (Homer 1998 [c.750BCE]: 320-337), descriptions in Proust tend to become animated and begin to look more like narrative proper, that is to say, in movement. As Genette writes elsewhere, 'the narrative duration is not interrupted – as is so often the case with Balzac – for, rather than *describing*, Proust *narrates* how his hero perceives, contemplates, and experiences a given sight; the description is incorporated within the narrative and constitutes no autonomous narrative form' (Hoffman & Murphy 1996: 188).

There is still more that one may learn from Proust in this respect. Multiplicity. Of perspectives, of visions, of connections. A classic instance of Proust's peculiar use of the narrative form occurs toward the end of the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, alternatively titled *Within a Budding Grove* or *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, where Proust lovingly lingers over Albertine's face, but because his thought moves swiftly meshing so many disparate ideas and comparisons, the description he provides appears to be not static but in movement, as if the author wished to show the simultaneous presence of the most diverse elements that coincide in any event, in this case, Albertine's features. As Italo Calvino (who himself could glimpse in the tiny queen on the chessboard by turns a lady on a balcony, a fountain, a church with a pointed dome, a quince tree [Calvino 1997: 121]), memorably noted, Proust is anxious to 'plumb the multiplicity of the writable within the briefness of life that consumes it' (Calvino 1993: 112). In Proust, no impression is lost, every instance of the past is alive in the mind, which associates freely, picks and chooses at will, unlike the objective, matter of fact descriptions of Balzac or Zola:

> On certain days, thin, with a grey complexion, a sullen air, a violet transparency slanting across her eyes such as we notice sometimes on the sea, she seemed to be feeling the sorrows of exile. On other days her face, smoother and glossier, drew one's desires on to its varnished surface and prevented them from going further; unless I caught a sudden glimpse of her from the side, for her matt cheeks, like white wax on the surface, were visibly pink beneath, which was what made one so long to kiss them, to reach that different tint which was so elusive. At other times happiness bathed those cheeks with a radiance so mobile that the skin, grown fluid and vague, gave passage to a sort of subcutaneous glaze which made it appear to be of another colour but not of another substance than her eyes; sometimes, when one looked without thinking at her face punctuated with tiny brown marks among which floated what were simply two larger, bluer stains, it was as though one were looking at a goldfinch's egg, or perhaps at an opalescent agate cut and polished in two places only, where, at the heart of the brown stone, there shone, like the transparent wings of a sky-blue butterfly, the eyes, those features in which the flesh becomes a mirror and gives us the illusion of enabling us, more than through the other parts of the body, to approach the soul ... and each of these Albertines was different, as is every fresh appearance of the dancer whose colours, form, character, are transmitted according to the endlessly varied play of a spotlight. (Proust 1998: 718-19)

V

In conclusion, I offer an example of my own attempt to fuse movement, multiplicity, and free association of ideas to try and create – recalling Lukács – the sense of a real chronological, concrete, historical sequence. In my novel, *The Queen's Play*, which attempts to write the origin of chess into the narrative cycles of the *Ramayana* (Valmiki 1990-2009 [c.450BCE]), one of the two formative epics of ancient India, Chapter VII, for example, opens with the demon king Ravana's return to Lanka from the far north. It is a crucial moment in the context of the story for, the narrative structure is not linear, the scene conveys to a reader not only a sense of what is to come later, but also the

historical and political significance of Ravana's early years as ruler of Lanka, while at the same time implicitly documenting the psychological changes wrought by his long exile in Western Tibet. The free indirect style of narration, fusing speech with thought and character with narrator (Genette 1990: 52), in the span of a few long sentences, aims to fit this together:

> Home at last, and yet terribly homesick. This island, this city of gold, cleverly wrested from his stepbrother after long planning and a fierce political, even a brief physical, battle, this seat of his vast empire, which extended out to include faraway continents at the end of the ocean, as also large parts of the peninsula in the north, where after years of quashing rebellions and forging multiple alliances, the king had been able to gain control of territories as far up as the mouth of the Indus to the left, near which he had seen and fallen in love with the queen, and the delta of the Ganga to the right, whence it sprawled out into marshlands and forests before meeting the sea, this island where winds from all directions, carrying a variety of scents and climates, converged to ruffle the flags of his rule high above the palace, this land of his birth and triumph, of his education and wandering, where in times past he moved now like a philanderer, now like a sage, this earth of lush forests and groves where he first received the words of the holy scriptures from his father, the sage Visravas, descended from the great Pulastya himself, one of the ten mind-born sons of Prajāpati, the Progenitor, the First Born and the First Sacrificed, the Absent-Present One, and poured oblations into the sacred fire for the gods, was this home? Or was home in the forever changing flow of notes, of the myriad nuances and pitch oscillations, that rose up to enliven the air from his lightning-fast fingers holding the strings to the frets of the long, heavy lute resting across his chest, it seemed, in several places all at once? Nor was home in the hymns of the Sāma Veda, carefully selected and calibrated to recall the sound that created the universe, which, if one was attentive, could easily be heard in the vibrations of a bowstring. And what of the sacred rituals and sacrifices, which he had patiently learnt over the years only to later unlearn with ever more persistence and fortitude? Surely, home was not the queen, consort, or the child, nor the dice that moved one through night and day to victory or doom. Home was something else entirely, a tiny transparent spot somewhere behind the eye past which one entered into unending space shining with light. Home was the desert, the lake, the mountain. A land of few shadows. Home was where the wanderer felt the cold, crackling wind without judgment, where he saw, forgot, remembered again, ancient rocks becoming ever harder in their losing tussle with the elements, where the light filled wings of black-necked cranes against the chain of the peaks, the indifferent stare of the eagle swooping down on its prey, the leopard's sprint along the river, the red outline of an ibex balanced on a cliff edge caught in a flaming full moon, the tinkling of distant bells, crystalline constellations that stood out sharply one moment and were cosmic dust the next were the impressions that washed over him, filled him with a feeling he had not known before, of a joyous vertigo, if it could be described thus, of falling into the swirling flux and recovering anew to pure breath, pure movement. This perhaps

> was home then, which each passing moment was now fast taking away. (Kaul 2015: 24-25)

Notes

[1] See Stephen Halliwell for a detailed historic analysis of the term (Halliwell 2012). For example, Halliwell writes: '*Diegesis* ("narrative," "narration") and *mimesis* ("imitation," "representation," "enactment") are a pair of Greek terms first brought together for proto-narratological purposes in a passage from Plato's *Republic* (3.392c-398b). Contrary to what has become standard modern usage [...], *diegesis* there denotes narrative in the wider generic sense of discourse that communicates information keyed to a temporal framework (events "past, present, or future," *Republic* 392d). It is subdivided at the level of discursive style or presentation (*lexis*) into a tripartite typology: 1) *haple diegesis*, "plain" or "unmixed" *diegesis*, i.e. narrative in the voice of the poet (or other authorial "storyteller," *muthologos*, 392d); 2) *diegesis dia mimeseos*, narrative "by means of *mimesis*," i.e. direct speech (including drama, *Republic* 394b-c) in the voices of individual characters in a story; and 3) *diegesis di' amphoteron*, i.e. compound narrative which combines or mixes both the previous two types, as in Homeric epic, for example. From this Platonic beginning, the terms have had a long and sometimes tangled history of usage, right up to the present day, as a pair of critical categories.' return to text

[2] Stephen Halliwell is critical of this turn. He writes: 'it was not, however, until the 20th century, with the development of modern narratology, that the vocabulary of *diegesis/mimesis* was given a new currency. That currency has brought with it some complications. In the most widely adopted usage, Plato's terminology has been simplified in such a way as to equate *diegesis* exclusively with third-person narrative, whereas the *Republic*, as explained above, treats *diegesis* as an overarching category which is then split into the two main types of "plain" (or, in a sense, "single-voiced") *diegesis* and "*diegesis* by means of *mimesis*"... The theoretical consequence of this simplification is to foist onto the Platonic argument, which might be said to be concerned with different kinds of narrativity, a strict division between modes conceived of as respectively narrative and non-narrative... In addition, some modern theorists have converted *diegesis* into a narratological category denoting the imagined story-universe as opposed to the discursive or textual constituents of a narration. The closest we come to this distinction in ancient criticism is in Aristotle's pair of terms *praxis*, "action" *qua* events depicted, and *muthos*, the structuring of depicted action into a dramatic/narrative representation (see esp. *Poetics* 6.1450a3-5). In French, this other sense of *diegesis* is denoted by 'diégèse' ... while "diégésis" is reserved for the narrative mode contrasted with *mimesis*. This further terminological splitting has led to a somewhat confusing variation in the sense of the adjective "diegetic"/ "diégétique," together with related compounds, in the hands of different theorists. One reason for this state of affairs is the fact that the earliest modern usage of French "diégèse" originates in film theory, where diegesis designates everything which constitutes or belongs to the world projected, and not only visually, by a film...' (Halliwell 2012). return to text

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