

The Thought-Provoking Power of Narration

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Abstract: After a time of theoretical condemnation common sense as well as academic curiosity have rediscovered again the all-permeating powers of narration. Narrativity and culture are, this is a conviction grounding this essay, closely interwoven. But from this doesn't follow that narration has to be seen as a guardian of general order. On the contrary, if we contemplate the appearance of narratives in everyday life and in literature we may detect differences but also affinities in subverting common beliefs. Yet, literary narrations tend to work in their own way through what in philosophical discourse is reduced to conceptualizing. The topics dealt with in this essay include Schiller's substantiation of aesthetic awareness and Goethe's narrative response; the great master-narratives of the 20th century: Proust, Joyce and Beckett; and the question, what an advanced art of narration can contribute to an experience which is yearning to break open the iron cage of traditions in thought as well as in literary invention.

“Alles, was menschlich ist, Empfindung, Kenntnis
und Erkenntnis, Trieb und Wille – insofern es men-
schlich ist und nicht tierisch, ist ein Denken darin”
(G. W. F. Hegel)

To tackle a topic that tends to get exuberant is never a pleasure. But a deep interest, since long existent, has eased this burden while reading and writing, and has even sometimes occasioned the pleasures of recognition and newly found insight. I couldn't help but dwell on fragments of knowledge and, therefore, my presentation comes out fragmentary enough. The aim of this essay is to subvert some of the all too controlled opinions about, let's say, narrative identity or narratological theory-building. I favor the zone in between categorically well-ordered demarcations and hope that the foreign language I was compelled to use in this text does not too severely obscure what I want to point out.

1. Narrative culture?

Storytelling seems to be a natural gift independent of ambitious intellectual operations. Yet it has to be seen as a cultural attainment. Some may even argue that the most formally feeble story any contemporary chooses to unroll in a narrative plot will be deeply impregnated by handed down cultural patterns and more or less useful conventions of construction. And it would not matter – so a saying goes – if it is a fictitious or a true incident he or she is going to elaborate in the manner of an unkempt oral or a more or less ornate narration.

However, one may have reasons to doubt the latter. What is it that we call “culture?” It is certainly not a petrifying or petrified item. It is instead something oscillating between permanence and variation, something in a precarious process of becoming and not in a self-contained state of being. Talking about a national culture does not mean to allude to a harmoniously built and intricately decorated architecture of aesthetic and symbolic values. It is in fact nothing else but a manner of speech subsuming a most colorful bundle of coexisting local cultures and their particular narratives, entangled in a lively process of giving and receiving, under the heading of an otherwise void concept. Cultural and narrative pluralism is the vigorous signature of our time. Not to mention the fact that cultures, and that is also true in respect to the various cultures of narration, belong evidently to those heterogeneously composed artifacts produced and utilized by people in a wide range of multifarious manifestations. Not what cultures, not what narratives *are*, but what they do to us and how we use them is of maximum interest.

It seems, furthermore, to be common sense that the meaning of culture as a sine-qua-non-condition of human existence is contingent on the narrative accounts of what was accomplished during the evolvement of mental and material achievements in the history of mankind. Historico-genetic definitions necessarily include narrative speech. It, therefore, cannot be denied that “culture,” if used as a concept, embraces history in the broad sense of a narratively construed experience. What is decisive for an acceptance of the verisimilitude of the narration is the compliance of the respective text with an intentionally chosen perspective, videlicet point of view. To conceive “culture” as a *text* or as a *context*, is self-explanatory as long as we keep in mind the fact that this term incorporates what Clifford Geertz aptly called a “web of significance,” something man-made and therefore to be compared with the multifariously connected webs of narration.¹

Greek philosophers made the point that storytelling compared to other literary forms is a *genus mixtum*, something in between the conventional genres

¹ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York: Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3–30.

of Drama and Poetry. A view that supports the thesis of narration as an inclusive language game. Subsequent theories adopted Plato's suggestion and gave it the position of a powerful normative principle. The prevailing distinguishing feature of that principle was linked to the question of who the subject of speech would be in one or the other situation: the author or a fictitious person. Yet, this is, as the advanced theorists very well know, a bit short-sighted. Narration is more than something in between neatly circumscribed literary genres, because it will be implemented in each and every case wherever transitional forms of worldmaking are in demand. Anyhow, comparison between given genres was long ago left over to the conventional typing procedures of the classical poetics.² Formalism and Structuralism have extended the debate by directing the attention towards the intermediary functions and the time-establishing power of narration.

The intermediary functions are, so to say, condensed in the narrator's figure – if it is apt to call him a “figure” at all. It is a strange fact that there is no definite term either for that second self or for the relation between him and the reader. There are certainly various concepts expressing the manifold aspects of that peculiar function of an intermediary subject who seems to illustrate what within the epistemological tradition since Kant belongs to our basic beliefs: that whatever we know about us and the world is organized according to our own capability of perceiving reality and at the same time to our faculty to pattern and order this reality with our mind's help. So the world we experience is not something in itself but something we learn to know in a categorically mediated way. Is this comparable to the intermediary function I am suggesting here when talking about the in-between-status characteristic of a fictional narrative? I will try to give an answer below, but would first like to take a look at a certain variety of narrative forms and functions.

2. *Varieties*

Reasoning, respectively thinking is the outcome of a seduced mind envisaging the never-ending hardships of necessity. This is at least what is known to posterity by that fragmentarily conveyed but soon sacralized narrative we are used to quote as “Genesis 3” out of the Hebrew Bible. It is a remarkable invention that the violation of the prohibition to relish the Fruit of Knowledge combined with an instantaneous extradition opened the eyes of a hitherto sleeping mind. And it is even more admirable that this fantasy was vested in a narrative clarifying the birth of thought by sending the fancied

² See W. Schmid, *Elemente der Narratologie*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008.

ancestors of mankind from a paradise of total ignorance into a world full of troubles and aching labors.

To conceive thinking as a result of privation is part of my thesis. It seems to me for a variety of reasons I am going to discuss below that narration is the most appropriate way to embody the headspinning turmoil man is confronted with in the relatively short history bridging the times between Genesis 3 and our own troubled world. Both, thinking and story-telling certainly are intertwined irrespective of whether linguistic or extralinguistic, let us say, pictorial media are involved. If man's existence is nothing else or nothing less but a cluster of closely amalgamated stories the question is obvious what in the world could justify a precise distinction between thought and narration.³ I am not going to deny that this distinction is possible and even necessary. Especially since in the particular realms of literary criticism and linguistic analysis a huge amount of thinking is invested in the thorny task to define what narration and story-telling are.

What I find intriguing is the fact that in the English language the verb "to tell" has a semantic affinity with the verb "to discern;" whereas the German word "erzählen" reminds us of the enumeration of numbers (*Zahlen*). So in both cases we are beckoned to acknowledge that narration and thought are in a more or less contiguous position. Perhaps academic reflection insofar has done the right thing by introducing a new sub-discipline called "Narratology" which by now has generated a real hyperproduction of extremely specialized theoretical and analytical thought- and research-work in this field.

The term "narratology" was coined by Tzvetan Todorov in his *Grammaire du Décameron* (1969). His aim in this book was to differentiate the entities constituent of a fictional narrative and to describe their structural functions and relations. Today "Narratology" stands for an interdisciplinary research-paradigm which has an almost infinite scope embracing all sorts of narratives not only of linguistic provenance but also out of the world of multimedia productions.⁴ All sorts of linguistic and pictorial compositions in the meantime became a topic of innumerable studies applying a continuously expanding arsenal of narratological instruments. And it seems that even purely argumentative utterances are not exempted from the frenzy of that kind of analysis.⁵

Story-telling is an everyday experience and an entertainment. Despite the fact that it is such a common and often enough spontaneously if not automatically performed activity, it ordinarily attracts the attention of those who

³ W. Schapp, *In Geschichten verstrickt. Zum Sein von Ding und Mensch*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1953.

⁴ S. Heinen and R. Sommer (eds.), *Narratology in the Age of Cross-Disciplinary Narrative Research*, Berlin-New York: de Gruyter, 2009.

⁵ W. Müller-Funk, *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative. Eine Einführung*, Heidelberg: Springer, 2007.

happen to be the listeners. Combined with it is an irresistible appeal to ask the narrator simple questions like "Why?," "How?," "So what?" or to react by starting one's own story-telling device. Yet, to be able to identify the specific speech-act as some kind of story-telling is not a necessary condition in everyday communications. There are so many varieties of narration according to the ever changing socio-cultural contexts that the endeavor of a complete listing would not really pay off. Story-telling and consuming everyday-stories, for instance, by reading the daily newspapers can be a pleasure. But it really offers much more if a sociological expert-eye flicks through the papers looking for stories about those ordinary troubles that give evidence to the irregular regularities of social life. For such a kind of stories there is no better treasure trove than Erving Goffman's *Frame Analysis*. To quote an example that could have been told by Buster Keaton: "One man in the crowd gripped his walking stick when he saw three men racing down a busy street near Trafalgar Square yesterday, followed by policemen. He knew where his duty lay if cops were chasing robbers. He raised his stick, cracked one man over the head and vanished from the scene. His only desire was to be an unsung hero. The injured man was taken to hospital to have his gashed head stitched. Last night, nursing his aching head, 30-year-old actor Michael McStay bemoaned the fact that the movie sequence had proved too realistic. 'I suppose this is an occupational hazard,' he said, 'but I do think he owes me a drink.'"⁶

To raise questions in the situation of everyday communication is not only a means to disturb the flow of narration, it is in fact also the right way to turn one's wit toward that questionability a philosophically tuned mind might be prone to enjoy. But there is no need to exaggerate at this point the game of question and answer. Narrative situations for the moment can be considered on a much more moderate level. On the part of the narrator a lot of diverse intentions and purposes are thinkable. The listeners of course, who have scruples about what they hear, might make out of it what they want. And it is this possibility, I think, which marks an important difference linguistic analyses not seldom put aside because they are anxious to keep in line with a scheme of rule-governed story-telling.

To intervene and thus change the course of narration certainly is a property of oral, i.e. direct and interactive communication. And this is a situation in which narrator and audience not only share time and place, they also may indulge in the game of changing roles and attitudes. It, therefore, seems natural to take for granted that spontaneous oral narrations owe their power to the interplay between time and place, the attitudes of the involved actors and

⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 23, 1966; E. Goffman, *Frame Analysis. An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1986, p. 310.

the skill of the narrator to vocally and gesturally perform his speech. What I would like to point out in this context is that the comprehension of the more complex, i. e. literary forms of narration is unthinkable without the knowledge of those varieties of narration experienced in ordinary communicative interactions.⁷ There is a fluent passage between the natural and the artificial forms of telling a story, may the narrator be motivated by the purpose to produce an aesthetic or a didactic piece of speech. Crucial is what the recipient chooses and prefers according to his expectations. And this refers most often to a fuzzy attitude not so far away from what in the misreading of the Horatian formula "aut prodesse aut delectare" survived all those well-meant attempts to draw a sharp line between the search for practical usefulness and disinterested delight.

A lot of contemporary talk and writing is circling around the notion of narrative identity. Maybe this is a symptom of fearing to lose what former times held in high esteem, a type of belief dedicated to the life-guiding magic of a narratively preserved past experience. The past is known to us in a more or less reliably handed down tradition the best kept part of which we could imagine to be enclosed in something similar to that universe of written and printed matters, Jorge Luis Borges described in his enigmatic tale *The Library of Babel*.

Of course, Borges' library is a fantasy protected by a deep play of thoughtful construction. It cannot be destroyed not only because of its origin in the depths of an ingenious source of narrative and at the same time mathematical skill. It is also an infinite jest because it enlightens the reader and is at the same time an obscurant fraud. The principle of insufficient reason Borges takes as a basis does not exclude reasoning as a tool for surviving the ordinary dangers of everyday life. It functions as a monitum to mistrust the exclusive knowledge-rules of a science-based logic. The idea that there could be any affinities with religion in Borges' poetics is a rather improbable temptation. For that suspicion I cannot find any evidence in his *Library of Babel*. Instead we may consider any text – profane or sacred – as being pulled from the Babelian library by the act of the author defining the search letter by letter until he accomplishes a narrative close enough to the one he or she imagined and intended to write down.

The abundance of narrative forms in world-literature – sacred and profane – is not even remotely comprehensible. Superficially examined it is noticeable that many of the conventional forms are connected to particular expectations as to their effects or functions. But very seldom these effects have to do with the profane enlightenment of reason or, generally spoken, the capacities of thought. Even the narrative constructions of the philosophical past hardly find credit as an instrument apt to enhance the force of epistemic progress.

⁷ T. A. van Dijk, "Action, Action Description and Narrative," *New Literary History*, 6 (1975), pp. 273–294.

All the more interesting are the effects of narration immanent in this or that world of fiction, not least because they refer to a wide range of usage of – to quote Plato’s metaphorical designation of writing – “pharmaka.” Poisoning or healing, these are the extremes. In case of the *Arabian Nights* a third effect has to be added: being rescued from death by artfully telling stories. This miracle of narration, the *Arabian Nights* in their written form, mirrors a culturally specific skill going back to Islamic and urban roots of oral story-telling.⁸ The collection is a fantastic example of telling and reflecting the particular art of representation. And some of the stories tell – a good example is the *History of Abu Kir and Abu Sir* – how the invented actors for their part can make a fortune with the help of their narrative skills. It is an almost Beckettian hallmark of many Arabian stories that they avoid the opening-formula “Once upon a time...” so familiar to us and start instead with the words “It was – it was not.”

Rescue is one of the dominant themes of story-telling, poisoning to death the antithetical version. One of the most eerie, emotionally moving plots, shrouded in a dramatic form, develops in Shakespeare’s *Othello*. The pack of lies schemed as an intrigue by the villain Iago is the poison which talks Othello into his wife’s murder. And this catastrophe appears as a gruesome inversion of the world-order since the Moor himself had won Desdemona’s heart by telling her his own fateful story:

My story being done,
She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, ‘twas strange, ‘twas passing strange,
‘Twas pitiful, ‘twas wondrous pitiful:
She wish’d she had not heard it, yet she wish’d
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank’d me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story,
And that would woo her.⁹

3. Paradoxes

Is it true that our emotional responses to fictional narrations, be they dramatic or prosaic, are irrational?¹⁰ Apparently not, if we bear in mind the simple act of *choosing* between lived and imagined existence, between factual and fictional

⁸ R. Irwin, *The Arabian Nights. A Companion*, London: Penguin Books, 1994.

⁹ W. Shakespeare, *Othello*, a. I, sc. 2, vv. 158–166.

¹⁰ C. Radford and M. Weston, “How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes, 49 (1975), pp. 67–80.

worlds. In case I am going to read a novel I have already chosen between fact and fiction and have in advance decided to submerge into a world of fantasies and illusions. And it would be rather quixotic if the reader would be in danger to lose his wits by this encounter. Text types have their frames, and the reader knows how to use them in order to spur himself into focusing his attention.

The same is true of watching a movie or a theatrical performance. So there is a firm knowledge in the background about the possibility of inhabiting different worlds and manifold provinces of worldmaking. It is indeed the prerogative of the adult and the result of a disillusioning learning process to be capable of fluctuating between different, sometimes even contradictory worlds. I therefore doubt if "paradox" is really the right label when talking about the emotional quasi-infections aroused by the actions and characters of an imaginative, an artificial world.

Neither would I defend the claim that the emotional response to a novel or a theatre play has to be qualified as a *pretended* response. Pretension might occur on behalf of the actors on stage. But on this side of the forestage – the audience's side – the emotional responses are as genuine as they are consciously gone through. And something analogous pertains to the relations between the reader's experience and the fictional narrative he is enjoying. Once the preliminaries are settled, i.e. the novel chosen, the reader's mind and emotions are looking forward to sensations which in the world of fiction occur in a condensed and intensified peculiarity the real world might perhaps show ever and anon only in a state of exception. But beware, such a state involves a lot of unpredictable and unknown hazards the observer might not be able to survive unscathed.

This is of course not the right place to invoke psychological paraphernalia. Emotional *responses* induced by imaginative stories must not be confused with emotional *reactions*, the latter involving the impulse to effectively act at once. The spell by which the reader's intellect and emotions are inflamed and at the best get mesmerized can never exactly be foreseen. It rather depends upon an imponderable concatenation of preconditions and contexts which could be reduced to formal or psychological issues only by rendering ineffective what belongs to the core of a real aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic epiphany that may arrive in the course of apprehending a work of art can be understood as a suddenly arisen, but difficult to verbalize revelation. The point is that it is the text or the image which seems to offer the appropriate signs to express an emotional confusion engendered by the reader's performance of a text- or picture-world that is neither simply given nor the product of his own. It rather is a third dimension dividing and at the same time joining the given regimes of the text-world on one side and the reader's world on the other side; as if in-between the dawning of a new insight would emerge.

Despite the indeterminacy of emotional responses inherent in what may here be characterized as an aesthetic experience I therefore would like to argue that the pleasures of letting loose the emotions while re-enacting a great narrative are by no means irrational. Just the opposite can be defended: these pleasures are nourished by the intense interplay between imagination, emotion and intellect: "Emotions function cognitively not as separate items but in combination with one another and with other means of knowing. Perception, conception, and feeling intermingle and interact; and an alloy often resists analysis into emotive and nonemotive components."¹¹ Furthermore we should not forget that especially in the case of re-enacting a poetic story – whatever the media of narrative representation may be – the process of apprehending never follows a plain rhythm and tune. May the flux of narration be ever so harmonious (a boring experience), the recipients will in nine times out of ten experience the fascination of shifting distances and emotions. Suspense means to get thrilled by a provocative uncertainty, comprising the indeterminacy of the plot and the indecision of the actors. It is not a disinterested delight that is generating what we might call an aesthetic experience; it is rather the aim to satisfy one's curiosity by resolving the complex symbolic textures which constitute a perfectly judged narrative.

In short, if "paradox" is a term that expresses roughly the incommensurability of the aesthetic experience induced by reading a great narrative work I would willingly suggest to adopt Victor Hugo's "harmonie des contraires."¹² Hugo's formula expresses pretty well the reader's incitement to understand and, if required, to analyze *Notre-Dame de Paris* [*The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*] or any other great fiction.

It is not possible here to address the various, in part rather gloomy topics Hugo's novel is bringing to life. To cut off just that much: paramount in the novel is a dramatic combat between the beautiful and the ugly, between the good and the evil, between the sublime and the ridiculous; a combat that on the part of the reader from time to time may trigger a sequel of suddenly changing emotions which even may seem altogether contradictory. A disturbing fact the investigative reader might easily get along with once he takes as a starting point what the author in his earlier *Préface de Cromwell* defined as the "Grotesque": a character or artifact inducing in the beholder an emotion wavering between disgust and sympathy.

Victor Hugo as an individual writer is by no means my concern in this essay. But it is one of his merits that he was able to combine in his fiction the

¹¹ N. Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976, p. 249.

¹² V. Hugo, *Préface de Cromwell*, in Id., *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. J.-P. Reynaud, Paris: Laffont, 1985, p. 17.

most entertaining style of writing with those advanced reflections the literary historian considers a symptom of a forward thinking state-of-the-art position. In his *Préface* he has declared the “Grotesque” a principle of modernity in art, above all in literature. By this argument he rejects the conventional dichotomies and emphasizes the re-enactment of an intermediary experience as a genuine aesthetic value. Even if Hugo’s own way of narrative worldmaking – compared to Flaubert’s – does not wholly accomplish what he in theory wanted, his thoughts give a clue to what is appreciated as a broken-up art form. So one of the key-symbols the narrator in *Notre-Dame de Paris* is commenting on is the image of the written novel as a cathedral, piled up letter by letter and at the same time as distorted and enigmatic as the Gothic building itself.¹³ And, what is more, it appears as a wicked, a godforsaken place where violence and evil prevail. It is this autopoietic stance which breaks up the immanent form in order to suggest that the dark side of history has to be seen as a condition of possibility of modern fiction-writing.

So, if we look back at the question of an emotional bewilderment by reading fiction, we now may assert in a general way that one of the criterions of aesthetic experience has to do with the complexity a narrative work displays. The more complexity in form and content a work incorporates the greater its thought-provoking power. There are, of course, many ways of creating a complex narrative cosmos: playing with language, self-reference, ambiguities, oppositions, style, composition, rhythm, rhetorical and literary figures, self-mockery, common sense, prejudices, characters, morality, common expectations etc. Any handbook of any writer’s academy may itemize all the ingredients and combination options required to compose a narrative. The success, however, of the artifact is not a question of following prescriptions. There is the reading public, an imponderable being, with many diverse habits of mind and of taste, but like everybody endowed with particular conceptions of life and probably with contradictory critical preoccupations. It is a great accomplishment if a book of fiction manages to induce the reader to take up the attitude of a discoverer eager to understand both, the imaginative universe he perceives and the bewildering amazement sparked off in him by the particular story.

4. *The Third*

The great masters of fiction representative of the above only marginally outlined reflexivity are part of that canon the partial value of which becomes more and

¹³ See D. Harth, “Kunst und Alchemie. Der Zeichner Victor Hugo,” IABLIS. Jahrbuch für europäische Prozesse, 7 (2008), pp. 9–37.

more obvious when confronted with the global circulation of a literary production that is not rooted only in one and the same single national tradition. But if we balance the gains of classical modernity against the decentred pluralism of narrative forms in contemporary literary production there may be a chance to grasp some of the features of what I would like to call the aesthetic awareness.

The philosophical grounding of this awareness belongs to the European intellectual world of the 18th century. And this is a significant fact because the epoch of Enlightenment was a time of departure from traditions the normative power of which had shaped in a very profound way the substance of Western cultures. Religious power was in a defensive position, mundane literature gaining ground. In short, a development took place that deeply affected culture in general and the literary production in particular. Literacy till then was highly dependent on religious narratives, above all on reading and repeating the sacred words of the Bible, or on a wide heritage of heroic tales. But soon, under the circumstances of a radical cultural change, there abounded a multiform production of fictional narratives reveling in the adoration of a subjective sensibility and sentimentality.

I want to call this in mind because the discovery of the subjective self as a source of empathetic knowledge, in the meaning of trying to understand the emotional and intellectual dispositions of oneself and of the other, exerts until today a powerful impact on theory-building in art history and in literary criticism. Philosophy in the 18th century – the Age of Criticism – established Aesthetics as a new discipline with the task to comprehend the cognitive capacities of perception. The aim was not to ameliorate the discipline of conceptual logic but to find out how a “logic” of perceptual sensitivity could be substantiated. From Alexander Baumgarten, via Immanuel Kant to Friedrich Schiller, philosophical discourse – sometimes with more, sometimes with less efficiency – centered upon the question if and to which measure sensitive knowledge (*cognitio sensitiva*) could be made fruitful in enhancing the capacities of self-understanding and together with this the perfection of human co-existence under the circumstances of a nascent cultural reflexivity.

More than a few authors in this period deplored what they considered a rampant disintegration of culture, an awareness that for many became unquestionable after the bloody events of the French Revolution. To regain an integral normativity of culture, literary and philosophical writings in that time brought in an amazing production increase. It is obvious, that today’s literary and even cultural criticism derives its origin from the Age of Criticism. What is more, it is worthwhile to call briefly in mind one of the more advanced positions of that period, especially since it provides a valuable insight into the inner form of aesthetic thought which, I believe, still deserves attention. It was Friedrich Schiller, who in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*

carved out a path into what he called "the labyrinth of aesthetics." To quote from his Twentieth Letter, published in 1795: "Our psyche (*Gemüt*) passes, then, from sensation to thought *via* a middle disposition (*Stimmung*) in which sense and reason, however, they cancel each other out as determining forces, and bring about a negation by means of an opposition. This middle disposition, in which the psyche is subject neither to physical nor to moral constraint, and yet is active in both these ways, pre-eminently deserves to be called a free disposition; and if we are to call the condition (*Zustand*) of sensuous determination (*Bestimmung*) the physical, and the condition of rational determination the logical or moral, then we must call this condition of real and active determinability (*Bestimmbarkeit*) the aesthetic."¹⁴

If I here leave aside some of the more idiosyncratic arguments Schiller worked out, "the Third" (*das Dritte*) is, however, of considerable interest for my own musings about the aesthetic experience initiated by reading a full-blown narrative work. The Third appears, as the author of the *Letters* argues, if the art-work succeeds to transport the reader into a state in which the opposition between sensitivity and intellect is "*aufgehoben*," meaning "preserved by abolishment."¹⁵ So this new synthesis does not involve a complete obliteration of the subsumed, but a new state of cultural affairs through co-operation between "sense and reason." In Schiller's view the goal has to be reconciliation between the normally opposite powers. And as soon as this is attained, so his dream goes, beauty will rise and create the "aesthetic State" and a culture of freedom.

Schiller's dialectic of "*Aufhebung*" foreshadows the famous "*Negieren und Aufbewahren zugleich*" ("to negate and to retain simultaneously") in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* (1807). But above all it gives a hint as to what an aesthetically set mind could be conceived of relative to the advanced state of reflexivity in art and literature. It is of great interest in this respect that Schiller's colleague and close friend Goethe did not escape a profound contradiction in the friend's program to remedy the corrupted *weltanschauung* and disintegrating culture of their own time. Goethe's commentary avoided the rigorous logic of a conceptualized argument. Instead he wrote a narrative entitled *Märchen*, the title *Fairy Tale* aiming ironically at the utopian fantasy in Schiller's discourse.¹⁶

To respond to a philosophical treatise by writing a fairy tale at first sight seems awkward. But regarding Schiller's particular argument, there's something to be said for that. To begin with, the form of narration can break up

¹⁴ F. Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, translated by E. M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967, p. 141.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁶ K. Mommsen, "Goethes Märchen als Antwort auf Schillers Ästhetische Briefe," in Id., *Kein Rettungsmittel als die Liebe. Schillers und Goethes Bündnis im Spiegel ihrer Dichtungen*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2010, pp. 117-146.

petrified contrasts in favor of a transitional process. The narrative puts, so to say, in motion what in theory is thought as a passage from two adverse potentials (sense and reason) into a state (the Third) of peaceful consonance. In addition the choice of the fairy tale as a narrative genre offers a favorable opportunity to play with metamorphoses and all kinds of figurative enchantment the reader is provoked to recognize and to interpret. By this means Goethe's *Märchen* to a certain degree strives to anticipate what in theoretical discourse is blocked by conceptual abstractions: sensual pleasures without suppressing the appetite to disclose the encrypted meanings.

Beyond that the tale is part of a series of stories within a frame-narrative the model of which is Boccaccio's *Decamerone*. Similar to the group of Florentine citizens who were forced by the horrors of the plague to leave their town, a group of German refugees want to escape the horrors of the war ensuing the French Revolution. In both novella-collections the fugitives try to keep up their good spirits by story-telling and establish not only a considerable craftsmanship in that art but also – at least in Goethe's case – the knack to comment the secrets of a well composed and contentwise attractive narrative.¹⁷ Story-telling here is a temporary pastime and as well a resource of conversation about aesthetic, moral and political issues.

5. Eloquent Silence

The above briefly resumed developments in aesthetics set a new framework not only for theory-building but also for the creative realms of art and literature. The *aesthetic frame* – goes one of today's lines of thought – excludes all that is not appearing within the boundaries it draws.¹⁸ That does not mean an absolute autonomy. Contextual dependencies in regard to history and zeitgeist must not be ignored when research investigates the conditions of production, of quality and critical acceptance. But in order to apprehend what has to be taken into consideration once the reader has entered the world inside the aesthetic frame, a pivotal change in attitude cannot be denied. And this change is a response to the stimulative impression (*Anmutung*) radiating from a work of art or from a critically approved narrative.

If we would take the trouble to compare Boccaccio's and Goethe's narrative cycles we would soon discover a difference proving that the stories of

¹⁷ See W. v. Goethe, *Unterhaltungen deutscher Ausgewanderten* (Conversations of German Emigrants). 1795.

¹⁸ D. Henrich, *Fixpunkte. Abhandlungen und Essays zur Theorie der Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003.

the latter include a concealed comment on the feebleness of a pacifying story-telling appeal. There not only erupt profound disagreements between the group-members as to the manner of inventing and composing a narrative, in the end news about the brute events of the war break up the frail atmosphere of comfort and acceptance. And if we proceed further in the general history and the history of narration we immediately come across a disturbing increase of similar troubles due to the escalation of atrocities during and after the wars of the 20th century.

To argue like that at this point may seem a bit erratic. But all I want to say is that in the middle of the collapse of a treacherous coziness there looms a new variety of producing and experiencing art and literature. Framing a neatly hedged piece of narration may still occur. But it is of little interest when compared with the complexity of, let's say, novels like *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913–1927), *Ulysses* (1922), *Der Prozess* (1925), *Murphy* (1938), or *Comment c'est* (1961). Frames in all of these books become mobile, and ambivalence a paramount feature.

Marcel Proust's voluminous narrative work encompasses not only a treasure of philosophical and aesthetic thoughts, it also unrolls a carpet with many different colors and patterns taken up from various types of literary world-making. Not to mention the fact that the narrative reflects and examines what the book-title announces, the search of remembrance and the tentative to reanimate lost experiences. In all it is a copious and at the same time painful process varying between joy and misery. On the surface Proust's literary language tends to preserve the aesthetic delicacy and charm of a highbred parlance. In its depth, however, it refers – as Samuel Beckett in his homage to Proust has shown – to music as the one and only immaterial art travelling on the wings of time.¹⁹ So Beckett here discovers an ideal “phenomenon” behind the phenomenal, narratively materialized world which he himself in his later works takes up in order to perforate the opaqueness of the narrative language.

Joyce's style of telling a story and handling his language is quite another case. If, generally spoken, the writer is bound to keep silent while operating his writing utensils, his literary eloquence usually unfolds without touching the boundary between spoken and written word. There is no real listener who could be addressed even if the author wanted to lend his writing a voice. The reading-process works analogously: the solitary reading subject poised, book before his eyes, in silence and in a quiet position, yet indulging in the eloquent outpouring of an alien language.

Joyce displaced the conventional frames regarding narrative genres and styles, broke them open when and where he wanted. Trivial speech and even

¹⁹ S. Beckett, *Proust*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1931.

hackneyed clichés permeate the narrative flux in *Ulysses* and amalgamate with the most bookish innuendos. The narrative is a deliberately merged hybrid of divine (often Latin), vulgar, heroic and symbolic language with a blasphemous, but humorous urge. A motto could be Stephen Daedalus' depressed sigh "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake," a world view that affects the flow of narration and obviously echoes Hegel's statement that history is "not the soil in which happiness grows."²⁰

Early readers and critics then regarded *Ulysses* as an invitation to chaos. And this is true insofar as Hesiod's antique myth of creation puts Chaos at the beginning of what the ancients opined the birth of the ruling class of divine beings coincident with the molding of the human world. Joyce's narrative method of worldmaking in a number of his books makes ample use of mythic tales: besides Homer's *Odyssey* in *Ulysses* the myth of Daedalus in *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and the old legend of Finn MacCumhal in *Finnegans Wake*. But he approaches these masterpieces definitely with an ironic wink. And not enough with that manner of expertly borrowing of and playing around with mythology. Joyce has also an amorous relation with the European narrative tradition which he in his own writings decomposes and stitches together again with incongruous, but vivid fantasies of his own in order to keep up a memory akin to the playful Muses, the daughters of Mnemosyne. He is the perfect representative of a post-traditional culture not laboring meticulously like a pathetic guardian of paper-stuffed archives but as a virtuous expert-reader who enjoys to juggle while writing with the remains of the great master narratives.

In *Finnegans Wake* Joyce unleashed a controlled abundance of word-play and narrative complexity exploiting the layers (*Ge-Schichten*) of various, in part rather antiquated narratives and other literary material. One of his philosophical readers christened the paronomastic method applied in this book "phonemanon," contracting "phoneme" and "phenomenon."²¹ Thus the dissonant sound of the new lexeme echoes and at the same time parodies the tension between speech and writing familiar to each writer and reader. Writing as well as reading, trivial to repeat it, is an affair of silence and simultaneously of *parole*, a tranquil adventure within a milling of words. Dissonance here refers to the frictions between aural and optical senses, between the oral word and the printed page. But *nota bene*: "dissonance leads to discovery."²²

²⁰ J. Joyce, *Ulysses*, A Critical and Synoptic Edition, ed. H. W. Gabler et al., New York: Random House, 1986, p. 377; G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, translated by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 79.

²¹ J. Derrida, quoted in A. Roughley, *James Joyce and Critical Theory*, New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p. 277.

²² W. C. Williams, quoted in F. Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, London: Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 123.

It anyway seems that Joyce was more than once occupied with this catalytic phenomenon.

Joyce's technique of "scribbledehobble" in *Finnegans Wake* makes use not only of a provoking cumulative semantic tucked into one single lexeme, giving these a most unusual appearance and provoking a crackjaw oral performance, e.g. "runnerhinerstones" or "O gig goggle of gigguels." He also uses various narrative forms, he had entered in several of his notebooks precedent to the publication of *Finnegans Wake*: e. g. "Arabian nights, serial stories, tales within tales, [...] desperate story telling" etc.²³ The first line of *Finnegans Wake* gives an impression of what the again and again faltering narrative flow of this book was thought to transport: "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodius vicus of recirculation back to Howth Castle and Environs." The spinning and fishtailing flow of narration may – so could this passage be translated – pass the first days of mankind and run on a more comfortable road (*commodius vicus*) back to from where it started, to Dublin (Howth Castle belonging to the environments of this city).

Most interesting is Joyce's extensive use of the writings of the Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (scilicet *vicus!*), who published his most important books in the early 18th century. Highly appreciated by many writers of the 20th century – to name only a few: Samuel Beckett, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon – he endeavored to establish a modern humanism as a response to Cartesianism, a dominating school of thought in his time. In his *Principi di Scienza Nuova d'intorno alla Comune Natura delle Nazioni* (1730) Vico introduced the so called *verum-factum*-principle, a principle according to which truth has to be conceived not as a result of distanced observation, but as conditioned by invention and/or construction. So it is not surprising that his theory was highly praised by the creative class.

The construction of *Finnegans Wake* makes use of Vico's philosophy of history borrowing from him the scheme of a circular process.²⁴ Circularity here means that history in general is made up of cycles the determinant events of which recur again and again. Each cycle encompasses three ages – divine, heroic and human – and ends in destruction and chaos, opening the door for the advent of a new cycle. In the Last Day of a cycle – the hour of chaos, Vico calls "Ricorso" (Joyce's term "recirculation") – all what happened in the bygone times will then in a simultaneous rush be recapitulated and finally annihilated. The new cycle starts with a thunderclap, God's inarticulate stam-

²³ D. Hayman, "The Manystorytold of the *Wake*: How Narrative was Made to Inform the Non-Narrativity of the Night," *Joyce Studies Annual*, 1997, pp. 81-114.

²⁴ See K. Reichert, "Einleitung" to his edition of J. Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982, pp. 17-22.

mering voice. History as a “nightmare” – the fusion with Vico’s eschatological time mirrors that view. And it looks as if Joyce wanted to merge deep into that time-construction by creating in *Finnegans Wake* a language able to mimic not only the topsy-turvy of the Last Day but also God’s stammering speech.

It is a great enterprise one is going to encounter when reading, better, when decrypting Joyce’s *Wake*. It is a unique case where polyphony and polysemy go hand in hand and all classical coordinates seem inappropriate. Yet, the reader’s mind usually is still wandering along in the trail of fairly well ordered conventions. So for him what is provokingly new looms before the background of entrenched habits of reading and understanding. If he lets himself in to get involved in that challenge of discovering a realm hovering between the obvious and the obscure he may gain access to another zone of understanding, a twilight-zone and like all narratives a good place for the process of transition.²⁵ The result of that experience could be a disposition between the habitual orders of feeling and of cognition. I would like to associate this in-between-zone with “the Third,” which is nothing else but a metaphor symbolizing *alterity*. It is not beauty promising redemption, it is the pleasure of understanding both, the infinity of exploring the unknown and the finitude of life.

This is, I think, the right moment to close and I want to do that by allowing myself a brief glance at some of the narrative peculiarities in the writings of Samuel Beckett. In my opinion his mode of story-telling complies to an admirable extent with a method of positing and cancelling almost comparable to a calculation machine. His narrative discourse therefore on the one hand gives room for an assiduous search for meaning in the dull labyrinth of everyday life. On the other hand, this same search is always aware of the final end and tends, if it ever succeeds in finding some comfort, to cancel its findings. Beckett loves, like Joyce, to explore the music – sound and rhythm – of the literary language. And he too is a master of generating bewilderment in the common reader’s mind. His protagonists, often the rebelling makers of their own murky stories, are no “strangers to the joys of darkness.”²⁶ The author has a deep distrust in the reliability and sustainability of the literary and every-day-language. Ordinary language as well as philosophical language are because of their habitual use and their unintentional as well as inscrutable immanent dogmatic obstacles on the way to penetrate the darkness. Communication is not what Beckett’s figures are looking for.

In *Comment c’est* – the French title is an ironic word-play on *commencer*; Beckett’s own English translation has the title *How it is* – the text gives a mur-

²⁵ See B. Waldenfels, *Ordnungen im Zwielicht*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987.

²⁶ S. Beckett, *Malone Dies*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965, p. 23.

muring voice to a man without name who thrives hard to crawl through darkness and mud, panting and trying despite his dyspnea to articulate fragments of his life. It may be probable, as many an interpreter presumes, that the author was inspired by Giacomo Leopardi's poem *A se stesso*, written about 1835, in which the world appears as mud (*fango*) and human life as an abject tedium.

Or poserai per sempre,
 Stanco mio cor. Però l'inganno estremo,
 Ch'eterno io mi credei. Però, Ben sento,
 In noi di cari inganni,
 Non che la speme, il desiderio è spento.
 Posa per sempre. Assai
 Palpitasti. Non val cosa nessuna
 I moti tuoi, né di sospiri è degna
 La terra. Amaro e noia
 La vita, altro mai nulla; e fango è il mondo.
 T'acqueta omai. Dispera
 L'ultima volta. Al gener nostro il fato
 Non donò che il morire. Omai disprezza
 Te, la natura, il brutto
 Poter che, ascoso, a comun danno impera,
 E l'infinita vanità del tutto²⁷

Of course, Beckett's text, which lacks any punctuation, can also be read as a literary version of a tedious philosophical conundrum, that is to say, the genesis of form out of an amorphous materia. "how it was," the first line reads, "I quote before Pim with Pim after Pim how it is three parts I say it as I hear it," and then: "INVOCATION."²⁸ The opening presents the speaking subject – difficult to characterize him as a narrator – as someone who, lying face down, listens to what his breath is whispering to him ("I hear") and painstakingly stammers it out ("I say"); an echo of his own inward experience. The whole scrappy text is, if I may say so, quotation ("I quote") of the inner voice and insofar contradicting the classical ritual of invocation which is a well-known matter of literary inspiration since Homer.

²⁷ "Now you'll rest forever / my weary heart. The last illusion has died / I thought eternal. Died. I feel, in truth, / not only hope, but desire / for dear illusion has vanished. / Rest forever. You've labored / enough. Not a single thing is worth / your beating: the earth's not worthy / of your sighs. Bitter and tedious, / life is, nothing more: and the world is mud. / Be silent now. Despair / for the last time. To our race Fate / gave only death. Now scorn Nature, / that brute force / that secretly governs the common hurt, / and the infinite emptiness of all" (translated by A. S. Kline <http://digilander.libero.it/il_leopardi/translate_english/leopardi_to_himself.html>).

²⁸ S. Beckett, *How it is*, New York: Grove, 1964, p. 7.

Minimal narrative elements may encourage the reader to perceive *How it is* as a work belonging to the genres of story-telling, let's say the novel. But I find it hard to agree because I am most deeply convinced that the musical features of the book outstrip its narrative form. The broken breath of the fallen man appears in the course of a sequentially proceeding reading-process in the shape of a thoroughly composed, rhythmized lamentation; reading aloud is almost a must. Permutations of verbalizations, postponements, retrogression, ritardandi, repetitions and other formal, otherwise syntactic figures blend in and superimpose the narrative elements. Sure, music in this case is enshrined in a verbal score. And there is also, what cannot be denied, dissonance as a clear sign of life's essential distress. Yet, if we subscribe with Beckett to Schopenhauer's philosophy we can admit with relief that the power of music delivers the afflicted from misery and puts the all too long ongoing turmoil of thought to peace.

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