

SKIPPING BETWEEN TEXT AND PERFORMANCE: SOME QUESTIONS OF “REALISM”

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ABSTRACT

Following Gérard Genette’s explorations of “transtextuality”, the article addresses the afterlife of Franz Kafka’s *Report to an Academy* in examples offered by John Maxwell Coetzee and Oliver Frlić. These construct a palimpsest for considering the dynamic relation between “text and performance”, as broaching questions of ethics in narrative practices that cannot be limited to those of narratology. The article attempts to maintain a sense of itself offering an example of its own understanding, echoing a sense of the “propositional” to be found in Alfred North Whitehead.

KEY WORDS

Kafka, Coetzee, Frlić, empathy, realism

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“There is, first of all, the problem of the opening...” [1; p.1]. In this very example of an opening, the problem referred to concerns how narrative might build a bridge from our understanding of where we are to where we want to be. Indeed, the narrator reflects on the paradox of such a beginning, that “where we are” is already in the middle of things, if not (as yet) “nowhere”. At least, so it appears when the experience of reading is admitted without it having been already explained. Although a narrative has begun – with this example of displacement (which is of the definition of quotation) – it will only have transformed such a nowhere into the desired somewhere after the opening has, as it were, been closed. For the understanding of what appeared “first” comes afterwards, in the end that a beginning implies – when the story told and the telling of it appear to have coalesced; or when the page is no longer blank.

The latter is a familiar metaphor for life – where the blank page offers recognition of the inscription of time in the making of meaning, playing with the gap between experience and explanation. In the story whose opening sentence is quoted here, this metaphor of the blank page is given *to* a character; and then given *by* him to the reader, so that the described scene appears to be understood through someone else’s thoughts [1; p.4]. With this process of focalisation, it is as if propositions – or even metaphors – require a fictive consciousness to be told (the lack of which makes a reading difficult to “follow”). While this seeming requirement is explicit in imaginative or literary narrative, it remains implicit in academic prose (whether in an article or a lecture), especially when it is deemed “inappropriate” to acknowledge it (skipping between, or monkeying with, disciplinary conventions).

By contrast, such an acknowledgement is part of the very sense of a “proposition” in the view of Alfred North Whitehead, for whom it attests to modes of consciousness to which it is not, however, reducible. For Whitehead, this acknowledgement obviates the entrenched distinction through which narrative, or propositional, claims are traditionally assigned their “appropriate” extension, as between “subjective experience” and “objective reality”, for instance. In her reading of Whitehead, Isabelle Stengers poses the question underlying this critical recognition: “How can we approach the difference between a statement corresponding to a perception or to a judgement, and a statement exhibiting propositional efficacy?” [2; p.397].

The narrator of my opening example, for instance, likes to highlight the attempt to make bridges between performance and text (or between *énonciation* and *énoncé*) by announcing that he is “skipping” things. Fracturing a narrative sequence (a fracture set out here in quotation marks), it is not only the “first of all” that is “the problem”. Without skipping, without such narrative ellipses (as a mode, paradoxically, of connecting thoughts), “we will [as the narrator says] be here all afternoon” – getting nowhere, perhaps – for all that this also “plays havoc with the realist illusion” [1; p.16]. That the question of consciousness is elided here in a fictive “we” – whether of listeners or readers – offers the possibility of narrative “efficacy” and broaches the fraught question of a relation between empathy and ethics (or what the author here calls “the problem of evil”).

The introductory “problem”, concerning the “illusions of realism”, is conceived of by the narrator in disciplinary terms, as a relation between the claims of “writers and thinkers” [1; p.10]; that is, in the “quarrel” between the disciplines of literature and philosophy, between the literary and the theoretical, which inflects the self-defining tradition of European “humanities” from the ancient Greeks to the present. This segregation in “the spectrum of human thought” – as if between “reason” and “emotion” (or even between human and animal) – is not the least of what turns out to be in question here in the name of “realism”. Between “performance and text”, this traditional “disputation” is even staged by the author himself, as he offers a lecture in the form of a fiction and, conversely, that very fiction in the form of a lecture.

All of this discussion is engaged with the afterlives of Franz Kafka’s text *A Report to an Academy* – which the fictional author introduces to her audience with the suggestion that, “perhaps you know it” [1; p.18]. In Kafka’s story, she tells us: “an ape, dressed up for the occasion, makes a speech to a learned society. It is a speech, but a text too, an examination, a viva voce. The ape has to show not only that he can speak his audience’s language but that he has mastered their manners and conventions, is fit to enter their society” [1; p.18]. This example of the transtextual [3], like the opening “problem”, is taken from John Maxwell Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*; a re-citation of which introduces a current stage production by Oliver Frljić at the Gorki Theatre in Berlin (2019) [4]. These palimpsests of “performance and text” concern not so much a question of genre, however, as of transformation; ciphering the relation between reading and writing (identified by “skipping” connections) within claims to narrative “realism”. Indeed, this is literally announced by Coetzee’s narrator in terms, firstly, of a skip in the performance [1; p.16] and, secondly, a skip in the text [1; p.24]. These ellipses concern not so much *what* it is that we are attending to (whether as “a lecture”, “a story”, or “a play”), as *how* it is that a narrative form solicits or realises our attention, including through its re-citation.

How, after all, does the “reading” of a novel or of a stage production become an instance of writing that understands itself as an example of what it is trying to understand? What makes for a “realistic” narrative in this example concerning *A Report to an Academy*? Of course, the “problem” of the “opening” – foregrounding, precisely, the mutual conditionality of the mimetic and the diegetic, the performance and the text – refers simultaneously to itself and to what it is not; as if hoping to find (paratextually) its own writing in what has been read. Even the opening citation here – the narrative possibility of “there is” – is split between the performance (the “opening”) and the text (as the masquerade of Coetzee and Frljić).

Does “realism”, in this example, draw attention to its own narration (or performance) – to the work of writing (as that of “skipping” and of “quoting”)? Or, on the contrary, does it occlude its construction, as is usually assumed – where, as the quoted narrative suggests, “the time and space of the real world fade away, superseded by the time and space of the fiction” [1; p.16]? (In the case of theatre, of course, this work of “supercession” – in which “the notion of embodying turns out to be pivotal” [1; p.9] – offers a new set of questions that are related, but not reducible, to the text.) Is the fictively “realistic” narrator one who plays with the refractions of the “broken word mirror” [1; p.19] of Elizabeth Costello’s humanist tropes? Or one who offers a complete reflection, as if the fractures and fissures of the metaphorical glass could be separated from what is imagined by its means? Indeed, how does the work of citation – in the standard academic appropriation of “examples” – operate between refraction and reflection, as in its very example here as a question of “realism”?

Curiously, however, between the performance (as an actual lecture, entitled “what is realism?”, which Coetzee gave at Bennington College in November 1996) and the text (in its appearance as the first chapter, or “lesson”, of a novel in 2003, entitled simply “realism”), the title topic has lost its question mark. But returning to the “blank page”, for example, this question – “if we are being realistic” [1; p.20] – concerns the very nature of the subject, indexing the different ambitions of (or hopes for) life and literature to the unconditional mortality of the former and the conditional immortality of the latter. Indeed, these relations to death gloss the expectations of what is meaningful in each case, as a relation between beginning and ending.

The tension or fragility of such expectations in modernity comes into particular focus when associated with twentieth century European history (as refracted, or reflected, in literature). This is especially the case concerning the limitations of “being realistic”, or of what admits of the “illusions of realism”, with respect to knowledge of the Shoah. The possibility of making

meaning when confronted with the social understanding of life manifested in the historical “reality” of the Nazi regime is succinctly addressed by Adorno, for instance, in his *Notes on Kafka*: “In the concentration camps, the boundary between life and death was eradicated. A middle ground was created, inhabited by living skeletons and putrefying bodies, victims unable to take their own lives... As in Kafka’s twisted epics, what perished there was that which had provided the criterion of experience – life lived out to its end...” [5; p.260].

Here the relation between life and literature finds its “witness” in an example that, in its critical appropriation, remains profoundly disturbing. Between empathy and proposition, witness and reality, consciousness and realism, the narrative relation (between the opening “there is” and the fictional “we” in Coetzee) exposes an ethical complexity that has no “closure”. We might reflect also on another transtextual instance, with the opening “scene” of Claude Lanzmann’s film *Shoah* and its attempt to disclose something concerning the “reality” of Chelmno at the time of the filming (albeit transformed into the time of – and by – the editing). In this sequence, we hear Szymon Srebnik (one of only two survivors) broach the time of the witness – in a voice that expresses both disbelief and affirmation (or, rather, disbelief at the possibility of affirmation) in the “there is” that the film begins with. “Yes, this is the place,” he says. “No one can describe it... Even I, here, now. I can’t believe I’m here” [6]. Lanzmann takes a decided position with respect to “realism” and its “illusions” – attempting to eschew any fictionalised consciousness, even as he demonstrates that propositions do not simply speak for themselves.

As Whitehead insists, the descriptive and the demonstrative are not – in any meaningful sense – reducible to each other. The testimony as to what does not exist (looking at or for the site of the Chelmno death camp today) offers a testimony concerning the existence of the survivor – as he speaks to and for himself, and thereby to and for Lanzmann’s film. The truth of the proposition that “this is the place” is contained in the reflection “I can’t believe I’m here”. The ostensible focalisation (simultaneously withdrawn) is necessary since without it the camera sees “nothing”. Lanzmann’s montage is devoted to the attempt to engage with this condition (or impossibility even) of narrative “knowledge” in the example of a relation between film and the Shoah. The survivor’s testimony – in its “unbelievable” affirmation – presents one side of the “broken mirror”; while the other side presents the testimony of those whose lives – with the possibility of being “lived out to their end” – are also related to this same landscape. In contrast to a testimony as if from the dead, however, the narrative of knowledge from the living touches upon disavowal rather than disbelief; as if a complete reflection could be found in each shard of the broken glass.

With the mirror metaphor, we are re-citing familiar narrative questions concerning “being realistic” [1; p.20], which are not simply posed *to* the texts referenced here but are, of course, already posed *by* them. As Mieke Bal remarks, the relevance of “theory”, after all, speaks to that of its subject – working from and with the narrative example it has chosen, rather than offering abstract narratological categories or typologies along with their “illustrations” [7]. For Bal, the issue is not so much about disciplinary knowledge as a critical practice, one that is engaged with the field of cultural practices which it cites. The aim is not to demonstrate that an example is questionable in narratological terms, but to explore the work that such terms do in thinking through how and why such questions arise “first of all”. As Whitehead observes: “Consciousness requires more than the mere entertainment of theory. It is the feeling of the contrast of theory, as *mere* theory, with fact, as *mere* fact. This contrast holds whether or no the theory be correct” [8; p.188].

In the present case, these propositions (exploring the opening sense of what “there is”) are offered in Whitehead’s sense of not simply stating that which “is”, but of evoking the potential of what is felt. “The primary mode of realisation of a proposition in an actual entity

is not by judgement, but by entertainment. A proposition is entertained when it is admitted into feeling. Horror, relief, purpose, are primarily feelings involving the entertainment of propositions" [8; p.188]. As an inscription on the tomb of all that "might be", the "there is" concerns not only what is said, but also what is not said; in the sense of both what is not sayable (Wittgenstein) and what is unspeakable (Adorno). In this regard, it is curious that the question (or the "realism") of empathy hardly appears in the indexes of standard narratological text books, as if its disciplinary claims cannot "entertain" such matters of consciousness. Indeed, this suggests that, perhaps, any cosmopolitical (or ethical) concern with questions of narrative might go beyond the "merely" narratological.

To be able to acknowledge the existence of (if not to identify with) another's point of view – as embodied (or "lived") – invites questions, following Kafka's *Report*, that offer a play not only of understanding (or "mimicry") between male and female [1; p.23], for example; but also between human and animal, generating metaphors of the "bestial" and the "humane". As Costello explores, these attributes speak of and to limitations in the understanding of human being and action. Beyond the humanist cosmopolitanism of "entering into others' lives" (or their "thoughts"), there is (to follow Bruno Latour [9]) a question of cosmopolitics here, where Costello's "broken mirror" fractures the image that Humanist culture has of itself as distinct from "nature". The understanding that the very nature of "culture", in its self-reflection, is fractured requires a cosmopolitics in which the question of animal consciousness is not so "fictional" as is often still supposed. The difference between having or not having a soul, for instance, is not reducible to the difference of species; at least, not when conceived of in pluriversal rather than universal terms. The idea that the intersubjective could include interspecies relations without being limited to (or by) suppositions of "anthropomorphism" (or, what Frans de Waal calls, "anthropodenial" [10]) is a marker for ethical questions in narratology. After all, the experience of empathy evidently fails, historically, to "explain" the claims of ethics (despite those of literature).

"'Ladies and Gentlemen', she begins. 'It is two years since I last spoke in the United States. In the lecture I then gave, I had reason to refer to the great fabulist Franz Kafka, and in particular to his story *Report to an Academy*, about an educated ape, Red Peter...'" [1; p.62]. Referring to the lecture given ("two years ago") in chapter one, on "realism", this second lecture by Elizabeth Costello (in chapter 3) will itself be a point of reference in a later lecture (in chapter 6), where it is described as "a talk for which she was attacked in the pages of *Commentary* (belittling the Holocaust, that was the charge) and defended by people whose support for the most part embarrassed her: covert anti-Semites, animal-rights sentimentalists" [1; p.156]. Citing Kafka's *Report* (in relation to Wolfgang Köhler's experiments, particularly with an ape named Sultan [1; pp.71-75]), the second lecture – which was given by Coetzee at Princeton in October 1997 – elaborates the traditional "literary" (or Humanistic) question of empathy in the context of historical "reality". Here Costello makes a comparison between public knowledge (or, rather, its disavowal) of the mass murder of Jews and of the industrial slaughter of animals.

The question of narrative is now implicitly folded into that of rhetoric, as the enlivening of what – as tropes – are themselves essentially modes of citation. The paradox of empathy – as an understanding that acknowledges subjectivity and, indeed, complicity – is evoked. But what is supposed here to be the epitome of the personal – a sense or feeling of responsibility implied by knowledge (despite knowing that one is not directly responsible for the actions about which one knows) – is often addressed philosophically as if it were without a subject. The evocation of this sense of responsibility is a matter of narrative efficacy, of an interweaving of fiction and reality, performance and text; or, indeed, philosophy and literature (as Stephen Mulhall has explored so well [11]). This is evidenced especially when Costello's lecture is

adopted in performance – no longer that of its “speech giving” author, Coetzee, but of actors re-citing (or “embodying”) the words of the fictional Costello to an audience in a production that uses this text for its opening. Returning to “the problem of the opening”, then, the narrative questions (working through propositions, reality, embodiment, the fictional and the historical) become charged in new ways. The “there is” supposed of the narrative confronts what is supposed of “being realistic”, precisely, in the evocation of the “unspeakable”.

In the opening gesture of Oliver Frlić’s Berlin production “of” or “with” Kafka’s *Report to an Academy*, the Costello lecture appears not only as a didactic introduction for the audience; it seems, implicitly, to offer an accusation. The role of an audience – whether at the gathering of a “learned society” or at a theatre; in a fiction or in reality (where the supercession of the one by the other is forestalled) – is compared to that of bystanders to a crime. Was this crime socially sanctioned with the complicity of narrative “culture”, as much as through the force of terror? In its very enactment, however, Costello’s speech (in contrast to Coetzee’s own example) seems to mistake the proposition, as if it were a matter of performance *or* text rather than their mutual implication (in what Brecht would call its *Gestus*). “What” is said as the problem of the opening overwhelms “how” it is said – as if what was at stake occluded the very occasion of and for saying it (or, indeed, the question of its “realism”).

The problem of the opening in this case is that the transtextual is presented as if it were its own “source” (as if Costello was being cited in the name of Kafka). The play of citation is in tension with the “facts” being narrated, beginning with the fact of the narration or “lecture” itself. The speech’s historical reference to Treblinka does not build a bridge between where we are and where the speaker wants us to be, between what we know and what we do not want to know. Crucially, an understanding of the citation (of the transtextuality operating in Frlić’s dramaturgy) is realised only afterwards, when it turns out that the beginning was already a repetition of the ending. As a marker of its construction, the production concludes by returning to the same speech, starting all over again, as if because of (rather than despite) all that had occurred on stage in between. Paradoxically, this implies an “unending” cycle in German (or European) politics, where the ethical (or cosmopolitical) question of such “knowledge” (as also that of its narration) is not posed in a way that might interrupt or displace the conditions of and for its repetition. This exposes the political vacuity of intoning “never again”, as Costello’s speech serves as a reflection of the end in the beginning, rather than its refraction into alternatives.

It is with such examples of the “illusions of realism” – exposed by skipping here between performance and text – that the following observation from Whitehead comes into focus, pointing to the complexity of what “we” suppose of narrative: “No verbal sentence merely enunciates a proposition. It always includes some incitement for the production of an assigned psychological attitude in the prehension of the proposition indicated. In other words, it endeavours to fix the subjective form which clothes the feeling of the proposition as a datum” [12; p.243]. With this, however, this article itself would also need to begin again, so far is it from what it had to say “first of all” (in “the problem of the opening”).

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