"Yarn-Spinning is Also Highly Recommended": Yann Martel's Framing Narratives

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Summary

In Yann Martel's collection *"The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" and Other Stories* ([1993]2005), we can clearly discern the construction of a metaphorical frame that creates and encircles the real, thereby describing two important poststructural frames of reference: the Lacanian "magic circle" (especially as this is foregrounded by Catherine Belsey in her recent monograph, *Culture and the Real* (2005*),* and the Derridean parergon. Martel's fictions perform a cultural function in that they frame the unsignifiable unknown (be this death, AIDS, God, or the creative moment) with a "signifying screen" (Belsey 2005: 72) that is creative, gives pleasure, and fleetingly appeases the drive of the subject. The framing performance of Martel's stories is intriguingly complex, operating not only at the level of theme and subject but also at the level of structure, prepositional play, language and metaphor.

Opsomming

In Yann Martel se versameling "*The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" and Other Stories* ([1993]2005) kan 'n mens duidelik die konstruksie van 'n metaforiese raamwerk waarneem wat die werklike skep en omring en sodoende twee belangrike post-strukturele verwysingsraamwerke beskryf: die Lacanse "towersirkel" (veral soos Catherine Belsey dit in haar onlangse monografie, *Culture and the Real* (*2005),* op die voorgrond stel) en die Derrideaanse raam ("parergon"). Martel se fiksie het 'n kulturele funksie aangesien dit die onaanduibare onbekende (hetsy dit die dood, VIGS, God, of die kreatiewe oomblik is) op 'n skerm van aanduidings projekteer (Belsey 2005: 72) wat kreatief is, genot verskaf en die drif van die subjek kortstondig tot bedaring bring. Die omramende aanbieding van Martel se stories is boeiend gekompliseerd, funksioneer nie slegs op die vlak van tema en subjek nie maar ook op die vlak van struktuur, voorsetselspel, taal en metafoor.

Framework

In *Culture and the Real* (2005), Catherine Belsey offers a wide-ranging and inclusive study of a hitherto relatively unexplored trope from Jacques Lacan's seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. The metaphor is of culture's "magic circle" (Lacan 1992: 134), the function of which, Lacan

argues, is to demarcate the real. The real, which comprises the third and destabilising realm of the Lacanian triad of desire, is helpfully described by Belsey as a "terrain of unmapped alterity": "The real is what is there, but undefined, unaccountable, perhaps, within the frameworks of our knowledge. It is there as such, but not there-for-a subject" (Belsey 2005: 5). It is important, I think, to note that Belsey offers more than simply another "interpretation" of Lacan; what *Culture and the Real* offers is, in many ways, an ambitiously broad and challenging perspective on the classic concerns of literature, philosophy and psychology. Rejecting what she regards as the "cultural determinism" (p. 28) that drives the readings of Lacan offered by Slavoj Žižek (pp. 53-63) and Judith Butler (pp. 10-19), Belsey makes a strong case for culture's creative function, whereby art, architecture, poetry and memorials "form a magic circle": "In all these cases, the allusion to absence, the construction of something out of nothing, and the reference to the nothing which is the condition of that construction, all combine to offer a kind of satisfaction by pacifying the drive" (p. 72).

In his seminar Lacan offers by way of example the instance of the vase, a culturally created object, which

> creates the void and thereby introduces the possibility of filling it. Emptiness and fullness are introduced into a world that by itself knows not of them. It is on the basis of this fabricated signifier, this vase, that emptiness and fullness as such enter the world, neither more nor less, and with the same sense.
>
> (Lacan 1992: 120)

The language of framing dominates both Belsey's and Lacan's description of culture's magic circle, whose function it is to provide a mutable, dynamic membrane that permits contiguity between both what is *within* its ambit and *without*. In this sense, its subject-function is governed by the supplemental, destabilising logic of the parergon as it is described by Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*. Belsey does not make the comparison, however, and part of my project in this essay is to extend her paradigm to show how the magic circle is a form of cultural/psychological parergon; it is, to use Derrida's words,

> neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work (*hors d'oevre*) neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below[;] it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work. That which it puts in place – the instances of the frame, the title, the signature, the legend, etc. – does not stop disturbing the *internal* discourse on painting, its works, its commerce, its evaluation, its surplus-values, its speculation, its law, its hierarchies.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 9)

While Derrida's broader concern is with the "heritage of the great philosophies of art", his view of the active role played by the parergon and the passe-partout (Derrida 1987: 12) to destabilise the margin/centre hierarchy and to mediate between the two, brings his position and Lacan's remarkably close. Here are Derrida's thoughts on the passe-partout:

> I write right in the passe-partout well known to picture-framers ... the passe-partout remains a structure with a moveable base, but although it lets something appear, it does not form a frame in the strict sense, rather a frame within a frame. Without ceasing (that goes without saying) to space itself out, it plays its card or its cardboard *between* the frame, in what is properly speaking its internal edge, and the external edge of what it gives us to see, lets or makes appear in its empty enclosure: the picture, the painting, the figure, the form, the system of strokes (*traits*) and of colors ... *passe-partout* ... is written in the singular but the law of its agreements may require the plural .... The internal edges of a passe-partout are often beveled.
>
> (Derrida 1987: 12-13)

While Derrida and Lacan had their (well-documented) differences,[1] it is noteworthy that their vocabulary, and their sense of the *creative,* aporetic and mediatory function of the liminal circle or frame coincide here. Moreover, Derrida also describes how the "prolegomena" of his own text – the arguments concerning truth and/in painting from Kant, Hegel and Heidegger – are caught up in the "circles" of their own discursive logic, and in turn "ringed together by a circle", thereby providing the parergon of his discourse; he also asks (while saying that he will not) "[W]hat is a circle?", answering that it "redoubles, re-marks, and places *en abyme* the singularity of [a] figure. Circle of circles, circle in the encircled circle. How could a

1. I would suggest that in this instance, Lacan's circle has a more rigid structure (as suggested by his metaphor of the vase) than Derrida's ceaselessly mutable "passe-partout", and that Derrida would perhaps have little patience with Belsey's valorisation of the real which approximates, at times, a transcendental signifier in her discussion. Derrida, of course, disputes the possibility that anything can exist beyond signification, and in his essay on Lacan's "Seminar" he challenges the terms and bases of Lacan's construction of a triadic structure of desire. He maintains that in spite of Lacan's reference to a third order which ostensibly disrupts dyadic oppositions, Lacan nevertheless resorts to "phallogocentrism" in which the phallus is regarded as a "privileged signifier" (Derrida 1975: 98). Barbara Johnson, in turn, convincingly demonstrates how Derrida may be regarded as guilty of the same error of which he accuses Lacan (Johnson 1985: 110-46). However, for the purposes of this essay at least, I submit that Derrida's "parergon" and Lacan's "magic circle" work in strikingly similar ways, in that both destabilise reductive oppositions and in their cultural forms, perform a dynamic and creative function for the subject.

circle place itself *en abyme*?" (Derrida 1987: 24). The circularity of his prose here suggestively alludes to the resistance to origins and end-stopped definition that informs his argument, and is couched in terms of movement and plurality closely allied to Lacan's description of culture's construction of a vantage point from which the subject may catch a glimpse of an abysmal real.

Lacan, Belsey and Derrida all capitalise on the metaphorical force and philosophical matrix provided by the trope of the frame. In that spirit, the rest of this essay is, in one sense, set within the frames of their paradigms. In another, it is woven through and is about ("concerning" and "around") the frame itself. The range of this essay is strongly influenced by Belsey's method in *Culture and the Real*, in which broad and classical pre-occupations are sought out in the particular. More specifically, I seek to show how the metaphor and function of the Derridean frame and Lacanian magic circle have special relevance to the fiction of Yann Martel, especially his collection of short stories, first published in 1993, *"The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" and Other Stories* (2005).[2] Martel reveals in his fiction an abiding and complex preoccupation with (the impossibility of) representation, particularly the representation of the real as it is suggested by those great parenthetical, inaugurating moments of subjective existence: creation and death.

"Yarn-Spinning"

In the title story, the narrator's good friend Paul has AIDS. Stricken by his helplessness in the face of terminal illness, and inspired by the narrative conditions of Boccaccio's *Decomeron*,[3] the narrator suggests to his friend that they pass the time and take their minds off Paul's condition by telling one another stories about an invented family – the Roccamatios – living in Helsinki. Each tale is to be based, either directly or indirectly, upon a historical event, beginning in the year 1900. The friends' plan is to alternate narratives, taking turns in nominating the catalysing incident from the past and telling a story loosely based thereon. The Roccamatio saga itself, however, is barely mentioned in the story. As the title suggests, the narrative

2. Hereafter referred to by the abbreviation *HR*.

3. "I had read a beaten-up copy of the Italian classic when I was in India. Such a simple idea: an isolated villa outside of Florence; the world dying of the Black Death; ten people gathered together hoping to survive; *telling each other stories to pass the time*" (*HR*: 17).

offers only the "facts behind" the Roccamatio saga, and concentrates instead on the framing story of Paul's illness, his death and the narrator's response to both. In a central passage, the narrator tells us:

> Yes, to meet as storytellers to embrace the world – there, that was how Paul and I would destroy the void .... I would also have to convince him that he had no choice, that this storytelling wasn't a game or something on the same level as watching a movie or talking about politics. He would have to see that everything besides the story was useless, even his desperate existential thoughts that did nothing but frighten him. Only the imaginary must count.
>
> But the imaginary doesn't spring from nothing. If our story was to have any stamina, any breadth and depth, if it was to avoid literal reality and irrelevant fantasy, it would need a structure, a guideline of sorts, some curb along which we could tap our white canes. I racked my brains trying to find such a structure. We needed something firm but loose, that would both restrict us and inspire us.
>
> (*HR*: 18-19)

"The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" is, then, a story about telling stories, and about the pleasure and anxiety that such an enterprise simultaneously provides by means of what he calls the "transformative wizardry of the imagination" – the "magic", if you will – of fiction. The stories (both the framing story, and the Roccamatio saga) are propelled by the same narrative impetus that drives the plot of Martel's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The Life of Pi*. It, too, is a tale of telling tales and both texts respond with gusto to the dictum, included in the British Royal Navy survival manual that Pi studies during his voyage: "yarn-spinning is also highly recommended" (Martel 2002: 167). In this spirit, Martel recalls in the "Author's Note" that prefaces his collection that he had "always expected academic degrees … to be the banister that would steady me up the steps of [my] successful life" and that when he failed "the banister fell away. The view gave me vertigo" (*HR*: vii). Writing fiction – "yarn-spinning" – became for him a way of resisting the fatal magnetism of his existential chasm.[4]

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4. Belsey draws a distinction between slick narrative sleights of hand and more complex aesthetic responses to cultural trends. Her reference is to late-twentieth-century cinema, but her caveat applies here, too:

   > [T]hese movies ... do not ask us to make the easy constructivist assumption that there is no difference between illusion and reality. Instead, they problematize that difference, call it into question, sometimes wittily, sometimes to disturbing effect. What should we make of this? Should we see these films as cinema at play, a sophisticated form of self-referentiality, postmodern metafiction? Probably. But that does not eliminate the possibility that it is also

"about", "beyond", "behind"

In his translator's note to the *Ethics of Pychoanalysis*, Dennis Porter notes that "Lacan frequently uses French prepositions and prepositional phrases in startlingly new ways; thus one of the most difficult words to translate turned out to be 'de'" (Porter in Lacan 1992: viii). The preposition "de" ("of") can reverse the priority of subject and object in a sentence; it is multidirectional and suits Lacan's purpose because it can throw a sentence into a fruitful state of ambiguity.[5] Jacques Derrida, too, takes advantage of the polysemic potential of French prepositions; especially, in *The Truth in Painting*, with those that suggest parergonal activity: the circularity of terms such as "around" and "about" deconstructs the directionally specific "in" and "on" (particularly with reference to Cezanne's "I owe you the truth in painting" (Derrida 1987: 2)). He determines to write "around" painting (p. 11), and the preposition "about" is equally suggestive, implying both "on the subject of" and the verb "to circle".

Prepositional turns inform and reflect the narrative of "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios", which is a story *about* death: it is *concerned with* death and it is *written around* death. For Lacan, as for Belsey, death is one of the rare instances in which the real intrudes into the symbolic plane. Belsey argues that

> the subject's own constitution in language brings about the "death" of the real for the subject. In that sense, the possibility of absence from the signifying chain is there at the inaugural moment of the speaking being. The absent real anticipates a future absence for the subject itself, marks subjectivity as finite, temporary.
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> (Belsey 2005: 40)

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a cultural symptom, indicating an increasing uncertainty about the borderline between fiction and fact, between the lives we imagine and the simulacra we live, and a corresponding anxiety about the implications of that uncertainty (Belsey 2005: 8).

Martel's fiction falls into this category of cultural performance that exceeds postmodernist fancy.

5. To cite the most famous of examples: "the desire of the other" can be taken to mean "the desire which the subject feels for the other" and/or "that which the other desires". Or, to offer Lacan's own explanation: "not so much because the other holds the key to the object desired, as because the first object is to be recognized by the other" (Lacan 1977: 58).

She continues: "Death ... constitutes a paradoxically absent presence in the symbolic order, and in that respect it not only exemplifies the real as unknowable, but typifies at the same time the lost object of immediate experience, subsumed, supplanted, and yet not finally abolished by the signifier" (Belsey 2005: 41). In "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios", the motive for telling the stories under such trying circumstances is, quite simply, that death is unspeakable.[6] The narrator makes this clear by his frequent allusions to the difficulty of its articulation. Early in the story and in the first stages of Paul's illness, the impossibility of comprehending his fate is given literal expression: "[D]eath couldn't make itself understood," comments the narrator; "[d]eath was beyond him. It was a theoretical abstraction. He spoke of his condition as if it were news from a foreign country. He said, 'I'm going to die,' the way he might say, '[T]here was a ferry disaster in Bangladesh'" (*HR*: 9). The remark that death was "beyond" Paul also suggests death's status as an event that can be regarded as an incursion of the real into the symbolic: it is there, but beyond signification. Death is therefore, literally and figuratively beyond him, "beyond" in all the senses of the word that allude to time, space and signification – "in the future", "incomprehensible", and "outside the limit" (*OED*, 1980, s.v. "beyond"). Furthermore, the narrator does not say, "[W]e could not understand death" but rather "[D]eath could not make itself understood". The syntax places agency at the level of death itself; but its inability to "make itself understood" undercuts that agency in the very act of establishing it.

Sharon Oard Warner discusses how in the 1980s fictional narratives about AIDS shared a peculiar reluctance to name the disease and its victims. She begins her discussion by noting how in Susan Sontag's widely published story "The Way We Live Now", AIDS and its victims are never mentioned by name, and she observes:

> By and large, the stories about AIDS that have followed Sontag's have also kept their distance from the subject .... As good as these stories are – and some are excellent – most of them are not stories about people with AIDS – instead, they are stories about people Who [sic] know other people with AIDS. Once again, the disease and those who suffer from it are kept at a distance.
>
> (Warner 1993: 493)

6. For Lacan, as for Belsey, death is one of the rare instances in which the real intrudes into the symbolic plane: "The subject's own constitution in language brings about the 'death' of the real for the subject. In that sense, the possibility of absence from the signifying chain is there at the inaugural moment of the speaking being. The absent real anticipates a future absence for the subject itself, marks subjectivity as finite, temporary" (Belsey 2005: 40).

Martel's 1993 story would seem to mark a sea change: while his, too, is a story of someone "[w]ho knew someone with AIDS", it identifies the disease and the victim, Paul. (It is the narrator, curiously, who remains nameless.) Nevertheless, Martel's narrative makes it painfully apparent that the consequence of Paul's illness can never be adequately captured, no matter how many designations or acronyms pave its path. Warner's essay is a heartfelt plea for a less furtive fictional treatment of AIDS; however, I would argue that writers' early reluctance to name the disease is as much symptomatic of the unsignifiable nature of death as it is of a reluctance to confront AIDS as a social and political hot potato.

"The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" puts the "yarn-spinning" survival strategy to the test, but its success is qualified, at best. By telling the story of the Roccamatios, Paul and the narrator gingerly circle around death, framing it, keeping it (temporarily) at bay, signifying it indirectly, finding pleasure in this gesture and giving expression to their anxiety about its inevitability and imminence. But we are never deluded for a moment that the frames enclose and commemorate anything other than the rage of silence and a gnawingly present absence. The framing narrative "encircl[es] emptiness", creates a "signifying surface that supplants its model", and in so doing "offer[s] a kind of satisfaction" (Belsey 2005: 72); notwithstanding these defences however, Paul, inevitably, dies. Just as tombs and monuments figure for Catherine Belsey as fertile instances of the magic circle because they "set out to immortalize an individual, but without denying, paradoxically, the loss of the person that they are also designed to overcome" (p. 65), so does Martel's story memorialise death's victim – and, in so doing, commemorates storytelling as a way of pointing up and resisting, "paradoxically" and parergonally, the symbolic desire to elide absence.

I would like to step a little closer to the frame. "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" is also *about* death at the level of deep narrative. The narrator's defiant claim that "everything besides the story was useless" (*HR*: 18) is striking in that the story can only be known to us through its absence. And everything that is extraneous to the Roccamatios' story gives substance to Martel's framing narrative. In an extraordinary enactment of Derridean paradox, what preoccupies Martel and his reader here is not the "centre", but the parergon. If anything, it is "everything besides" the *parergon* that is "useless". The narrator insists that the Roccamatios' story will remain hidden: "Now understand that you're not going to hear the story of the Helsinki Roccamatios. Certain intimacies shouldn't be made public. They should be known to exist, that's all. The story of the Helsinki Roccamatios was often whispered – and it wasn't whispered to you" (*HR*: 23). The story of the Roccamatios performs a metaphorical function by standing in for the real, which can only be (dimly, whisperingly) "known to

exist, that's all". The desire of the reader of this story is thwarted, and all we have is this beguiling story of a story that we cannot know or hear. The story (and by extension, the real) are unrepresentable other than by dint of scraps and hints, comprehensible to the subject only as a deflected, oblique and deferred knowledge that propels her anxious desire. Moreover, the historical events themselves participate in the framing function. They compose the passe-partout, the frame within the frame around the story of the Helsinki Roccamatios, drawing our attention to the fact that the story is there but not there for us as subjects, at once leading us towards it and barring it off from us, giving us pleasure while at the same time demonstrating the anxiety of our desire, reminding us of our unsignifiable connection with the real. Derrida's remark that the "internal edges of a passe-partout are often beveled" (Derrida 1987: 12-13) seems especially applicable here, as it suggests an area of mutable transition between the centre and the margins that is ambiguously productive.

The story's dominant preposition – "behind" – makes conspicuous the unsettling lacunae at its "centre". Belsey recalls the Saussurian dictum that language is a system of differences "*without positive terms*" (Belsey 2005: 41) and argues that "[o]rdinary language ... locates an intention, a reason or a truth 'behind' what is said. But there is no access to this place 'behind' the words; whatever inhabits it remains undefined, conjectural" (p. 42). Fittingly, the story of the Roccamatios "behind" the framing narrative remains, as we have seen, chimerical and almost exclusively conjectural. The challenge to the priority of origin over supplement in this striking performance of the Saussurian/Lacanian nexus becomes even more complicated when we test the stability of the "facts behind" the Roccamatios' story. It soon becomes apparent that "facts" are frequently not so "factual" after all: while the narrator and Paul are, initially, faithful to the documented concordance between date and event, Paul soon dismisses this link as immaterial: he allows that Camus was killed in 1921 in a car accident, only to change this "fact", moments later, insisting that Camus was a victim of the bomb that exploded over Hiroshima (*HR*: 42-43). 1942 is stripped of history altogether when Paul makes it the "year of nothingness", and his final instalment, at the moment of his death, is to record Elizabeth II's death in 2001.

The loss of rational connectivity between cause and effect generally and between signifier and signified more particularly, is underscored when it becomes clear that for Paul there need be no discernible connection between the historical event he chooses to propel his episode, and the content of the episode itself. While the connection between history and the fragment of the Roccamatios' story that we do catch sight of begins clearly enough – the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 inspires the death of Sandro Roccamatio,

war is declared in 1914 and Marco has a "serious fall-out with his brother Orlando" – the causal effect between fact and story soon loosens alarmingly: Harlow Shapely's mapping of the Milky Way provokes, bewilderingly, an "ugly" story of Orlando Roccamatio's alcoholism (*HR*: 39), for example.

But this destabilising of the "facts behind" is not simply the desperate gesture of a dying man. The narrator, too, begins to meddle with apparently unequivocal and transcendent truths. While he insists at one stage that Paul's historical "fictions" are "unacceptable", it is not long before he "forbid[s] the publication of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*" (*HR*: 40), a statement that is configured with tantalising ambiguity. On the surface it means that he forbids the use of Freud's text in the Roccamatios' saga, but the way it is expressed also suggests that he forbids its publication *in fact*. These seemingly absurd predictive/retroactive gestures – again, these are the gestures of the passe-partout and the magic circle – open up the possibility of changing the "facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios", of challenging the authority of documented history, and giving full reign to the creative power of art both to point to the real and keep it at bay.

Structure and Perspective

The prepositional play of the story (about, behind, beyond) is shored up by its architecture: the arrangement of the tale contributes suggestively in the setting up of frames which encircle emptiness and whose very composition forms, in turn, the matter and subject of the story. The title of the story appears on the title page, conventionally enough, but is then repeated when the narrator and Paul begin to tell the story of the Roccamatios, pointing up in retrospect, if you will, the fact that the preceding narrative stands outside of the main subject and has the status of parergon without which the (absent) subject can have no meaning at all. Appropriately, this embedded story begins, in the narrator's words, "with an ending" (*HR*: 24), and ends with an invitation to proceed ("The story is yours" (*HR*: 99)), thereby subverting the teleological conventions of beginnings and conclusions and rehearsing the metaphorical force of the framing circles upon which the text is structured.

The other stories in the collection are calibrated to provide a similar effect. In "The Vita Æterna Mirror Company" the story's compositional principle is presented typographically, with the grandmother's barely legible narrative presented as a narrow column, and her grandson's egocentric narrative literally elbowing hers to one side, the two skirting around the never-explained workings of the mirror machine and concealing more than

they reveal. When the grandmother dies, the absence of her "blah-blah-blah-blah" (HR: 234-6) is silently expressive and the grandson's parenthetical thoughts drift disconsolately across an otherwise empty page.

Similarly, in the tale "Manners of Dying", a prison warden rehearses a letter he must write to the mother of a recently executed prisoner. The different letters that attempt to narrate and thereby make sense of Kevin Barlow's execution have a consecutiveness that nevertheless belies logic, development or progress: no matter how often, or how differently, the death is described, the moment of death itself eludes him. Ironically, however, and in spite of his despair, the warden has drawn his magic circle. It might not be a grand one, but the organisation of the tale – the repetition with variation – and the cumulative effect of his letters memorialise the dead man. Thanatos, for a moment, is fleetingly "disarmed" (Belsey 2005: 81). "Manners" of dying are shown to be paltry approximations of the real; but the writing of the letters by Harry Parlington to Mrs Barlow in and of itself becomes a productive and creative framing act.

";*so*;"

In "The Time I Heard" Martel's predilection for graphic representation, so forcefully expressed in "Manners of Dying",[7] is obtained through an even more surprising analogy. The narrator wistfully recalls the perfection of Conradian punctuation:

> Looking at the program again, I noticed that the Maryland Ensemble had used colons between the composers and their concertos, but semi-colons between the musicians and their roles or instruments. I was reminded of Joseph Conrad. Conrad has marvelous punctuation. There's one example I'll never forget. It's from Conrad's first novel, *Almayer's Folly* …. Almayer feels that time and again he nearly made it. Fortune, success, glory – nearly achieved, nearly, but for some misfortune, some small error:
>
> *He looked at his daughter's attentive face and jumped to his feet, upsetting the chair.*

7. And, indeed, in Martel's Booker Prize-winning novel *The Life of Pi*. The name of the novel's hero is short for "Piscine" ("swimming pool"); it also denotes a mathematical principle (the ratio of a circle's circumference to its radius), a dimension traversing either across or around a void. His name also suggests the novel's narrative arcs: the two stories that Pi tells his audience blur the apparent distinction between fact and fiction, point up their status as potential illusions that can never be conclusively tested against a fixed reality, and in so doing measure out an unquantifiable space wherein lie those huge questions of God, truth and unequivocal knowledge.

"Do you hear? I had it all there; so; within the reach of my hand."

> What a brilliant use of semicolons. Admire the construction: five words fore and aft balanced upon the fulcrum of a single word that carries all the weight and tension of the sentence. An ordinary writer would have used commas to surround that fulcrum. Dashes would have done the job. But semicolons, by isolating the "so" without making it parenthetical, give the word a real impact. Their bottom halves curl like fingers of two hands raised in frustration, their periods glare like two desperate eyes, and the word held between them shouts with the wretched hopelessness of twenty years that have added up to nothing. The punctuation of this sentence is deliberate, forceful and dynamic. It is the punctuation of a true master.
>
> (*HR*: 120 -122)

What the narrator describes here reflects in many ways the general inclination of Martel's own narrative technique, embedded at the point of typographic symbol. The semicolons of Conrad's sentence draw the readerly eye towards the frame: the ";so;" like the Roccamatios saga, hints at the real, the space that leads away and carries with it the possibilities of our desires. And Martel's story, in describing this use of punctuation, frames the framing "hands" of the semicolon: frame compounds frame. This extratextual encasing gesture that "isolate[s] … without making it parenthetical" dramatises a magic circle that delimits but not hermetically so.

"blah-blah-blah-blah"

The framing effect achieved in these stories is supported by Martel's shrewd testing of the referential limits of discourse. The magical, creative potential of words is made manifest in "The Vita Æterna Mirror Company", where speech actually constructs a physical object. The grandmother's yarn-spinning – of which, once again, we hear only fragments – consists of her memories about her marriage, which she speaks into the funnel of a mirror-making machine. The "transformative wizardry" is such that, with the addition of oil, silver and sand, a mirror emerges. Even more remarkably, the grandmother's words are faintly discernible as print on the mirror itself. However, their meaning is elusive and tauntingly reflective, and her grandson's recollection of his grandmother's stories extends barely beyond a meaningless "blah-blah-blah-blah". As he gazes into the mirror, all he is left with is a reflection of his own adolescent self-absorption and regret, as he tries "to imagine all the words [he] so stupidly ignored"(*HR*: 239). The reader is equally frustrated of knowledge in this tale about telling a magical,

mirror-making story that can never be recalled.

As this story graphically demonstrates, language, for Martel, plays a deeply ambiguous part in the construction of culture's magic circle. The signifying subject, trammelled in the defiles of the symbolic realm, cannot express the real, and yet the writer must use words to do precisely that. In "The Time I Heard", the narrator finds himself caught up in the double bind of being keenly aware of the inadequacy of language and the impossibility of expressing that inadequacy in any way other than through language. The scene is set by the name of the dissolving name of the theatre on the barbershop window: "Some of the letters were scratched out, with only their outline left. It was more like **MER I EW T EA R**" (*HR*: 105). The letters are missing, but the sign persists in making sense and appropriately reflects the position of the theatre which is in the process of being destroyed but nevertheless houses a performance. The music he hears is, the narrator claims, beyond signification:

> What a strange, wondrous thing, music. At last the chattering mind is silenced. No past to regret, no future to worry about, no more frantic knitting of words and thoughts. Only a beautiful, soaring nonsense. Sound – made pleasing and intelligible through melody, rhythm, harmony and counterpoint – becomes our thinking. The grunting of language and the drudgery of semiotics is left behind. Music is a bird's answer to the noise and heaviness of words. It puts the mind in a state of exhilarating speechlessness.
>
> (*HR*: 116)

The irony is, of course, that the music will not be repeated and cannot be expressed – even alluded to – without recourse to the "grunting of language", and he must make what he can out of the tools available to him in the symbolic. He finds himself drawn to metaphor, especially simile, such as "It was a swaying, ascending melody that sounded like two climbers tied to a rope" (*HR*: 118). Ensnared in a tautology in which he must express how experience exceeds expression, he captures the beauty of sound via deafness, in impossible terms, observing: "I could describe the music with my deaf ears" (*HR*: 126).

In "Manners of Dying" the warden's despair at his inability to adequately describe and commemorate Barlow's death, in spite of a surfeit of apparently interchangeable (and therefore insignificant) details, is palpable as he is forced to resort to a repeated cliché: "Please believe that I share in your grief" (*HR*: 174). Like Eliot's Prufrock, he protests, finally, "This is not the way I would have had it. None of this is the way I would have had it" (*HR*: 198), a complaint as much against the difficulty of expression as it is against the morality of the death penalty. In "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios", language's referentiality is always at risk, and it is

plagued by a denotative inadequacy which Martel underscores by repeated reference to medical terms and treatments which become brutal shorthand for AIDS and its deprivations, but which woefully fail either to cure or to express Paul's physical and existential agony. The narrator observes that "[d]rugs called dapsone and trimethoprim were overcoming Paul's pneumonia, but he was still weak and out of breath" (*HR*: 10). The verb "called" here alerts us to the deflective conditions of the signifying, symbolic order. The effect of these references is to highlight the disjunction between the victim's experience of the disease and its palliatives, and – more broadly – to point up the signifier's deferred position from the signified. Later, the narrator records that "[a]gainst my will I became familiar with words like azidothymidine, alpha interferon, domipramine, nitrazepam. (When you're with people who are really sick you discover what an illusion science can be.)" (*HR*: 15). This desire-inducing discovery that the signifier can never comprehensively express the signified is diagnostic of the signifying subject. By the same token, the words, words, words of philosophy are literally dismissed, physically thrown out as meaningless: "I would stare for hours at the same paragraph of Kant or Heidegger, trying to understand what it was saying, trying to focus, without any success. I screamed, I got up, I projected the hefty Hegel book through the closed window" (*HR*: 13-14). Science and philosophy fail to capture the experience of AIDS as an incursion of the real: instead, Paul and his friend must turn to art in the form of narrative, and, like the narrator of "The Time I Heard", to metaphor in particular.

Metaphor, as an artistic gesture, and as a vital component of the frame of art and the beautiful which surrounds the real, leads the community of this text (Paul, the narrator, Martel and the reader) into a state of anxiety and pleasure that is the domain of art in culture. Indeed, the frame *as* metaphor plays an important role in contributing to the structural framing of the story. In his seminar on "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud", Lacan describes metaphor this way:

> The creative spark of the metaphor does not spring from the presentation of two images, that is, of two signifiers equally actualized. It flashes between the two signifiers one of which has taken the place of the other in the signifying chain, the occulted signifier remaining present through its (metonymic) connexion with the rest of the chain.
>
> *One word for another*: that is the formula for the metaphor and if you are a poet you will produce for your own delight a continuous stream, a dazzling tissue of metaphors.
>
> (Lacan 1977: 157)

We find a striking performance of Lacan's definition of metaphor when the

narrator of "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" remarks, "I don't want to talk about what AIDS does to a body .... Look up in a dictionary the word 'flesh' – such a plump word – and then look up the word 'melt'" (*HR*: 11). Keenly aware of the figurative value of a word such as "flesh" that extends beyond its literal meaning, of how tropic force is forged, and of how unstable the locus of its power is, Martel houses the "flashes" of the metaphor not only between the two terms, but within the reader her-/himself. His instruction to the reader to "[l]ook up" the word "flesh" "in a dictionary" extends the ambit of his own text and points up the porousness of the frame, of the barriers that separate text from reader, fiction from reality, and the real from the symbolic. The definitions of these words are entire and separate from one another; it is only when the reader puts the two of them together that the "dazzling tissue" is produced. The creative role of the reader is extended to the entire premise of the story, as she/he must put together the facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios with "The Facts behind the Helsinki Roccamatios" and the result – her/his own imaginative construction of the Roccamatios story – is the artistic and cultural, mutable and ever-productive outcome. When Paul and the narrator link together historical event and the story of the Roccamatios, they are embarking on a construction of metaphor on a grand scale: "*one word for another*": one story for another. The energy and power of this metaphorical construction rests not in either term on its own but in the space that separates and links the two.

And so the metaphor of the circle comes full circle: metaphor, frame, circle and narrative coincide to form a complex and mutable lemma that is once the margin and centre of Martel's work. I have argued that Yann Martel's narrative is textured by the same culture economy that informs Lacan's magic circle and Derrida's frame. We should, of course, guard against being hoodwinked by the utopianism of such a project. As Belsey rightly notes in her extended treatment of how Lacan's position is enacted by perspective in painting, the "miracle" of the productive, creative frame "is achieved at a considerable price":

> Faithful to a specific actuality, illusionism puts on display a moment the painter chooses, investing the artist with autonomy, or with perfect sovereignty over the material we see. But for the viewer, this moment is always elsewhere, unattainable, lost .... As it pacifies the drive, fencing off the pure absence of the Thing, perspective painting opens a space of loss that perpetuates the desire of the viewer.
>
> (Belsey 2005: 98-99)

In Martel's stories, the moment, too, is always "elsewhere, unattainable, lost", be that moment in the guise of a sustaining story about a family from

Helsinki, the single performance of a violin concerto in a demolished theatre, the death of a prisoner or the constitutive memories of a now-dead grandmother. The moment is lost: what we are left with is the magic circle of the narrative. The desire of the reader and the vision of the author seem almost to coincide in the frame but this promise is illusory, lost at the brink of attainment. No doubt the reader's desire persists; but we are left, nevertheless, with a fleeting, consoling residue, a sense not easily dismissed, that "yarn-spinning is [indeed] highly recommended".

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