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Narrative, Perspective and Cultural Otherness*

Manfred Schmeling

Summary

The article endeavours to link two existing fields of research, namely that of narratology and that of comparative "imagogy" which is primarily concerned with experiencing the foreign. It deliberates on how the narrative perspective as a characteristic element of the text is interrelated with and interdependent on the projection of the foreign which may be ambivalently interpreted as being either hostile or congenial. Special attention is devoted to the particular function of the letter as a narratological technique for conveying that which is alien. In conclusion, the article touches on the narrators' point of view stemming from social, cultural or historical strangeness.

Opsomming

Die artikel trag om twee bestaande navorsingsterreine, naamlik dié van die narratologie en dié van die vergelykende imagogie wat gemoeid is met die ervaring van die uitheemse, met mekaar te versoen. Dit bepeins hoe die narratiewe perspektief as 'n onderskeidende eienskap van die teks interverhoudelik tot en interafhanklik van die ambivalente vertolking van die vreemde is, wat òf as vyandig òf as welwillend ervaar kan word. Die rol wat briewe, as 'n besondere narratiewe tegniek om die vreemde tuis te bring, speel, kry ook aandag. Ten slotte, verwys die artikel na die verteller se gesigshoek wat gekleur word deur die sosiale, kulturele of historiese ongewone.

Examining narrative perspective has always been an important task of narratology. Comparativist "imagology" has taken over the research on the experience of the foreign. I would like to try and link the two fields of research and ponder the particular relations and interdependences between narrative perspective and viewing the foreign.

In sociological research on the notion of the foreign, it is agreed today that the latter

> does not characterize things or people, but a way of relating .... It is in relation to one's personal and social identity that the other's strangeness is revealed. This applies equally to those who find themselves on the other side of this interaction. Seen "from the other side" - through a different personality, another social group, another generation, a foreign culture or a foreign nation - my own idio-

> syncrasies, according to modalities that are difficult to determine, may seem perfectly strange.
>
> (Schäfter 1991: 12)

This is a somewhat abstract but realistic description of what first happens outside literature in "normal" life. But one can also easily transpose the principle that has just been evoked to a novel in which a foreign nation, culture, or language would be perceived by a narrator, directly or through a central character of that novel. In the same way, one can also observe the images reflected by the "other side", the views of those who are at home and in whose perspective the identity of the narrator and the protagonists seems foreign.

Narratives are often characterized by the fact that the hero - who may be identical to the narrative source - crosses cultural frontiers. He becomes the point of contact between heterogeneous spaces. When the spatial or the temporal crossing is linked to the experience of the foreign, the structure of the narrative is organized in a very spectacular manner in a network of contrasts, tensions, attractions and repulsions. Furthermore, the foreign exudes a certain ambivalence: the hostile and the friendly foreign may coincide and the encounter with the foreign universe is often the beginning of a learning process.

These few remarks may seem a little banal but they show that the description of the fundamental structures, for example, of a journey narrative, immediately leads to the discussion of "perspective" or "point of view".

It is true that in narratology these terms have undergone a semantic evolution: the term "point of view" and the topological terms "proximity/distance" and "interior/exterior" have acquired hermeneutic, interpretative, prestigious meanings; they have come to express a vision of the world. This applies to the rather conservative poetics of Henry James adopting "a controlled point of view, interior to the novel, situated in the mind of a character" (Van Rossum-Guyon 1970: 479), as well as to the most modern forms in which techniques of multiple perspective aim at suggesting incertitude, plurality, simultaneity of experience and knowledge. Wayne C. Booth, one of the best known Anglo-Saxon researchers in the field of narrative poetics - and for whom narratology is almost exclusively limited to the research on point of view (unlike the French theory of narrative discourse according to Gérard Genette) - explicitly emphasizes the *normative value* of point of view.

In a novel, the relation between the author, "the implicit author" or the narrator on the one hand and the characters, the objects and the events on the other, would be specially characterized by a "greater or lesser distance

from the norms" (Booth 1970: 519).

To him, point of view is in no way reduced to a poetic technique or to structural elements of space or time. This is evident from the large arsenal of subcategories under which he classifies these normative relations: "morally", "intellectually", "emotionally" etc. Furthermore, the notion of point of view becomes all the more complex as it also involves the reader. Indeed, whatever may be the content related to or filtered by the narrating instances, it is only on the level of reception and against the background of the personal or social norms of the reader that the point of view is formed.

The above reflections have shown that the question of narrative perspective or point of view is largely linked to sociological and even epistemological aspects. What follows will be about the establishment of a link between the three levels: perspective as the situation of the subject of knowledge and discourse, perspective in the context of identity and otherness, perspective as a narrative technique.

This implies a whole scientific programme that can only be summarily sketched in the allocated time, by combining an attempt at systematization with the analysis of concrete examples. One must distinguish:

1. The narrative situation (who is speaking? to whom?).
2. The type of text (the theme of the foreign and narrative perspective may be decisive for defining the genre).
3. The level of narrative transmission (proximity and distance, multiplicity of voices).
4. The functional aspect of the experience of the foreign.
5. The historical dimension (relation between narrative perspective and the historico-philosophical context).

One must first consider the relation between the true author and the narrator. In order to interpret the notion of the foreign, especially if the reader is to perceive the dialectic between identity and otherness, it is important to know whether the author himself has experienced the situation of the foreigner. The extent to which this influences narrative technique can be noted by examining, for example, the novels of exile or travel narratives. In *Doctor Faustus,* Thomas Mann admittedly describes his own country as seen by a German, especially from the point of view of the narrator, Zeitbloom, but the "vision from behind", as Jean Pouillon calls this kind of narrative focalization, is greatly influenced by the situation of the author in exile, by the exterior perspective of one whose own country has become foreign. Another variant of this situation is to be found in Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Le vraie vie de Sébastien Knight* (1989) where the author, the

first-person narrator and the hero lead a symbiotic existence. The narrator who is the half-brother of the protagonist, Sebastian Knight, is a biographic reflection of Nabokov (same date of birth, same cosmopolitan experience, exile etc.). On the other hand he ends up being confused with the hero: "And I am therefore Sebastian Knight" (Nabokov 1989: 308), a writer, who in many ways also resembles Nabokov, the author. The novel is about the impossible reconstruction of Sebastian Knight's biography. New documents - the testimony of friends and acquaintances, letters, biographical essays (Goodman), press critics and research by the author himself - add up to an incomplete puzzle, a pseudobiography with multiple perspectives which in its structure and substance cannot reflect the deficiency in identity that characterizes exiles.

Julia Kristeva who, in her famous essay, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (1991), analyses different forms and different levels of the notion of the foreign, devotes a few pages to Nabokov's novel. The "polyphonic mastery of the writing", according to Kristeva, is not explained only by the tradition of Russian aesthetics, it is rather directly related to the situation of the writer in exile. The fact that it is impossible to obtain reliable information on the life of the hero, that the first-person narrator is not capable of finally focalizing the different perspectives, refers one back to the ironic wandering of someone who lives between the two cultures: "one of the fields of this implacable relativism: cosmopolitanism, the criss-crossing of two languages - Russian and English" (Kristeva 1991: 52).

I wish to return to perspective in a narrower sense and to the related aspects mentioned. In my view, narrative perspective is a characteristic element of the text. Viewed ontologically, it is not identical to the situation of the empirical author, even if the concrete cultural experiences of the latter have determined the choice of perspective. In texts presenting the theme of the foreign, the interplay of perspectives can be the source of a fairly complicated cultural discourse, for the perspectives are always delegated to various enunciating subjects endowed with different cultural characters. In the particularly sensitive domain of national stereotypes, authors are generally wary of adding up the points of view into a single narrative voice. This can be demonstrated by a traditional example, *Lettres Persanes* (1754) by Montesquieu.

When the letter depicts the foreign, it has a different psychological impact on the reader than that, for example, of the journey narrative. Certainly, in its observation of the foreign, the journey narrative when it is written in the first person has certain common points with the letter: the subjectivity, the direct hold on the reader, or a grandiloquent style; but the form of epistolary communication determines another type of *dialogism*, an implicit or

explicit "you" which is clearly quite distinct from the much more abstract "you" who is the reader of the journey narrative.

That is why the letter has a particular function in the presentation of the foreign: its discourse rests upon, at least thematically, a certain tradition - which I would call humanist - a tradition of dialogue, of explicit willingness to communicate and to create confidence, and in which what is foreign is *aufgehoben* (at the same time recognized and surpassed) in the Hegelian sense, that is to say, seems, while preserving its strangeness and otherness, to have lost at the same time the harshness of its angles.

In the case of *Lettres Persanes* (1994), the communication is not one-way, without response; on the contrary, there is a sort of exchange of ideas in the Persian manner where news from Paris, from Venice and also from the seraglio is exchanged. Of course, the perspective created by Montesquieu is different from modern techniques insofar as the interior circle of communication is not broken. In the correspondence the Persians stay together and precisely at this level there is no communication between the Persians and the Europeans.

One can add a second aspect. The epistolary representation of the foreign demands that the reader consider the content as authentic (the German language qualifies as "verbrieft" as - Brief = letter - that which seems true). It is important to note that the epistolary form, in many examples, is linked to the presence of a fictitious editor. It is here that the network of exterior communication comes into play. Montesquieu's preface explicitly underlines the direct contact between the narrator who presents himself as a "translator" or the "copyist" of the letters and the Persians: "We spend our life together" (Montesquieu [1754]1994: 7).

One knows of such fictitious editors from other epistolary novels, Goethe also uses this topos in *Werther*. But contrary to *Werther* or to the epistolary novels of Rousseau, Fielding or Laclos, Montesquieu very consciously takes a stand regarding the situation of the observer in a foreign country, that is to say he thematizes the particular function of the narrator as a translator - in both the linguistic and ideological sense. To him, it is about *inter alia* adapting the style of the letters to his own culture.

> *Toute ma peine a été de mettre l'ouvrage à nos moeurs. J'ai soulagé le lecteur du langage asiatique autant que je l'ai pu .... J'ai retranché les longs compliments, dont les Orientaux ne sont pas moins prodigues que nous .... [I]l y a une chose qui m'a toujours étonné, c'est de voir ces Persans quelquefois aussi instruits que moimême des moeurs et des manières de la Nation, jusqu'à en connaître les plus finnes circonstances, et à remarquer des choses qui, je suis sûr, ont échappé à bien des Allemands qui ont voyagé en France.*
>
> (Montesquieu 1994: 8)

> (My greatest trouble was to make this work as conformable as I could to our ways. I have endeavoured to spare the reader with respect to the Asiatic language .... I have curtailed the long compliments, of which the orientals are more prodigal than ourselves .... [I] have often been surprised to find the Persians as well informed as myself of the ways and customs of our Nation. Even the finest circumstances have not escaped them, as they have so many Germans who have travelled through France.)

Given his role of fictitious narrator, the narrator cannot be identical to the author for, to the latter, the letters are purely imaginary products; this narrator is clearly making an effort to bring closer to his own French culture, what is distant and unknown. It is, therefore, clear that the manner in which the fictitious narrator interprets the letters of the Persians in the preface is not a reflection of Montesquieu's point of view. The narrator is subjected to the author's perspective, his field of experience is reduced, the value of the letters in confrontation with his own culture, French culture, does not play any role in the preface. The situation is quite different in *Quelques réflections sur les Lettres persanes* published by Montesquieu in 1754 and in which the realization of what is foreign is clearly a function of the text. There, the author tells us that the confrontation with the foreign is not conceivable without the backdrop constituted by the *hinc et nunc* of the observer, that is to say culture, politics, religion or social life. The plurality of perspectives (the French narrator, Uzbek coming from Paris, Rhedi from Venice, Solim from the seraglio in Isphahan) seems to condense here; one need only think of the shock effect that *Lettres Persanes* (Montesquieu 1754) produced on the French reader, and in particular on the representatives of the court and the church. If the author emphasizes the particular subjectivity of the foreign perspective, it is undoubtedly to disburden himself of the responsibility of some spectacular commentaries that he passes off *a posteriori* to the French as the expression of ignorance and prejudices due to a foreign culture (Montesquieu 1994: 2). Nevertheless, he grants his protagonist the capacity to change and learn. The observation of the extraordinary, "the sentiment of surprise and wonder" are allegedly natural reactions likely to launch the process of learning but not yet "the idea of examination" nor that of "criticism" (1994: 4). The author thus ironically turns the rational axiom of enlightened thought against himself.

At the same time, Montesquieu adds to these remarks a broader reflection on the relativity of the perception of reality in general. This is his advice to the reader of his novel: "He is requested to note carefully that the whole pleasure lay in the eternal contrast between real things and the peculiar, new or funny, manner in which they were seen" (1994: 5). Even if such a decla-

ration, considered in relation to the Cartesian programme of the new individual consciousness no longer seems revolutionary, nevertheless, from a narratological point of view, this observation is particularly imposing. For it is there that one can see, at a historically premature stage, how the transformations of the world-vision coincide with the appearance of a certain number of narrative forms. Reality as a subjective category appears as an unstable fluctuating entity which is modified according to the observer's point of view. The epistolary novel with multiple perspectives and the foreigner's point of view as a striking expression of a restrictive vision, are the appropriate aesthetic manifestations of this evolution.

What stands out in this short analysis is the ideology of the relativity of point of view, which applies particularly to the modern novel. Take the example of Henry James's novel, *The Ambassadors* (1903). This novel is widely considered as a precocious paradigm of modern writing. It ends the authority of the omniscient narrator and displaces the point of view by giving priority to that of the character of Lambert Strether. Strether is not the narrator but a "he" who must accept a certain number of commentaries from the narrator. Already the frequent recurrence of the expression "our friend" reveals to what degree something resembling an ironic distance is progressively built up against Strether's point of view. The narrator would, according to Genette's terminology, be the narrative lens or centre (foyer) embodying the "external focalisation". The "internal focalisation" is subordinated to it through the hero (Genette 1979: 203-207).

Strether is often shown in direct contact with the French universe whilst the subjectivity of his point of view, that is to say, that of a traveller in Europe who judges everything according to the norms of his life in America, is revealed formally through emphatic turns of phrase like "to his surprise" (James 1964: 145) or through interior monologue.

The perspective of the hero materializes here through distance-reducing techniques. James (1964: 7) himself declares, in his preface to the novel, that Paris as a place of action is actually secondary, for his concern is essentially to render the "differentiated view" of the hero. Paris has a symbolical function, "a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett" (James 1964: 8). Paris means much more than one could dream of by listening to Woollett's restrained speech. Paris is the metonymical equivalent of what Strether's aesthetic or moral point of view reveals in its difference and strangeness. Thus the particular profile of the hero's perspective results less from the inhabitual objects and landscapes themselves, than from a psychological constellation: here it is about the meeting of different cultural spaces and their reciprocal reflexions on the characters of the novel. James has strictly adhered to the personal point of

view in order to follow the inner evolution of the American in his new environment and at the same time - to a certain degree - the process of integration, of fusion. In his commentary on the novel, James uses the image of the chemical reaction of a liquid which is transformed when exposed to different air:

> He had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow.
>
> (James 1964: 6)

The relative unity of a point of view dependent on the central character, as we have been able to observe in James's work, is often abandoned in the contemporary novel. Narrating instances variable within the same text have become the rule. That does not preclude the modern writer from claiming the right - and the pleasure - to bring in the omniscient narrator who reflects in a particular way the state of his own reflections. Writers like Günter Grass (1981) or David Lodge (1991) are good examples. To them, sometimes the narrator disappears behind the point of view of his characters, sometimes he comments on their actions and words. It is not only the presence of the foreign, but also the question of its transmission which occupies the foreground. It is thus that one can interpret the famous chapter on Calcutta in *The Turbot* (Grass 1981) as the writer's attempt to overcome his depressing experience of Calcutta through artificial - and artistic - modifications of point of view. The narrator plays the role of a historic character, that of Vasco da Gama the navigator, and thus materializes not only the point of view of the foreigner as such, but also the historic change of perspective. Where the foreign world, seen from the point of view of the European civilization at the end of the XVth century, only gave rise to the impression of exoticism due to discovery, today we only have a world of misery before our eyes: "He [Vasco] saw flies on everything that exists: he saw life before death" (Grass 1981: 185). Grass is not content to vary the point of view: he explicitly justifies this change: "Perhaps it was the fear of the foreign reality which made me find a role. (How, otherwise, can one survive in Calcutta?)" (Grass 1981: 173). The autobiographical substance of the foreign experience represented is thus displaced to the level of reflection, held at a distance.

In *Changement de décor,* Lodge (1991), without wishing to indulge in an ideological critique, nevertheless proceeds in a similarly reflective manner. Two conflicting points of view of two professors - one American and the

other from Europe - beginning from perspectives specific to a particular culture are subordinated at the beginning of the novel to a centre of common focalization, that of an omniscient narrator, before developing a certain independence in the course of the story. Throughout several chapters, letters or newspaper articles transmit reflections from England or America: the double perspective underlines the relativity of each point of view:

> *Il en résulte que lorsque chacun des deux hommes débarquera sur le territoire de l'autre, et vaquera à ses tâches et ses plaisirs ordinaires, toutes les notations transmises par l'un à son habitat originel seront ressenties par l'autre, et vice-versa, et elles seront ainsi renvoyées à l'émetteur initial, subtilement modulée par la réaction de l'autre ....*
>
> (Lodge 1991: 15)

> (It happens that when each of the two men arrives in the territory of the other and attends to his ordinary tasks and pleasures, all the observations transmitted by the one to his original habitat will be felt by the other, and vice-versa, and they will be sent back to the initial sender, subtly modulated by the reaction of the other ....)

Lodge does not play with perspectives only, but also with the tradition of literary imagery (imagology). One of the professors, the Englishman, feels as if he is

> *dans un Gulf Stream culturel inverse de celui qui, par le passé, avait poussé tant d'Américains vers l'Europe, en quête d'expériences .... Ainsi, c'était vers la littérature américaine que l'Européen se tournait maintenant pour trouver une représentation en miroir de sa quête. Il pensa aux Ambassadeurs de James ....*
>
> (Lodge 1991: 284)

> (in a cultural Gulf Stream flowing in the opposite direction to the one which in the past had pushed many Americans towards Europe in search of experiences .... Thus it was towards American literature that the European now turned to find a mirror image of his quest. He thought about James's *The Ambassadors* ....)

By way of conclusion, I would once more like to situate my subject in a broader systematic context. I have suggested that the situation of the narrator and the point of view must be discussed in relation to other aspects of what one would call an intercultural discourse. In our concrete analyses, we have, for example, noted the presence of several *narrative levels*. One should examine more precisely what effect the "metadiegetic" (Genette 1979) structure can have on the interpretation and the appreciation of identity and otherness. It is thus that Thomas Moore - to use a traditional example once again - lets the story within the story (the journey to Utopia)

be told by a foreign narrator: the narrative is told from the point of view of a Portuguese. By this displacement, the author does not only enlarge the cosmopolitan framework - as does Montesquieu in his epistolary novel - but at the same time also avoids taking a too direct position *vis-à-vis* the English state. In any case, it seems important to distinguish between the different narrative levels, that is, in a word, between the external perspective and the internal perspective - or possibly several internal perspectives.

The next question would be that of the social *implications* of point of view. To what extent should the differentiations or the restrictions of perspective by means of narratological techniques be interpreted as differentiations, not only specific to a culture, but as also having a social character? From Montesquieu to Grass (or to some modern cinematographic works in which immigrants who have become taxi-drivers determine the point of view) one finds enough signs of the presence of what one could call, in a sociological sense, the view from the outside, from below or from above.

Besides social or cultural strangeness, a third aspect of narrative perspective would be *historical strangeness*. A particularly spectacular example is furnished by the epistolary novel of the German writer Herbert Rosendorfer, *Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit* (1992) which catapults a Chinese of the 10th century to today's Munich. The degree of strangeness is reinforced by a journey in time, it is determined by the historic abyss between the subject and the object of the discourse. Another example, already mentioned: Vasco da Gama beholding modern Calcutta.

All the cases considered involve crossing national boundaries: this is a constant that I should like to underline particularly to avoid the dilution of the comparativist notion of the foreign. Otherwise one should effectively take into account all the points of view linked to the dialectic of identity and otherness - a text like *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) by Aragon comes to mind.

All these reflections lead to the conclusion that narrative perspective in texts that use an intercultural discourse, that is to say that establish a relation between at least two cultures, have an important *hermeneutic* weight. This does not, of course, apply to the same extent to the simple journey narrative as to the different forms of the novel. The latter indeed, in adopting a given point of view, does not only seek to impart information on a foreign country; it tries to give an important place to the problem of the cultural identity of the one who experiences the foreign, to establish a link between the cultures or to make the foreign culture an instrument, a simple screen on which to project an individual or national attitude.

Of course, through the technique of perspective, our sense of the relativity of our own cultural perspective is heightened. If that can constitute a pedagogical and humanistic objective, it must not make one forget that literature,

amusements such as those offered by Rosendorfer. The discourse of the 10th-century Chinese, who sends home a kind of report on Munich, is presented in a language that underlines the foreign perspective: and the language is part of the cultural reality. Rosendorfer's mandarin always says Lome for Rome, as everybody knows that the Chinese cannot pronounce the "r". And for the slit-eyed character, the Am-mei-cans - that is to say the Americans - or the people of *Minchen* (München, Munich) become the "Big-Noses". I quote, in conclusion, an amusing passage of a letter from our Chinese

> *ont des yeux ronds et exorbités, des bouches lippues, un menton en galoche et de très grandes dents. L'âme la plus forte doit avoir du mal à tenir en bride une telle monstruosité de visage. Chaque mouvement de l'âme se marque ainsi sur le visage .... Quand ils sont contents, les Grands-Nez montrent les dents, étirent la bouche vers le haut. Quand ils sont fâchés, ils montrent également les dents, mais étirent la bouche vers le bas .... Pour qui n'est pas au courant, cela paraît très menaçant, comme tu peux l'imaginer, et il m'a fallu du temps pour apprendre les différences. Aujourd'hui cela ne me fait plus peur, mais je ne peux pas m'empêcher d'en rire.*
>
> (Rosendorfer 1992: 129)

> (The Big-Noses have round bulging eyes, thick-lipped mouths, protruding chin and very big teeth. The strongest soul must have difficulty in controlling such a monstrous face. Each movement of the soul is thus marked on the face .... When they are pleased, the Big-Noses show their teeth, stretch the mouth upwards. When they are angry, they also show their teeth, but stretch the mouth downwards .... To the uninformed this is very frightening, as you can imagine, and it took me some time to learn the differences. Today it does not frighten me any more but I cannot restrain myself from laughing.)

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* Translated by Dr. S.H. Mdluli, Romance Languages, Unisa.

Translator's note: Where the paper quotes from the French translation of works originally published in English, I have simply retranslated into English.