Response

Narrative, Perspective and Cultural Otherness

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I must confess that when I first saw the proposed title of your paper, I got a real jolt of pleasure, as I have always had a particular interest in narratology and have spent many mainly enjoyable hours with my students debating the sometimes daunting complexities of "point of view", "perspective" or, as the Genettians among us call it, "focalization" or, more simply, "*narrative focus*". "*Cultural otherness*" *in narrative literature seems almost* inevitably to invite an exploration of what this widely represented thematic could owe to or do with "point of view". Yet, it appears, no systematic study of this relation has been undertaken to date.

Your paper explicitly narrows the thematic field from the broader domain of comparativist enquiry, the experience of the "strange" (not necessarily foreign), to narrative constituting an intercultural discourse which crosses national boundaries - that is, texts which establish a link between at least two cultures. On the other hand, your definition of "point of view", which you see linked to "sociological and even epistemological aspects", is very broad; rather than strictly narratological (in the French - or Genettian - sense), it is closer to the more eclectic conception of Wayne C. Booth. This I find somewhat problematic, as I shall attempt to show in a moment.

The examination of the examples was very interesting and informative, and I largely agree with your conclusions about the importance of narrative perspective as a vehicle for articulating the experience of the foreign. I do, however, have a few reservations.

1

The assertion that "it is important to know whether the author himself has experienced the situation of the foreigner" in order for the reader to perceive the dialectic between identity and otherness: While this knowledge that

the "subject of knowledge" and/or "of the discourse" knows what he is talking about, as it were, may lend authority to the narrative and secure the reader's involvement, I do not really think this has much to do with "point of view" in any manageable narratological sense. Your assertion, interesting as it may be for many reasons, implies a definition of "point of view" so all-encompassing that it seems to me unproductive for the particular thrust of the enquiry announced by the title of your paper, diluting it to something closer to *The Novel and Cultural Otherness* rather than *Narrative Perspective and Cultural Otherness*.

You yourself have had to narrow down this broad interpretation of "point of view" before leading into the very interesting section on the epistolary novel, where the author's "point of view" cannot simply be equated with that of any of the correspondents - in fact, *must* not be, in some cases. The same applies to a novel like James's *The Ambassadors*, with its tightly regulated focal perspective through a particular character.

2

In your list of parameters you add, for the "type of text", a parenthesis about defining the "genre". I do not believe that crossing the theme of the foreign with the notion of perspective is going to produce a useful definition of a particular genre (or taxonomy of sub-genres) that could fall within the scope of your enquiry. I think *any* narrative text constituting an intercultural discourse and, more broadly, any narrative conjugation of the theme of otherness is likely to be of interest in terms of its relationship to narrative "point of view".

3

In most of the texts considered in this paper, isn't the foreign *always*, in a sense, *aufgehoben*, to use your word? - that is, recognized but also digested, naturalized, *récupéré*, tamed? In the eye of the beholder, the focal eye - whether it be the writer of a letter or the reflecting consciousness of a third-person heterodiegetic focal character (or "focalizer") - there is inscribed the measure of the strangeness, the difference, of the other. The measured distance from what the beholder explicitly or implicitly considers normal, in a sense, renders comprehensible the Other. The Other is most often simplified to the alien, strange - not merely (re)presented as "Other". The Nabokov novel (which I have not read) seems to be a possible exception;

Sebastian Knight remains "Other" or, perhaps, simply "unknown"?

To preserve the "otherness" of the Other without inflating and simplifying it in any way, and foregrounding it as "strangeness" etc., could require particular configurations of the focal apparatus. When an eighteenth-century French author satirizes the French, using as a vehicle the fiction of visiting Persians as focalizers, it stands to reason that he should depict the French as strange and alien as possible; this is defamiliarization of the same or the familiar. But when the object of the author's gaze is the Other, as such, there could be a particular challenge: to merely (re)present the Other in his/her cultural or personal otherness without simplifying him/her in any way. The use of letters, not bound by any overarching master narrative in a particular perspective, or texts composed purely of dialogue, like a theatre script with no authorial or narratorial framework, could of course serve such a programme. But it could also be interesting to explore other resources of focalized narrative. Particular uses of polyphony, as in certain novels of Marguerite Duras, come to mind, where the reader alone is left to construct or deconstruct otherness; for example *The Ravishment of Lol V. Stein*, whose narrative apparatus is geared precisely to thwarting the I-narrator's attempts to reduce the radical otherness of the eponymous heroine.