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Horizontal Tradition

In a way, the problem I will be touching on here, very briefly, is not exclusively narratological. It is the problem of, say, the French critic for whom the literary history of her country overflows the traditional territory of French and Frenchness; the problem, or the task, of the Faulknerian scholar forced to travel, methodologically if not physically, to Haiti and even farther away, to Western Africa, in order to uncover the sources of major Southern anxieties; the conundrum of the anthropologist perplexed by the bricoleurs of aboriginal mythologies; the dilemma of the Lacanian therapist who makes a living on the signifying chain, so to speak; the predicament of the Arctic biologist who discovers nitrates in penguin meat; the bemusement of the Don DeLillo character who wonders if gorgeous American sunsets are no more than "fallout from a war in China"; the paradox of the sociologist who need not be a fan of Žižek to entertain the notion that most of the working-class of knowledge economy era U. S. also resides in China.

The case can be made, though, that the matter at hand *is* narrative. After all, the issue seems to boil down to something as basic as telling a good story; to what makes a story compelling, whole, and so to how far a story should or could go—how detailed should or could be—in order to complete its diegetic or epistemological arc, to chronicle and account for an event, a destiny, a process, a causality, or a thought. This issue, then, is the scope, the limit, and ultimately the definition of narrative representation.

As such, it seems as old as Lessing's *Laocoön*, if not older. I would like to suggest, however, that the shortcomings and challenges of narrative representation become more visible

than ever in today's network society. Our problem may be traced back to the dawn of representation theory and philosophy, but it becomes something to attend to with renewed urgency, and possibly with new tools, in the age of the webbed world. This problem, in a nutshell, is *how to represent the network*, what kind of narrative form our growingly interconnected world is calling for and how we might recalibrate our critical narratives, from the poetics of prose to literary history, to account for such representations. This is the challenge of what I call "horizontal tradition." To clarify what I mean by this tradition, let me go back to DeLillo one more time and pick, almost at random, a couple of scenes from his 2003 novel titled, quite tellingly, *Cosmopolis*, city of the world.

For it is, indeed, the world city's story or stories, rather, that the writer must tell in order to tell a New York story; it is the story of Leopold Bloom that DeLillo recounts in order to account for 24 hours in the life if zillionaire Eric Packer; it is the pageant of world cultures— taken in, speaking of Joyce, with en eye to the parade of the Greek ships in the *Iliad*'s Book 2— that the author reviews in order to report on the funeral of rapper Brutha Fez, a procession Eric watches with Kozmo Thomas, the rapper's former manager; Eric's stretch limo may be "prousted" (from Marcel Proust), that is, soundproofed, "cork-lined . . . against street noise" (70), as Eric says, but back in it, he watches the world's unfolding stories streaming live on the car's countless monitors. The vehicle barely moves—after all, this is Manhattan—but it does not have to go anywhere because the entire world feeds into it, in real time, and this world is changed, also in real time, by the decisions taken by this Leopold Bloom of online currency trading.

The limo is a narrative trope of the ultimate time-space compression. It spatializes, concentrates in one, thick narrative knot, the world's stories, which are instantly told, archived, and processed—read and retold—into new narrative frames, which in turn lie behind as many

economic and political decisions, so much so that the decision and the narrative representation it is based on catch up with, and, oddly enough, ultimately predate the story and that which this story represents. Instantaneousness, the instant archiving of the event—theoretically, of all events—thus leads first to *achrony*, to a suspension of time as the story need not come after the event any more, and eventually to *anachrony*. That is, the story can even precede the event such as in the famous scene where Eric is looking, on the screen of his watch, at the image of the dead body he will become a bit later.

Narratives like this respond to the pressure, no less than to the temptation, to bear witness to a world that is not only increasingly networked but is also available as such to its potential narrators and publics. What authors and their storytellers face these days is less and less the question of how to tell discrete, separately evolving stories, or one-path narratives, and more and more how to deal with narrative *nodes*, with the plethora of stories crossing other stories, combining with them, deflecting and inflecting them, deriving from them and in turn originating them. The objective and, again, the challenge, of a narrative form culturally and stylistically symptomatic of the ever-thickening network society may well be less—and less and less possible—to follow *a* road but to tell the story of the crossroads, to pursue an always-already circuitous trajectory. Once more, this provocation is not something new: the Joycean-Borgesian legacy of postmodern intertextuality, then, stemming from this, the more recent hypertext genre are some of the things that come to mind right away. But the intensity with which the 21st-century world forefronts it is. It is, more broadly, the issue of global-era narratives and narrative studies, in my opinion, but also of that which narratives preserve, fashion, and ultimately, foster, namely, tradition.

Now, there are, roughly, two ways of thinking about tradition and more largely about identity, community, history, and so forth. Following James Clifford and others, I would label them the *root* and the *route* models (interestingly enough, in American English the words are quasi homophone). In any event, I would argue that the latter, the route, gets a boost in the post-Cold War years. This is, in essence, what Amin Maalouf points out in his discussion of heritage. "Each of us," he writes in his essay *In the Name of Identity*, "has two heritages, a 'vertical' one that comes to us from our ancestors, our religious community and our popular traditions, and a 'horizontal' one transmitted to us by our contemporaries and by the age we live in." The "horizontal" heritage of the present world is, the Lebanese novelist goes on, "more influential" and "becomes more so every day." But, he adds, "this fact is not reflected in our perception of ourselves, and the inheritance we invoke most frequently is the vertical one." Contemporary narratives like *Cosmopolis* are changing this perception. "Horizontal" narratives and narrative episodes in the connective, "thick" sense used above are more and more numerous and consequential; they are *mise en scènes* of the *lateral ancestry* that is playing an ever more decisive part in who we are and in how we see ourselves nowadays. A "thick narratology," or a "flat" one, in Bruno Latour's sense, a narratology that would be network-oriented, dialogical, transcultural, nomadic and rhizomic, keen on the world's narrative overload in terms of available stories and story material, would be a narrative geopoetics attuned to this ever-expanding horizontality.

Cultural identity increasingly obtains via this detour. Its anthropological uniqueness—that which makes our identity unique—characteristically follows from a "wayward" narrative of oblique addition, filtering, and refracting. What makes identity authentic is a transcultural chain of narrative deviations, divagations, digressions, and interpolations. The logos instituting it is

"chatty," dia-logical, crosswise. The socio-logy best quipped to account for it might be Bruno Latour's "slow-ciology," which surveys "democratically" objects and subjects alike, all of them equal agents along the "route." A *dérive* in space and meaning bearing out late globalization's emblematic relationality, this route is a routine of derivation that splices together diachronic ("vertical") filiation and synchronic affiliation or rather maps the former onto the latter, a displacement somewhat analogous to Jakobson's definition of the poetic function as a "project[ion of] the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination. Equivalence," the critic specifies, is "promoted to the constitutive device of the sequence."

In our terms, the self's historical transcendence, his or her ties with a past, vertically, this self now projects horizontally onto the planetary sequence of cultures to the point that worldly contingence—self and other's juxtaposition in the world—assumes some of the grounding roles hitherto performed within presumably discrete paradigms primarily by the patrimonial metaphors of root, depth, and, with them, soil, home, *Heimat*, *Vaterland*, and so forth. Contingence becomes heritage as en-routeness takes on the attributes of enrootedness. Still, the self is no less authentic for that. It is just that the coordinates of authenticity are changing. Patrimony, heritage, tradition remain key. But their geometry is altered by the self's ability to retrofit affiliation with others as filiation, to assign horizontal juxtapositions the traditionally rooting function of verticality, and conversely, to bring those others' inheritances and histories into the present and root itself in that multidimensional temporality. Is this is true of the world we live in, as I think it is, we, narratologists, literary historians, humanists generally, have our work cut out for us.

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