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# The Promise of an Embodied Narratology: Integrating Cognition, Representation and Interpretation

## 1. Introduction

Telling a story in everyday conversation is not a purely verbal affair: the speaker actively shapes the story through facial expressions and gestures, reinforcing or, sometimes, ironically undermining the meaning of her words through the body. In face-to-face interaction, storytelling can thus be characterized as a fully embodied performance in which the speaker shares an "embodied context" (Langellier and Peterson 2004, 8–13) with her audience, guiding their emotional responses and interpretations by way of bodily cues as well as linguistic and para-linguistic signs (e.g., intonation and pauses).

The embodiment of other forms of narrative is less straightforward. In this chapter we'll be focusing on the reading of print narrative, and particularly literary fiction, but our account can and should be extended to other narrative practices—for instance, film, comics and digital media—where the reception of narrative also occurs in the absence of the storyteller's physical body. The practices that surround prose reading—at least in private, silent reading as we tend to perform it today—would seem to marginalize the body, relegating it to the hand that turns the page, the eyes that take in the text, and the occasional correction of an uncomfortable seating position. These are all bodily processes, of course, and neuroscientists have explored reading in terms of material events unfolding within the body (and the brain more specifically; see Dehaene 2009). Yet, in Western culture, reading has traditionally been seen as an incorporeal process of mapping written words onto mental representations and meanings. No wonder, then, that unlike their colleagues in the social sciences, theorists of narrative in the narratological tradition have only sporadically and unsystematically paid attention to the body. Exceptions

exist, as we will see in a moment, but none of them has created sufficient momentum to turn the body into a vector of narratological investigation.

Yet drawing a parallel with conversational storytelling allows us to grasp the primacy of the body as a key aspect of narrative experientiality, in Monika Fludernik's term. The notion of experientiality subsumes the ways in which narrative taps into a background of cognitive-level schemas and predispositions; Fludernik herself recognizes that "the "feature that is […] most basic to experientiality is *embodiment*" (1996, 30). On a closer look, it seems clear that the motionlessness of the body in literary reading conceals a treasure trove of processes and modes of engagement that are, as we will see, embodied through and through. The key to uncovering these embodied features of literary narrative is provided by the recent turn towards embodiment in fields such as cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, both of which are crucial to the project of an "embodied narratology" that we will sketch out in the course of this essay. While growing out of cognitive narrative theory, an embodied account will also speak to the concerns of literary study more generally because of the body's entanglement with socio-cultural practices and interpretive meanings: even in highly mediated narrative practices such as literature, storytelling is a performative act that involves the body of authors, readers and characters in ways that deserve to be carefully examined.

The term "embodiment" in literary studies and narratology has been traditionally used in the sense of an abstract notion becoming actualized. For example, Virginia Woolf's Orlando can be seen as an embodiment of the shifting developments in British history, John Milton's Satan is an incarnation of the seductive hubris of evil, while Major-General Stanley in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Pirates of Penzance*, the "very model of a modern Major-General," can be said to embody the perceived shortcomings of the Victorian military system. Contrary to this generic use of the term, an embodied narratology looks closely at how the body is involved in the production and reception of stories. Our approach assumes that the body is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses biological processes and cognitive-level structures as well as cultural practices (see Johnson 2008). An embodied narratology, therefore, acknowledges the cultural and conceptual dimensions of the body and its share in meaning-making: over the last half century, philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu have vigorously investigated the body's involvement in ideological dynamics and cultural practices, paving the way for feminist and queer approaches to the body (see Hoy

1999; Lennon 2010). An embodied narratology takes these cultural aspects of embodiment into account, but considers them always in connection with the ways in which human thinking is anchored in the bioevolutionary make-up of the human body, guided by bodily experience and shaped by our physical engagement with natural and cultural environments.

In recent years, the cognitive sciences have performed a shift from abstract and computational ways of conceiving the human mind to a model of the mind that is situated in the body, its physical experience of the world and emotional responses to it (see Lakoff and Johnson 1999). These so-called "second-generation cognitive sciences" (in Lakoff and Johnson's phrase) place the mind firmly in bodily processes, rejecting dualistic models that see the mind as intrinsically separate from the physicality of both our bodies and the external world. This trend in the mind sciences relates perception to the proprioceptive experience of the body (see O'Regan and Noë 2001; Gallagher 2005) and establishes feedback loops between bodily activities, the affordances of the environment and technologies such as writing (see Clark 1997). Even conceptual thinking has been presented as relatively concrete and embodied rather than purely abstract (see Barsalou 1999), often through the mediation of embodied metaphors (see Gibbs 2005). For prose narratives, it has been suggested that narrative comprehension relies on part of the same brain machinery that we use for real-world action and perception, including so-called mirror neurons, which would enable readers to perform "embodied simulations" of the events and actions they read about (see Gallese 2005). We run an embodied simulation whenever language leverages cognitive resources normally associated with perception and action: to some extent, it is as if we were internally performing the actions referenced by the text. The appeal to mirror neurons in relation to narrative comprehension is somewhat controversial, as discussed by Ralf Schneider in this volume, but the notion of embodied simulation stands on its own: many psycholinguists have used it without falling back on the neural level of analysis. For instance, they hypothesize that readers experience motor resonances of the movements described in spoken and written language (see Zwaan and Taylor 2006). Embodied simulation involves a cognitive re-enactment of the physical actions narrated by the text, regardless of how that re-enactment is realized in terms of brain structure. Crucially for our purposes, this new focus on embodiment promises to move literary study and narratology in new

directions (see for example Bernaerts et al. 2013; Caracciolo and Kukkonen 2014).

Drawing on the "second-generation cognitive sciences," an embodied narratology brings to the fore the role of the body in shaping and reading narratives. Embodied narratology places an emphasis on bodily experience as the meeting place of bodily states and perceptions (both conscious and pre-conscious) *and* the body's cultural reflections and images. In fact, these two aspects of the body form a feedback loop in which physical experience and bodily make-up feed into our cultural understanding of the body, and this, in turn, informs physical experience and plays a role in conceptualizing our bodily make-up (see Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014 for a more detailed discussion of this feedback loop). In the three sections that follow this introduction, the role of the body in narrative is investigated from the point of view of an embodied narratology, detailing how it offers new perspectives on both narrative theorizing and literary texts. Each of the case studies considers a different dimension through which embodied involvements are leveraged by narratives (and their reception):

1) Cognitive. The cognitive dimension relates to the body as it is implicated in readers' understanding of and engagement with narrative in the framework of psychology and the cognitive sciences. The embodied simulations of readers in response to the representation of characters' bodily, perceptual and emotional experience, and bodily movements are at the centre of interest of this cognitive dimension.
2) Representational. The representational dimension concerns the body as it is thematically and stylistically rendered in narrative texts and how these representations feed into action sequences and their relation to the overall plot.
3) Interpretive. The interpretive dimension arises from the cultural and historical situatedness of bodily experience, and it refers to particular conceptualizations of the body as they are leveraged in and by narrative texts to project the space of the storyworld and its cultural and ideological meanings.

Each of the case studies focuses on one of these three dimensions, discussing more particularly how different modes of embodiment interact in readers' cognitive-level processing of narrative (based on the example of Angela Carter); how narrative progression can be disrupted by the

textual representation of gestures (based on the examples of Virginia Woolf and Rainer Maria Rilke); and how familiarity with the spaces we inhabit shapes the way we interpret ourselves and our historical situation (based on the example of Herta Müller). It will become apparent rather quickly that these dimensions overlap and that embodied simulations, textual representation and cultural conceptualization support each other in the profound impact that reading narrative has on readers' minds and bodies. Though some of these processes have equivalents in both lyric poetry and other narrative and non-narrative media (e.g., comics, films, or videogames), we will concentrate here on prose narrative because that medium has long been associated with a cerebral, and disembodied, mode of reception—and is therefore particularly in need of an embodied account. A more comprehensive treatment of embodiment and narrative across the board will have to wait for another occasion.

Before launching into our case studies, however, let us consider some of the antecedents of the embodied narratology that we are outlining here. Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World* centres on the physical body as a vehicle of socio-cultural, interpretive meanings, arguing that the "grotesque conception of the body is interwoven […] with the theme of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture" (1984 [1965], 325). More recent work has approached the body from a poststructuralist perspective: for example, Peter Brooks's (1985) psychoanalytic theory of narrative sees the body as an engine of narrative progression, suggesting that sexual impulses and death instincts give narrative its temporal, teleological, and axiological orientation. Daniel Punday's *Narrative Bodies* expands Brooks's project, making a case for a "corporeal hermeneutics" (2003, 15) premised on the idea that the body permeates, drives and at the same time resists narrative representation (a point that resonates with Susan Sontag's [1978] account of illness, for instance).

Other scholars have tended to conceptualize the body in phenomenological or cognitive terms, often combining these perspectives. A key figure here is Ellen Esrock (2004), who distinguishes between readers' embodied simulations (as defined above) and other kinds of bodily responses to literature, particularly proprioceptive feelings, which may become salient in the reading experience. Along somewhat similar lines, Hannah Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese (2011) (the latter being one of the discoverers of mirror neurons) argue for the importance of embodied simulations in mediating the emotional and cognitive impact of literary texts. Despite their subtitle, "Toward an Embodied Narratology,"

the literary scholar and the neuroscientist fail to discuss issues that pertain to narratology proper, such as story time and discourse time, plot or the creation of fictional worlds. Wojciehowski and Gallese present close readings from Dante and Woolf, stressing authors' and readers' shares in the literary text; but ultimately, their claims, while valuable, are more generally couched in the field of literary study rather than in narratology *per se*.

The same observation applies to Guillemette Bolens's *The Style of Gestures* (2012), which focuses on the representation of gestures, intertwining embodied cognitive science with close readings of texts from various literary periods and traditions. Embodiment plays a role in the work of cognitive literary scholars such as Ellen Spolsky (2001) and Alan Richardson (2010), although the emphasis here falls more on the interpretive payoffs than on the literary-theoretical implications of embodied cognitive science. Despite this limitation, the studies by Bolens, Spolsky and Richardson show that it is possible to reconcile cognitive models with historically nuanced readings. Their approach thus paves the way for an embodied narratology which seeks to overcome simplistic dichotomies between the cultural and the cognitive through a combination of analytic methods and interpretive interests. The second-generation cognitive sciences, with their explicit theorization of the feedback loop between culture and cognition, are crucial to this endeavour.

## 2. Moving, Fast and Slow

Angela Carter's retelling of the fairy tale "Puss-in-Boots" in her collection *The Bloody Chamber* illustrates that embodiment is not uniform and constant, but instead subject to temporal and cognitive dynamics. The short story begins with the line "Figaro here; Figaro, there I tell you! Figaro upstairs, Figaro downstairs and – oh my goodness me" (Carter 2006 [1979], 76). Evoking the aria "Largo al factotum" from Gioachino Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, Carter tells the story from the point of view of the cat, who displays all the features of Figaro's showmanship.

Delivered entirely in the present tense, the cat's narration is conversational, but it does not address a particular narratee. Instead, the cat seems to perform in front of an audience, much like Figaro stepping onto the stage and delivering his aria. He faces the audience and encourages them to relive his performance, but he does not individualize an interlocutor. We could say that the cat is showing *and* telling the narrative at the same time. On the one hand, the swift shifts of *deixis*

("Figaro here, Figaro there") evoke a face-to-face storytelling situation where Puss is enacting these lightning moves (or at the very least pointing in different directions). On the other hand, he also draws attention to the very act of telling (as he says himself: "I tell you!"). The cat as narrator does not keep to the usual correlations of showing with detailed and slow-paced narration and telling with textual economy and fast-paced narration (see Klauk and Köppe 2014). Gérard Genette postulates an "inverse ratio" of the quantity of information" and the "presence of the informer," as well as an inverse ratio between "quantity of information" and "speed of the narrative" (see Genette 1980 [1972], 166). The less detail, the more present the narrator and the greater the speed of narrative. But Carter's cat does not heed such double inverse ratios. He is arguably a very "present" narrator who speaks quite a lot and who modulates the speed of his narrative. Genette already indicates that there are problems with a clear divide between telling and showing, while Wayne Booth describes it straightforwardly as "inadequate" ([1961] 1983, 16) and distinguishes rather between different types of narrators. For Booth, Carter's feline narrator would fall into the category of the "dramatized narrator" and stand in the loquacious tradition of Henry Fielding and Laurence Sterne, where telling *is* showing.

Here, the very presence of the narrator depends exactly on the wealth of detail, that is, the constant flow of language which might even refer explicitly to the act of telling. Embodied narratology invites us to revisit this narratorial "presence"; as an emergent vector in the field, it offers new ways to categorise this "wealth of linguistic detail" as an alternative to the much-troubled showing / telling distinction.

Throughout Carter's narrative, the rambunctious, risqué note of the opening line is maintained, and a tale between lust and strategizing unfolds, much like the plots of Pierre de Beaumarchais' trilogy of Figaro plays which were adapted into opera by Rossini, Mozart and others. When the cat narrates how he scales up buildings, we read "I swing succinctly up the façade, forepaws on a curly cherub's pate, hindpaws on a stucco wreath, bring them up to meet your forepaws while, first paw forward, hup! on to the stone nymph's tit; left paw down a bit, the satyr's bum should do the trick" (Carter 2006 [1979], 77). At first, Puss gives a description of his movements and how he uses the ornaments of the façade from a first-person take. Then, however, he slips into the imperative mood, instructing himself (and readers) to perform the actions ("bring them to meet your forepaws") and encouraging them ("hup!"). Carter's cat takes the basic assumption of embodied cognition as a given

here: his readers perform "embodied simulations" (see Gallese 2005) and experience "embodied resonances" (see Zwaan 2009) of the movements and actions they read about. Yet movements, and the ways in which we experience them, are not uniform but rather complex and multi-layered. We can conceptualise this complexity through the differences between "system 1" (fast, automatic and embodied; S1) and "system 2" (slow, controlled and conceptual; S2) (see Evans 2008 for an overview; see Kahneman 2011 for a popularization of the distinction). "Thinking" refers here to the cognitive activities which the human brain and body perform in concert. The slow modes of thinking (S2) are characterized as detailed, deliberate and abstract, and movement itself can be performed in this mode when we are not sufficiently skilled (just imagine climbing up a tree after your cat if you are not used to such arboreal exercises). Fast modes of thinking (and movement) (S1) are experienced as more fluent, effortless and pre-reflexive.

The distinction might help capture the dichotomies and dynamics at play in Carter's story more precisely, because it depends on the embodied sense of speed evoked by the text, and its strategies, rather than the mere "quantity of information." Both the cat's movements and readers' "embodied simulations" could be considered as part of the "fast" cognition of S1. Yet, as Puss verbalizes his inner monologue and traces the movements in descriptions and imperatives, he slows down this fast cognition. He puts his movements in sequence, strategizes about where to move next ("the satyr's bum should do the trick") and seems to address his readers in the process. In terms of readers' responses, the text presents both elements of fast cognition in "embodied simulation" and elements of slow cognition through the narrating voice that controls, shapes and sequences.

The details of the climb up the façade slow down the cat's automatic movements. But at the same time, his verbal panache and the concluding statement ("Nothing to it, once you know how, rococo's no problem"; Carter 2006 [1979], 77) suggest that grace and effortlessness (which are associated with S1) have been achieved through S2. The two systems (S1 and S2) do not represent an irredeemable dichotomy, but a "dyad" of thinking (Collins 2013) in which one system interacts with the other. In fact, it seems that S1 and S2 are not fixed but flexible across time: when we learn a new skill, we need the explicit, detailed and conceptual mode of thinking that is associated with S2. Once we have learned the skill, however, it becomes fast, automatic and implicit as cognition in S1 (see Evans 2008). Similarly, the cat's verbalization in his performance seems

to look back at readers who still have to learn the skill of scaling façades, while for his expertise "rococo's no problem."

The "presence" of the narrator depends here on the degree to which he communicates his embodied skill. Considering embodied simulation through fast and slow modes of thinking helps to differentiate between different levels of proficiency of movement as reflected in narrative. It also suggests that detailing bodily movement might lead to an impression of effortfulness and difficulty, either on the part of the reader or on that of the character's experience, whereas economic descriptions of bodily movement suggest automaticity and expertise. In the instance of Carter's cat, his detailed descriptions give the human audience (with their presumably slow cognition when it comes to climbing buildings) a means of following, while at the same time, his effortless fluid performance suggests his own proficiency. Not all embodied simulation is the same; on the contrary, depending on the trade-off between slow and fast cognition in the verbal description of these embodied movements, readers get a sense of what we could call "modulations of embodied skill," as the cat ranges between rhetorical ornateness and lightning-fast instinctive moves, but because it also forms a thematic node in the narrative.

The cat is a reflection of his master. Both the animal and the human being are "proud as the devil, touchy as tin-tacks, lecherous as liquorice" (Carter 2006 [1979], 78). In the comic plot of lust and strategizing, which can be considered as a particular generic constellation of S1 and S2, the animal and the human being take turns in driving the action forward, and in an ironic inversion of the conventionally instinct-driven animal and the thoughtful human being, it is mostly the animal who strategizes. Like the character type of the confidant in Molieresque comedy, Puss schemes and plans to bring together his master and his beloved. In elaborate ploys, he sets up the human master to find admittance to his lady in the guise of a rat catcher ("Signor Furioso, the living death of rats"; 86) and a doctor (92), while the human being pursues the delights of the flesh, to be commented upon by the animal ("Full marks, Master"; 89). Yet this inversion of the traditional dichotomy between human beings and animals is not entirely straightforward: it is the human master who pines for transcendent, conceptual love, while the cat sets his sights on more pragmatic forms of wish-fulfilment.

The dyadic interactions of embodied thinking in this feline narrative are reflected across the layers of the narrative's meaning, from embodied simulations to thematic concerns and cultural contexts of the narrative. In some instances, these layers take what we could call a metaphorical

relation to each other. According to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) definition, conceptual metaphor relates a concrete, embodied domain with an abstract, conceptual domain. When the cat attempts the "Palladian" façade of the palazzo where the master's beloved lives, he comes to realize that "that chaste, tasteful, early Palladian stumped many a better cat than I in its time" (Carter 2006 [1979], 84). Indeed, "Agility's not in it, when it comes to Palladian; daring alone will carry the day" (84). Obviously, the Palladian façade, chaste and hard to conquer, represents the difficulties of the master's courtship. While "rococo," the easy-going ladies about town, are "no problem," this new lady presents a different challenge. The cat's embodied thinking feeds into his strategizing here. It takes a leap, an unheard-of stratagem, to gain the lady. The movement of climbing the façade mirrors the moves in courtship, mapping embodied with conceptual thinking. Furthermore, Puss seems to imply that devising schemes comes as naturally to him as his scaling the Doric columns in a single bound, as he maps what we can identify as features of S1 onto his achievements in actions that more generally fall under S2. Puss takes a curtain call after his ascent up the façade ("with a courtly flourish"; 84]) and the narrative as a whole (95), and hence underlines the parallelism of his efforts in fast, embodied movements and elaborate machinations that drive the narrative plot.

The pacing between movements, fast and slow, relates not only to the thematic importance of the interplay between S1 / S2 through the ways in which it ties in with cultural templates and genre expectations, but also to the overall narrative constitution. According to Seymour Chatman's definition in *Coming to Terms*, texts are "any communication that *temporally* controls its reception by the audience" (1990, 7). Both narrative and description, as text types, guide readers' understanding through time, but only narrative prompts them to construct the underlying temporal sequence called "story time." Movement in the text can be descriptive or narrative, depending on whether it constitutes an event that drives story time forward (31). As Chatman puts it, in order to be narrative, action needs to be "keyed [...] to the ongoing march of story events" (37). Puss scaling the façades constitutes a narrative action because in the first instance, he demonstrates his skills to the master and is taken into service; and in the second instance, he gets closer to bringing together his master and the lady. At the same time, however, as we have seen, the movements that advance story time are not uniform. Rather, to expand on Chatman's own musical metaphor, there seems to be a "notation" to embodied cognition, as the dyads of movements fast and

slow emerge in the discourse of the text. As narratology begins to consider the embodied features of storytelling, it becomes important to trace how the notation of the different kinds of movement in mind and body contributes to how readers experience the "march" of story events, how the different modes of embodied simulation in S1 and S2 relate to typical generic patterns and thematic nodes, and how they are mapped onto each other from individual scenes to the narrative as a whole. We will continue exploring these issues in the next section, which deals with how the representation of bodily movement, and particularly of characters' gestures, can slow down narrative-advancing action.

## 3. Disrupting Gestures in Modernist Fiction

This section argues that the representation of gestures in narrative can interrupt plot progression and underscore the embodiment of characters and readers alike. Our analysis is historically grounded insofar as we look at gestural patterns in modernist fiction and how they evince a conspicuously modern form of alienation from selves and bodies (see Armstrong 1998). Such reflection on embodiment, which we suggest was, albeit implicitly, ongoing at the time of Modernism, has recently been made explicit for different media. This is the case most notably of cinema, but also the visual arts, and the radical avant-garde have offered fertile soil for reassessing the embodied dimension of the aesthetic artefacts of the period (see McCabe 2001). We will extend this account to literary fiction by pointing to some seminal moments in Rainer Maria Rilke's hybrid narrative text *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) and Virginia Woolf's 1925 novel *Mrs Dalloway*, where embodiment is brought into sharp relief within the thread of the narration. Yet the most salient moments of embodiment in both novels do not straightforwardly represent pivotal sequences in the time-line of the plot. Far from being "plot-furthering" devices, these disrupting gestures invite attention in their own right, ostentatiously displaying their embodied nature.

To understand the distinction we are drawing between action and disrupting gestures, let us have a look at the definition of action. From Aristotle's (1995 [c. 335 BC], 49) characterization of plot as the representation ("mimesis") of action up to recent cognitive-narratological models (Herman 2002, chap. 2), "action" has been one of the key concepts of narrative theory. Philosophers argue that there is action whenever behaviour is coupled with a subject's intentionality (see Wilson and Shpall 2012). Someone performs an action when he or she moves her

body in an intentional way—i.e., consciously and purposefully. Thus, mere bodily reflexes such as blinking in response to sunlight do not qualify as actions in that they are normally devoid of intentionality. Gesture as we conceive it in this paper is bodily movement that calls attention to itself, beyond any underlying purpose or intentionality: it is involuntary, often unconscious, and challenges the association—which is otherwise normal in narrative—between characters' intentions, their bodily movements, and the progression of the story itself. When this association is present, we have actions; when it is problematized, we have what we are calling "disrupting gestures."

Alan Palmer captures the link between characters' actions and the mental states that propel those actions under the heading of "thought-action continuum" (2004, 212–214). Consider this passage from Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*:

> "I'm horrified at having given myself to the first comer," answered Mathilde, weeping tears of rage against herself.
>
> "*To the first comer!*" exclaimed Julien, and he sprung to an antique mediaeval sword which was kept in the library as a curiosity. […]
>
> Just as he succeeded, with some difficulty, in drawing the sword from its ancient scabbard, Mathilde, delighted at so novel a sensation, advanced proudly towards him; her tears had dried up. (2002 [1830], 363)

Julien's seizing of the sword is an action insofar as it conveys the character's intention to threaten Mathilde: Julien acts impulsively on his desire to kill Mathilde in order to defend his honour. As such, his action plays a key role in the narrative economy of the novel: it has an immediate repercussion on the plot, because Mathilde instantly falls in love with Julien as she interprets his aggression as a sign of fiery passion.

As our case studies will show, however, bodily movements can be seen as dramatically severed from narrative-advancing elements. In such cases the body is uncoupled from action; a rift opens up within Palmer's "thought-action continuum" so that characters' movements, unhinged from the plot, become full-fledged gestures. Berns's (2013) distinction between two levels of performativity is helpful here: in performativity I, the audience has direct access to an embodied performance (as in theatre or dance); performativity II consists in the "imitation or illusion of performance" in mediated and seemingly disembodied practices such as literary narrative. Both narrated action and disrupting gestures, as we understand them in this article, are forms of performativity II, and both can elicit embodied responses in readers; however, disrupting gestures

tend to underscore the embodied nature of performativity, thus highlighting the link between performativity I and II. While the embodied simulations through which we understand plot-advancing actions are mostly unconscious, disrupting gestures can heighten readers' awareness of their own embodied involvement in literary reading.

### 3.1. Hands and Pencils in Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*

An early milestone for modernist experimentation, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* reads as a deliberate attempt to stretch the structure of the traditional *Bildungsroman* to unfamiliar boundaries, its jagged narrative plot showing an uneasy subjectivity falling prey to an oppressive urban setting. Rilke wrote *The Notebooks* between 1904 and 1910, shortly after his stay in Paris (1902–1903): through the fictitious autobiography of a Danish nobleman named Malte Laurids Brigge, Rilke intertwines his own Parisian memories with Malte's telling of an imaginary Danish childhood. In the autobiographical mode of "mémoires," Malte appears as an alter-ego for Rilke, a semi-autonomous spokesperson for the poet's most intimate life. This ambiguous position wherein Malte is neither a full-fledged character distinct from the author nor a transparent stand-in for the authorial voice is perhaps at its most explicit in what Malte himself calls the "Hand story."

This episode interrupts and bears no evident connection to the ongoing thematic and narrative thread assembling episodes of mourning that occurred during Malte's childhood. On a winter evening, Malte is drawing a knight with brightly coloured pencils in the vicinity of his nanny Mademoiselle, immersed in reading a book. Just as he reaches for the red colour, he drops the crayon and starts groping for it in the dark. Abandoning his seat and going down on his knees, he fumbles under the drawing table with no source of lighting. As the search goes on and Malte's eyes grow accustomed to the dark, his right hand comes into sight. There is a first, unsettling effect of distanciation whereby the searching hand is granted an agency of its own and seems to act on an intentionality severed from Malte's:

> I took my bearings from the table legs, and in particular made out my own outspread hand, moving all alone below, a little like some aquatic animal exploring the sea-bed. (2009 [1910], 61)

This “moving all alone below”—the disquieting autonomy of Malte’s right hand—is first taken to be an object of curious interest: Malte follows his hand’s gesture of “groping about down there” and “pushing onwards” as an external witness registering the alienating effects which this dissociation between himself and his familiar tool of exploration brings about. The right hand first displays the autonomy of a living being as though it were “some aquatic animal”; then it evinces the opacity of a consciousness-endowed entity, “with a mind of its own” fully emancipated from Malte’s:

> I still recall that I watched it almost with curiosity; as it groped about down there, with a mind of its own, moving in ways I had never seen it move, it seemed to be able to do things I had not taught it. I observed it as it pushed onwards; I was interested, and prepared for anything. (2009 [1910], 61)

This first rift in the “thought-action continuum” is perhaps more of an odd interstice than a strong dissociation, for Malte is still aware that this free-willed hand is his: Malte’s loss of agency while his right hand devises gestures on its own comes across as a form of scare prank or a ludic short circuit in the loop connecting thought and action. However, the game soon turns sour, as a further tremor widens the gap between Malte’s inner proprioception and an odd, external perception of himself:

> But how could I have expected another hand suddenly to come towards it from the wall, a larger and unusually thin hand, such as I had never seen before? It was searching in similar fashion, from the other side, and the two outspread hands moved blindly towards each other. (2009 [1910], 61)

The alienation is now complete as an unrecognizable hand, larger and thinner than Malte’s facetious right hand, suddenly emerges from the dark and moves from the wall on the carpet rug in a symmetrical trajectory. Part of the horror that shakes Malte seems to be that not only are the two hands dissociated from his will, thus challenging his status of autonomous subject in command of his thoughts and actions but also, and more crucially, that those two uncontrollable hands are now uncoupled from each other: almost identical replicas yet turned “blind” to the presence of the other. Indeed, in Rilke’s *Notebooks* the continuum linking characters’ “thought” and narrative “action” is not only unsettled and challenged at the margins of the plot; the very idea of a subject as self-evidently, self-transparently embodied is also frayed with holes, ultimately depriving

Malte of the possibility of speech and, by extension, of narrating the incident as an integral part of the plot: "If there were words for what had happened, I was too small to find them" (61).

The "Hand story" thus displays an embodied blind spot in our proprioception: while groping about in the dark, Malte sees a familiar limb splitting into two disquieting, unrecognizable objects. One hand, exemplifying this sensory loophole, is claiming mischievous autonomy from the protagonist while the other is fully estranged from Malte, displaying his inability to recognize his own body through proprioception and thus mimicking quite concretely and in physical terms the rift we are identifying in Palmer's "thought-action continuum."

### 3.2. Pocket Knives, Shutters and Bubbling Songs in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*

Set in central London in the course of one day, *Mrs Dalloway* charts the narrative trajectories of two couples, Richard and Clarissa Dalloway (who are hosting a high-society party in the evening) and WWI veteran Septimus Warren Smith and his Italian wife, Lucrezia. The Dalloways and the Smiths never meet in person, but their lives often converge as they wander through London during the day, building up to the announcement of Septimus's suicide at Clarissa's party. Clarissa's long-time friend, Peter Walsh, connects the two groups of characters, since he runs into the Smiths twice during the day before attending Clarissa's party.

Peter is associated with a distinctive gesture throughout the novel: his playing with a pocket knife. Peter has long been in love with Clarissa, but she chose to marry Richard Dalloway instead. Their encounter in Clarissa's house can be read alongside the scene in the library between Julien Sorel and Mathilde de la Mole:

> "And how are you?" said Peter Walsh, positively trembling; taking both her hands; kissing both her hands. […] She's looking at me, he thought, a sudden embarrassment coming over him, though he had kissed her hands. Putting his hand into his pocket, he took out a large pocket-knife and half opened the blade. […] "How heavenly it is to see you again!" She exclaimed. He had his knife out. That's so like him, she thought. (2000 [1925], 44)

Amid the embarrassed politeness of Peter and Clarissa's first encounter in thirty years, Peter's pulling out his knife from his pocket triggers only a mild reaction in its interlocutor: unlike Julien's seizing of

the sword, it conveys the character's uneasiness, perhaps even his social inadequacy, without any impact on the plot. Clarissa herself psychologizes Peter's gesture by thinking that it is "so like him." Yet a pocket knife is hardly a neutral object to extract at the sight of an old friend. Peter's fumbling with the knife runs like a thread through his conversation with Clarissa: the gesture's automaticity (later on Peter is compared to a machine, "a mere silly chatterbox"; 48) opens a fissure between intentional action and bodily movement.

This rift participates in a more general problematization of plot in the Modernist novel (see Matz 2004, 30). More striking examples of this trend are offered by Woolf's gesture-like descriptions of psychological processes. Consider, for instance, this account of Peter's inner experience:

> [Down] his mind went flat as a marsh, and three great emotions bowled over him; understanding; a vast philanthropy; and finally, as if the result of the others, an irrepressible, exquisite delight; as if inside his brain by another hand strings were pulled, shutters moved, and he, having nothing to do with it, yet stood at the opening of endless avenues. (2000 [1925], 47)

As often in Woolf's prose, mental processes are laid out in a metaphorical, introspective space. In particular, the ending of the passage foregrounds a machinic metaphor by comparing mental events to mechanisms—"strings" and "shutters"—activated by someone's physical movements. Such gestures are therefore removed from the domain of narrative action: the mind takes on a life of its own, and its processes unfold independently of any thought-action continuum. Further, the internalization of gesture in Woolf's novel goes together with its uncoupling from the character's intentionality, since these internal happenings are explicitly attributed to "another hand" with which Peter had "nothing to do"—an image that is highly reminiscent of the Rilke passage we have examined above.

Woolf's attribution of gestures to inanimate or unconscious forces can be seen as a further step in her laying bare of embodied performativity through the representation of disrupting gestures. One of the most perplexing moments of the novel can be read in this light. As Peter Walsh passes by the entrance of Regent's Park, he hears a mysterious song originating from an old woman. However, the woman who is the source of the voice is substantially transfigured in a two-page long passage:

> As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a

> mouth, a mere hole in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets, […] fertilizing, leaving a damp stain. (2000 [1925], 89)

Here the transfiguration of bodily movement reaches a climax: the woman's singing is turned into an unrecognizable series of natural sounds and movements ("[bubbling] up," "burbling," "soaking," "[streaming] away") which lose any human semblance while seeming to extend into the non-human temporality of "infinite ages." The passage reveals a form of movement that not only transcends human action but also human embodiment as our condition of spatio-temporal finitude. Through the woman's song, a faceless, agentless performativity irrupts into—and hence disrupts—the plot of *Mrs Dalloway*, concluding the process initiated by Peter's unconscious fumbling with his pocket knife.

To conclude, we have examined in this section a number of instances in which Rilke and Woolf highlight an arresting discontinuity between narrative actions and disrupting gestures in embodied terms. This fracture, we are suggesting here, seems to be taking part in a wider strategy characteristic of Modernism which lays bare moments of embodied performativity beyond narrative progression. While characters' gestures have certainly been exploited against the grain of narrativity in texts from previous periods, the recurrence of disruptive bodily patterns that stray from the main narrative thread in our case studies seems to require more thorough attention on a larger scale, calling for a refined historical framing. In our understanding, modernist fiction can direct readers' attention to the pre-reflexive physicality of gesture, as evidenced in Rilke's and Woolf's texts. This sense of pervasive bodily performativity, we suggest, lies at the core of the exploration of disrupting gestures in modernist fiction. Our next section turns to a different form of disruption, where the boundaries of the body as well as the workings of embodied perception are made problematic by the writer's personal, and historical, predicament.

## 4. Embodiment and Alien Space in Herta Müller's Writings

The gaze alluded to by the title of Herta Müller's essay *Der fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne* (*The Alien Gaze, or Life Is a Fart in the Lantern*) is not the result of Müller's experience of exile; rather, she insists, this gaze was implanted by the dehumanizing

mechanisms of systematic state terror in communist Romania (1999, 5). Born in Romania in 1953, Müller emigrated to West Berlin in 1987 to escape Nicolae Ceaușescu's totalitarian regime. It is her experience with this regime that is essential to fully understanding the storyworlds of her novels—i.e., the imaginary domain they evoke (Herman 2002). Müller's personal topography of terror is communicated by means of a narrative that rests on the disruption of the natural, intuitive connection between the subject and his or her surroundings, a connection that is constitutive of our perceptual access to the world as defined by "enactivist" philosophers (see O'Regan and Noë 2001). Our examination of this disruption from an embodied perspective calls attention to the impact of the textual strategies that involve readers' bodies in the constitution of the historically situated storyworlds. Drawing on Herta Müller's own descriptive account of her experiences with persecution by the Securitate (the Romanian secret service) in her essays, this section sets out to connect the author's reflection on perception with aspects of enactivism and situated cognition. We will then move on to discuss how this analysis helps shed new light on spatial references in narrative and their contribution to characters' (and readers') experiential inhabitation of narrative spaces and the creation of the storyworld.

In her essay *Der fremde Blick oder Das Leben ist ein Furz in der Laterne*, Müller describes her experience with the Securitate, whose agents systematically broke into people's homes, often only to change little things—moving furniture, displacing an ashtray or a note on the fridge—so as to signal that they had been there during the occupant's absence:

> I was used to walking through the flat after coming home and checking whether anything had changed. I wanted to keep the flat familiar by means of these inspection rounds, but it only became that much stranger. (1999, 9; translation SM)

In her later essay *In jeder Sprache sitzen andere Augen* (*Every Language is the Seat of Different Eyes*), Müller sheds further light on the cause of her experience in her reference to the Romanian author Alexandru Vona's definition of "feeling-at-home":

> […] when I enter the room in the darkness of the evening, I recognize the chair, because I know that at this hour it must be standing there (and I know that) in an unfamiliar equally dark room, I would not be able to recognize it – because in fact I do not see anything there. (2010 [2003], 22; translation SM)

The way Müller's portrays the violation of a private sphere as a disrupted "feeling-at-home" is reminiscent of the Freudian notion of the "Unheimliche" (typically translated as "the uncanny"). Yet, rather than relegating this feeling to the unconscious recurrence of the familiar or surmounted thoughts (Freud 1999 [1919]), Müller points to our experiential sense of inhabiting space which, in turn, is based on our embodied knowledge of our surroundings. Indeed, Müller's reflections on her experience resonate with an enactivist approach to perception: our sensorimotoric knowledge of space depends on our awareness that moving through it would give us access to the occluded sides of all objects (Noë 2008, chap. 3, esp. 89). Situated cognition complements this view by taking into consideration the significance of sensorimotoric simulation in the recognition of manipulable objects (e.g., Barsalou 2003). Knowing something in this way implicates that the recognition of an object relies on acquired, practical, embodied knowledge. Moreover, the sensorimotoric simulation of observed actions in our brains is vital for our understanding of objects as well as gestures or facial expressions (e.g., Iacoboni et al. 2005). We use forks and knives to eat, a chair to sit on and a table to eat on—all actions that define the typical, everyday use of these objects. In such an everyday context, we also acquire a unique familiarity with these objects through the very specific ways in which we *have* used them.

The enactivist approach can be enriched through the extended account of cognition (as suggested, for instance, by Kiverstein and Clark 2009) insofar as it acknowledges the fact that objects can extend the autonomous system, i.e., the subject. Thompson and Stapleton distinguish between objects that merely extend the body-mind and those which are incorporated into it (2009, 28−29). According to this distinction, ordinary objects which we use on a daily basis represent a mere extension: they extend the body-mind but remain separate from it. In this conception of incorporation, our own relation to our bodies is categorized into two attitudes: body-as-object ("this is my arm") and body-as-subject. In the body-as-subject attitude, the body is the "structure of perception" (Thompson and Stapleton 2009, 29) and therefore transparent to our perception: it is an extension that becomes part of the subject's perceptual attitude. We argue that the inhabitation of space is a form of incorporation: evoking Vona's concept of "feeling-at-home" in order to grasp her own experience of terror and unrest, Müller draws attention to a quotidian form of incorporation of the environment. For Vona highlights

that he does not "see" at all in a familiar place. The chairs and the table in the flat signify a space in which the objects are close to being an extension of the body, just as the stick is an extension of a blind man's tactile perception. "Seeing" actually means sensing.

Thus, Müller's "alien gaze" reveals how visual experience relies on the body: the storyworld becomes the extension of the protagonist's body-mind. But the embodiment of Müller's text doesn't end here: a number of scholars have already stressed that the reader's own body is vital to the apprehension of narrative space (see Caracciolo 2011; Kuzmičová 2012). Likewise, in Müller's texts the spatialization of the storyworld results from how the protagonist's sensorimotor knowledge can unconsciously involve readers' bodies. This process becomes acutely evident when the immediate and intuitive relationship between body and space is deliberately disturbed: as long as we are familiar with the world, as long as there is no disturbance, things are to a certain extent transparent, and corporeal "boundaries" go unnoticed. The experience of terror makes Herta Müller's body-world boundary fragile and sensitive like the skin, potentially heightening readers' awareness of their own embodied understanding of the protagonist's situation. "The alien gaze" thus refers to the embodiment inherent in vision and the fundamental disturbance of the body-mind caused by the mechanisms of state terror.

The following passages from Herta Müller's *Herztier* (*The Land of Green Plums*) and *Reisende auf einem Bein* (*Traveling on One Leg*), both autobiographical novels which reflect on Müller's life in Romania and in Berlin, illustrate how this extended body-mind actively shapes the fictional space:

> To this day, I can't really picture a grave. Only a belt, a window, a nut, and a rope. To me, each death is like a sack. (1999 [1994], 1)

These two sentences, from the first page of the novel *The Land of Green Plums*, are characteristic of Müller's paratactic style and the way she introduces something akin to what is called the "perspective of importance" in the visual arts: objects are depicted not according to their relative size in the natural world, but according to their significance vis-à-vis the perspective that is to be conveyed. This perspective then does not depict the space according to geometrical accuracy but to a subjective, emotional (or political) point of view. The belt, the window and the nut, unknown and meaningless to the reader at this point in the novel, are closely related to—in fact *are*—the cause of the death of the protagonist's

friends, which signify her different life phases: her friend in university, Lola, kills herself with the protagonist's belt; Gregor, a friend in their conspiration against the regime, allegedly commits suicide by jumping out of a window at the beginning of his exile in Germany; the protagonist's friend and colleague at the school where she works, who will later betray her to the security service, dies of cancer. The objects subsequently pervade the novel like leitmotifs (as does the titular green plum). But these leitmotifs are stumbling blocks for readers. Even though the objects are personal objects whose meaning is for the duration of the novel mostly accessible for the protagonist; for the reader, they are signals which cause a disruption: they function because they have lost their-taken-for grantedness and become opaque, but still impossible to ignore, for the interpreter as well as for the protagonist. Through their "incorrect" use, these objects resist being incorporated into the "natural" space that surrounds them, thus causing a rearrangement of the fictional space. As a consequence of this kind of embodied alienation, the space seems to "fall apart," as in the following passage:

> Five girls were left in the cube, five beds, five suitcases. When Lola's bed was gone, someone shut the door. With every movement in the room, the threads of dust twisted together in the hot, bright air. Someone stood against the wall, combing her hair. Someone shut the window. Someone re-laced her shoes in a different way. (1999, 26)

This passage describes the situation in the dorm after Lola's suicide and after her corpse has been removed. Throughout the novel, the room shared by the girls is called "the rectangle." In this particular passage, the furniture in it is merely enumerated: five beds and five suitcases. The mere listing of these spare objects emphasizes their deserted state. They signify the exact opposite of the "feeling-at-home" that is described above. The objects are not familiarized through the casual everyday use, and they are not naturalized within the context of action either. Their defamiliarization lies in the disconnectedness caused by the disruption of the obvious, unnoticed extension of our bodies through things and actions. (For more on the Russian formalist concept of "defamiliarization" and its relationship with cognitive literary studies, see Fludernik 2010, 2.) This existential disconnectedness is translated into Müller's austere language and paratactic syntax, which merely enumerates the actions of the girls without placing them in a meaningful context of (potential) action. Instead, the dust is the only dynamic element in the room

absorbing the movement in the way its threads get twisted and entangled with one another. The syntax itself encourages an embodied experiencing of the scene insofar as it arrests time and denies causal relations and plot advancement.

In her earlier novel, *Traveling on One Leg*, Müller focuses on her experiences in the new country and the gaze she brought with her from Romania. Entering her new flat in a new country in a divided city, Berlin, Müller describes in striking terms the disturbance and unfamiliarity of this place:

> As she walked into the apartment, a hallway walked through her. Then a kitchen. Then a bathroom. Then a room. Nothing but empty walls. Irene only noticed later that there was a stove in the kitchen. (1998 [1989], 30)

Contrary to the way in which the room is described as a rectangle in the passage from *The Land of Green Plums*, the new flat here is by no means an extension. Rather, the new place is so completely undetermined that the inner-outer relation collapses: instead of constituting an extension, the surrounding space invades and negates the body of the protagonist. As with the dust of the passage discussed above, the dynamic verb is ascribed to the objective world whilst the body boundary, which is essential but tends to remain unconscious when the world around us is a mere extension of the body, is absent. The poetic strategy here lies in the reversal of the assumed cause and effect, action and re-action. The disruption lies in the inversion which renders the body permeable and immaterial. The constant danger of obliteration lurking in this space relies on an extended body with fragile borders:

> The man caught up with her. He was smoking. He walked with slow steps.
>
> Irene wanted to let the man overtake her. He didn't overtake her.
>
> The smoke passed over her face. Irene turned her face away. She heard the man's breathing. And that he walked in step with her. She changed steps.
>
> She only looked at the walls of the houses now. She felt that the man moved his arms to the same rhythm as she did. She didn't move her arms.
>
> It was dark. The feeling of not having any arms made Irene dizzy. (1998 [1989], 52)

To resist being absorbed into the movement of the other person, Irene stops moving her arms, which results in her feeling the extinction of her own arms. Müller invests the Berlin space with fear and paranoia by

calling attention to how Irene's body is affected when confronted with everyday activity on Berlin's street. In this scene, perhaps most vividly, the embodied enactive imagination is elicited as it relies on the reader's kinaesthetic empathy in order to convey the disruption between subject and environment. Müller's textual strategy of disruption of our everyday understanding of space and objects illustrates that even a rather specific, culturally determined image of fictional space can emerge in the imagination of the reader on the basis of embodied responses.

## 5. Conclusion

We have already referred to Hannah Wojciehowski and Vittorio Gallese's (2011) article whose subtitle, "Toward an Embodied Narratology," appears to foreshadow the project outlined in these pages. If Wojciehowski and Gallese answer the question of "how stories make us feel" (through processes of embodied simulation that literary texts elicit in readers), then this article attempts to make a few more determined steps in the process of advancing "towards an embodied narratology" by relating the principle of embodied simulation particularly to narratological questions. The case studies chart out what it means to be embodied as a reader in the coordinates of time and space that a narrative establishes through its plot and fictional world. Linguistic and stylistic strategies can speed up or slow down readers' embodied simulation, thus modulating their processing of story time as it is evoked by narrative discourse. The thought-action continuum of characters' fictional minds, as it feeds into the progression of the plot, can be disrupted and disturbed by seemingly uncontrollable gestures. Situated cognition contributes to readers' (and characters') habituation to fictional worlds and presents them with interpretive conundrums.

The case studies address a limited set of problems, of course, but they offer ready connections with a broad array of narratological concepts (such as telling vs. showing, plot, fictional minds and storyworlds), and they might form a point of origin for a new vector in narrative theory. Based on the considerations offered in the present essay, a more systematic treatment of how embodiment impacts a wide array of narratological categories seems both feasible and desirable. Among the issues to be further explored, also from an empirical perspective, are the psychophysiology of our embodied responses to narrative and how such responses may be shaped or at least modulated by the material context in which we read (or watch or listen to) narrative. Arguably, reading on a

busy train is not the same thing as reading in the silence and comfort of one's home, but we know little about the degree to which these different contexts lead to distinct forms of embodied involvement.

Bringing to bear the high-precision tool kit of narratology on the embodied engagements of literary reading offers a fertile, yet specific, programme of research into what happens in fictional narrative. At the same time, our analyses in the vein of embodied narratology have shown a feedback loop in action between culture and cognition: going through the cognitive, representational and interpretive dimensions we have discussed, this feedback loop ties the richness of literature's historical and cultural situatedness back into narratological analysis. The exploits of Puss-in-Boots create effects of intertextual sprezzatura, as Carter's cat plays it fast and loose with movements fast and slow. Both Woolf's and Rilke's experiments in disruptive gestures are firmly located in the modernist moment. The embodied experience of Herta Müller's fictional world is haunted by the author's past in totalitarian Romania. An embodied narratology that takes seriously both the embodied perspective and the narratological heritage can rethink established categories for narrative analysis as well as reconnect narratology with literary study more generally.

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