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**“R. K. Narayanswami B.A.B.L. Engine Driver”:
Story-Telling and Memory in *The Grandmother’s Tale, and Selected Stories***

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I. Remembering Narayan

The villages laughed with Nambi, they wept with him, they adored the heroes, cursed the villains, groaned when the conspirator had his initial success, and they sent up to the gods a heartfelt prayer for a happy ending. . . . On the last day when the story ended, the whole gathering went into the sanctum and prostrated before the goddess. . . . By the time the next moon peeped over the hillock Nambi was ready with another story. He never repeated the same kind of story or brought in the same set of persons, and the village folk considered Nambi a sort of miracle, quoted his words of wisdom, and lived on the whole in an exalted plane of their own, though their life in all other respects was hard and drab. (“Under the Banyan Tree” *GT* 23)¹

Much like the Nambi of this tale, R. K. Narayan has merited his reputation as a marvelous storyteller. Noted for his laser-beam focus on the closely-imagined Malgudi, he has come to be recognized as “the” Indian novelist, from whose pen many readers expected all the accumulated wisdom of the subcontinent’s abiding concern for transcendence. While such “guru-ization” amused Narayan, it also elicited his quietly sustained argument against procrustean templates by

which the west insisted on reading him as “typically Indian.”² In his essay on “The Indian in America,” as if answering in kind, Narayan poses an interesting and simplistic contrast between the two countries: “In the final analysis,” he writes,

America and India differ basically though it would be wonderful if they could complement each other’s values. Indian philosophy lays stress on austerity and unencumbered, uncomplicated day-to-day living. On the other hand America’s emphasis is on material acquisitions and the limitless pursuit of prosperity. From childhood an Indian is brought up on the notion that austerity and a contented life is good; also a certain other-worldliness is inculcated through the tales a grandmother narrates, in the discourses at the temple hall, and through moral books. The American temperament, on the contrary, is pragmatic. The American has a robust indifference to eternity. (*Story-teller’s World* 30)

The truth in this comparison must be seen as one of degree, an “occidentalizing” in response to the orientalized view in which he has been understood. He is surely not alone in his analysis, however. Psychoanalyst Alan Roland, many of whose patients are Indians living in America, observes:

What my subjects emphasized over and over again are the strong emotional connectedness between Indians, usually experienced on a nonverbal level; a more symbiotic mode of thinking of and being constantly sensitive to the other, with internalized expectations of full reciprocity; a tremendous (from an American’s view) giving and taking or constant mutual indulgence of warmth and concern; and a sense of we-ness and partial merger. This in contrast to the relative lack of closeness, sensitivity, warmth, consideration, intimacy, and emotional exchange they experience in most American relationships. (196-97)

The two quotations distinguish Americans from Indians, but do not make identical observations. The psychoanalyst’s patients, apparently, stress the relative warmth of Indian interactions; Narayan emphasizes the interest in austerity and other-worldliness. However, the important role that Narayan

attributes to the Indian grandmother in the nurturing of her country's imagination suggests, in part, the role he might personally embrace if asked to define his life's work.

While serving a term as a Distinguished Visiting Professor in America, Narayan guest-lectured in a class that was studying his novel, *The Guide*. "One member [of the class]," he recounts, "asked as usual whether I had based my novel on some actual experience or if it was pure fiction. A familiar question, which I generally answer evasively, since I myself do not know." Can this answer be ingenuous? How can a writer not recall an incident from his life, if one of his stories runs parallel to it? When asked whether the protagonist was typical of Indians, Narayan remarks that he "had to repeat here, and later, everywhere that a novel is about an individual living his life in a world imagined by the author, performing a set of actions (up to a limit) contrived by the author. But to take a work of fiction as a sociological study or a social document could be very misleading. My novel *The Guide* was not about the saints or the pseudo-saints of India, but about a particular person" (*Reluctant Guru* 9-10). It is the answer that his grandmother might have offered, and in a surprised tone that she might have used: we are talking about imagining life, here, not analyzing it. When asked some years later by John Lowe whether or not the central figures in *The Guide* were allegorical of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, Narayan responds: "I see what you mean, and I suppose those characters do represent those things. But I didn't think of it at the time I was writing the novel. I am Indian; any Indian writer will be shaped and influenced by the culture that produced him, and thus to some extent will be writing allegorically³. . . . [But] in [*The Guide*] I was concentrating on narration, character, transformation, and transcendence" (183, 185)—a writer at his craft (narration, character), but with the intriguing addition of "transformation" and "transcendence." Not allegory, surely, but clearly more than simple distraction from life's burdens. The purposes for a grandmother's stories

once again come to mind as illustrative of Narayan's possible sense of a successful story—something that will occasion in the hearer or the reader a “transformation.”

John Lowe concludes his brief interview by commenting that Narayan's chosen concentration on these four items—narration, character, transformation, and transcendence—might serve as “a concise description of virtually all of Narayan's fiction” (185). *The Grandmother's Tale and Selected Stories*, coming as it does as the last collection of his short fiction (some of its stories written specifically for the collection and many reprinted from earlier works), demonstrates Lowe's point. These stories reprise a number of the author's signature interests: a persistent ironic wink at the rascality of his characters, or at their charming and salvific naiveté (see, for example, “An Astrologer's Day”); a fascination with money and its hoarding (“Guru,” in which a miser adopts his nephew in order to use him as a tax write-off); the relationship between fact and fiction in his own work (the title story, which clearly warns the reader that “I have managed to keep her own words here and there, but this is mainly a story-writer's version of a hearsay biography of a great-grandmother” [GT 4]); and, of most pertinence to the concerns of this essay, his somewhat perplexing interest in the process of narration.

Why should this be “perplexing?” Simply because, set against the backdrop of the pyrotechnics of other South Asian writers, such as Vikram Chandra or Salman Rushdie, R. K. Narayan tells stories the old-fashioned way, with character self-revelation as central focus. He has said that “readability” is the quality he most admires in writers high on his list of favorites, such as Graham Greene (Lowe 184), and compared to the postmodern techniques of the generation that followed his major work, Narayan's writing is eminently approachable, quickly gobbled up and enjoyed, nourishing without requiring a lot of chewing. His writing rarely, calls attention to itself, and thus seems effortless: the way the story gets told is transparent. It is true, as Suresh

Raval puts it, that Narayan writes “in the genre of comic realism managed by a consummately skillful deployment of irony at both thematic and structural levels,” but his is what we might call a *kind* irony—kind, principally, to his readers. In Raval’s words, it is an irony that “exposes all of its protagonist’s activities and responses to criticism without in the least undermining the reader’s sense of the credibility of the novel’s world and its main character” (Raval 89). We may judge the characters, of course, but we are not left emptied out, as it were, by the needs of the universe we have encountered in the reading. In “A Horse and Two Goats,” for example, Narayan conjures up a humorous encounter between a peasant and a tourist, one speaking only Tamil and the other only English. While one discusses the end of the world, the other speaks of commerce and the purchase of Indian artifacts. What this amounts to, for many critics and readers, is a style of storytelling that is deceptively simple: “the conduct and response one might ordinarily characterize as trite or cliché-ridden possess a freshness of perception and gentle ironic insight for which there are no clearly recognizable models upon which he might be said to be drawing for his narrative” (Raval 89). We see two worlds meet, but they hardly collide; we laugh, but we do not despair. We do not ignore the limiting preoccupations of either character, but we do not feel compelled by the author to turn our backs on either man.

Without the self-referentiality of postmodernism the workmanlike care of Narayan’s realistic narrative techniques may often pass without comment—but he himself makes frequent notes on the topic as he goes along. On one hand, as we have seen, Narayan resists those who transform his stories into complex allegories and his individual characters into types. His essay, “The World of the Story-teller,” recounts the timeless mythic quality of familiar stories from Hindu mythology. While Narayan’s description of them and their narrative technique may be loving (Verma 100), it might be seen as something of a counterpoise to his own stories

and his own narrative technique. Far from the outright didacticism of myths, Narayan protests that he writes “primarily because it is my habit and profession and I enjoy doing it. I’m not out to enlighten the world or improve it. But the academic man views a book only as raw material for a thesis or seminar paper, hunts for hidden meanings, social implications, ‘commitment’ and ‘concerns’ or the ‘Nation’s ethos’” (*Writer’s Nightmare* 200). Those who listen to Hindu myths know what to expect, he writes, familiar, as they are, with the tropes, if not with the individual story itself. “In every [Hindu mythic] story,” Narayan notes,

since goodness triumphs in the end, there is no tragedy in the Greek sense; the curtain never comes down *finally* on corpses strewn about the stage. The sufferings of the meek and the saintly are temporary, even as the triumph of the demon is; everyone knows this. Everything is bound to come out right in the end; if not immediately, at least in a thousand or ten thousand years; if not in this world, at least in other worlds. . . . The tales have such inexhaustible vitality in them that people like to hear them narrated again and again, and no one has ever been known to remark in this country, ‘Stop! I’ve heard that one before.’ (*Story-teller’s World* 5, 7-9)

Though the stories Nambi tells, in our opening quote, share this mythic sense that all will be well, they are not templates that his listeners, or Narayan’s readers, readily recognize and comfortably settle into. Whereas a William Blake might see all the world in a grain of sand, R. K. Narayan insists on really taking a good look at the single grain—and then, on *rare* occasion, transcending it. Narayan acknowledges that his stories share with myths this one quality: “To the story-teller and his audience,” he writes, “the [Hindu] tales are so many chronicles of personalities who inhabited this world at some remote time, and whose lives are worth understanding, and hence form part of human history rather than fiction” (*Story-teller’s World* 5). The same is true of the reader’s experience in encountering the characters in a Narayan story:

they are individuals, and so clearly drawn that we would not be surprised to bump into them on the street.

On the other hand, Narayan's attention is rarely drawn toward eccentrics. On a tour in the Midwest, he makes a note to himself: "On the spot evolved a theory that I started a book on being provoked by an odd and eccentric character. All questions were based on this assumption, and I got plunged more and more in the morass of this hypothesis. . . . [But] I could not maintain my hypothesis too long, finding that my own books would not support the theory" (*Dateless Diary* 53). What seems to interest Narayan is not accurately described, therefore, as a character's eccentricity, but as his/her individuality, what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins would call his or her "inscape," that sets the character apart from all others in human history. Narayan seems to be making this point in a quirky essay on postal workers. The postman, writes Narayan,

is the greatest common factor in humanity. He is the great repository of all men's hopes, fears, and joys. If only a postman could write, what an epic he could write of man's struggles and aspirations. . . . His work is not very much unlike that of a doctor who sees human beings in the raw. . . . The admirable thing about a postman is his unflinching memory. . . . Scores of persons, including such impatient souls as go half-way to meet him, ask him all along the road 'Any letter?' but we never catch him saying 'Your face is familiar, who are you please?' Without a moment's hesitation he picks out the letter for the person or declares there are no letters for him. (*Reluctant Guru* 153-54)

Narayan's great talent, in fact, like that of any memorable realistic writer, is the ability to inhabit the role of this "postman," recognizing individuality in an imagined character and calling him or her by name.

But is this enough? Satyanarain Singh's objects that there is in Narayan's vision an "emphasis on individual redemption without at the same time developing a social conscience" (108). K. D. Verma suggests that the novelist is "aloof, completely shutting off all possible incursions of Western

history or discourse” (4). Narayan himself makes a similar point, telling John Lowe that “I’m not moved by great group forces but by individual characters, not social history” (181). There is the occasional recognition in a Narayan story of a pointedly contemporary social problem, as in “The Edge,” about the government’s enforced sterilization of men, or “Lawley Road,” a humorous consideration of the removal of a colonial statue, leading to complications when history is “revised” to reveal that the statue’s subject was in fact one of the *liberal*-minded colonizers.⁴ Such contemporaneity is rare in the stories; nonetheless, Michel Pousse greatly overstates Narayan’s position when he writes that “[he] was a novelist in revolt against society. Narayan’s revolt is aimed at modern Indian society and at the intrusion of the West into his country. His ideal model remains traditional India” (196). Admittedly, nostalgia informs a good many of the tales, as in the following selection from the story, “The Grandmother’s Tale”:

She just mentioned it as “that village,” which conjures up a familiar pattern: a hundred houses scattered in four or five narrow streets, with pillared verandas and pyols, massive front doors, inner courtyards, situated at the bend of a river or its tributary, mounds of garbage here and there, cattle everywhere, a temple tower looming over it all; the temple hall and corridor serving as a meeting ground for the entire population, and an annual festival attracting a big crowd from nearby hamlets—an occasion when a golden replica of the deity in the inner shrine was carried in a procession with pipes and drums around the village. (5)

The inclusion of the mounds of garbage suggests something other than Pousse’s “ideal model,” and can hardly be described as a revolt against modernity. Agreeing with much of V.S. Naipaul’s reading of Narayan, Geoffrey Kain offers the more balanced observation that Hindu traditionalism is central to these stories, “especially as that traditionalism is challenged by characters who entertain more ‘modern,’ more overtly individualistic values.” Kain continues: “. . .

.interestingly, a number of Narayan's prominent characters work to resist traditional religious and familial duties or expectations (dharma), then inadvertently or (seemingly) fortuitously fall into roles that exemplify the very values or lifestyles they reject. . . . [T]he sacred makes its claim on the profane . . . in such a way as to suggest that these self-absorbed, appetite-directed characters may in fact have been baited, urged unwittingly toward the immanent divine" (101).⁵ But this encounter with the divine comes across as, at best, a hint or invitation.

Narayan is obviously well aware of trends in contemporary fiction that would denigrate even this gentle concession to didacticism, as well as those that suggest that his stories are insufficiently directed to the alleviation of social inequities. Clearly, he has made a number of decisions that shape his narrative techniques and that distinguish him from many other writers of the twentieth century. In "The Problem of the Indian Writer," he puts his writing in an historical context:

Between [the Victorian period] and now we might note a middle period when all that a writer could write about became inescapably political. There came a time when all the nation's energies were directed to the freeing of the country from foreign rule. Under this stress and preoccupation the mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of psychological factors, the crisis in the individual soul and its resolution, and above all the detached observation, which constitute the stuff of growing fiction went into the background. It seemed to be more a time for polemics and tract-writing than for story-telling. (*Story-teller's World* 15)

Since independence in 1947, though, Narayan sees that this compulsion has dissipated. Nation-building is no longer the be-all and end-all for artists. As he sees it, the goals of Indian writers are less driven. "Every writer," he continues, in the same essay, "now hopes to express, through his novels and stories, the way of life of the group of people with whose

psychology and background he is most familiar, and he hopes it will not only appeal to his own circle but also to a larger audience outside.” He has made the personal decision to approach this task through the recounting of individual stories and lives. In his essay, “After the Raj,” he writes that “The authentic comprehensive Indian theme if attempted at all will have to be pieced together laboriously, bit by bit, like a jigsaw puzzle, and even then one cannot claim to have obtained a total or final picture. India is too vast and varied in characteristics, types, outlook and cultural mores” (*Story-Teller’s World* 31). Looking back over his very long career, one can be grateful that he preserved so *many* facets of the “total” picture.

II. Narayan, Remembering

Nambi came out of the temple when everyone had settled and said, “It is the Mother who gives the gifts; and it is She who takes away the gifts. Nambi is a dotard. He speaks when the Mother has anything to say. But what is the use of the jasmine when it has lost its scent? What is the lamp for when all the oil is gone? Goddess be thanked. . . . These are my last words on this earth; and this is my greatest story.” He rose and went into the sanctum. (“Under the Banyan Tree” *GT* 233)

Viewed in retrospect, and taken together with this essay’s opening selection from the same short story, this epitaph from “Under the Banyan Tree” has obvious overtones of Prospero renouncing his magic and ending his long career, or of Yeats in his dotage lamenting the desertion of the “circus animals” of his imagination. If, as we have been suggesting, Narayan situates himself decidedly in the Asian storytelling tradition that seeks to connect people to their collective pasts, we can nonetheless take time, at his career’s end, to imagine his personal process of encountering his many characters and, as it were, realizing how he has been piecing *himself* together.

In his interview with the author, John Lowe asks whether or not the European existentialist movement has had much of an impact on his life, and the author responds: "I don't think there is any successful influence of that type in contemporary Indian literature. That way of thinking has not been very influential in this culture" (184). Yet Narayan's stories often center around moments in his characters' lives that can reasonably be described as transformative and, in this sense, as existential turning points. In a follow-up question, Lowe suggests that several of Narayan's characters are isolated, but the author again resists the suggestion, responding that family generally keeps one from true isolation—except in cities like Bombay, he notes, where "people are cooped up in apartments. In that kind of place you may be prey to alienation and despair, but virtually nobody writes about it" (184). That is surely less true today, but again echoes the suggestion that Narayan would, at least, prefer that this were not so.

One does not associate R. K. Narayan with, alienation and despair, and he seems determined to avoid such emotions in his books—though in the hands of another writer there would certainly have been grist for such a mill. Nonetheless, in his extraordinarily long career he frequently portrays the processes of aging, of memory and of forgetting, as they enter the lives of endless characters. Despite his warnings, therefore, we may be forgiven for imagining the author's own existential condition as he returns to his desk, year after year: "Have I told this one before? Have I painted this part of the picture?"

In the title story of *The Grandmother's Tale, and Selected Stories*, Narayan's stand-in is trying to get the facts right as he transcribes a story from his grandmother. He offers her prompts to jog her memory, but to no apparent effect:

The story-writer asked at this point, "Were they the only ones in that house?" "Yes, must be so," said my grandmother. "What happened to the rest of the family—there must surely

have been other members of the family!" "Why do you ask me? How do I know?" said my grandmother. "I can only tell the story as I heard it. I was not there as you know. This is about my father and mother, who were still apart though living under the same roof. . . ."

I asked the next question, which bothered me as a story-writer: "Did Surma Bai have no children?" "I don't care if she had or had not or where they were, how is it our concern?" "But you say they were living together for fifteen years!" "What a question! How can I answer it? You must ask them. Anyway it is none of our business. My mother mentioned Surma, and only Surma and not a word about anyone else. If you want me to go on with the story you must not interrupt me. I forget where I was, I am only telling you what I know!" She stopped her narration at this point and left in a huff and went off to supervise her daughters-in-law in the kitchen. (GT 24)

If we are to imagine Narayan in the role of the grandmother, as we have been doing in this essay, it is not a stretch to hear in this old lady's protest against the demands of her grandson the writer's similar rejection of the criticisms he heard in his lifetime from those who wished to direct his writing in another direction, towards questions he chose not to address. In the story in question, the grandson will not be easily put off, and after the passage of some time he returns to the story-teller, and tries again:

For nearly a week she ignored me while I followed her about with my notebook. She ignored me until I pleaded, "You must please complete the story. I want to hear it fully. You know why?" "Why?" "Otherwise I will be born a donkey in my next *janma*." "How do you know?" "The other day I attended a Ramayana discourse. A man got up in the middle of the narrative and tried to go out of the assembly but the pundit interrupted himself to announce, 'It's said in the Shastras that anyone who walks out in the middle of a discourse will be a donkey in his next birth,' and the man who was preparing to leave plumped back in his seat when he heard it. And so please. . ." (GT 33)

Not the most compelling logic, perhaps, especially in light

of the fact that a Narayan story also typically ends “in the middle of a discourse.” No aficionado of this writer is surprised that “The Grandmother’s Tale” ends inconclusively, as follows: “My grandmother concluded, ‘That was the end. My husband was a submagistrate at Nagapattinam when we got information that Viswa’s end had come suddenly. I have nothing more to add. Don’t ask questions’” (46). For many writers, and certainly readers, this would be counterintuitive—is there no sense of an ending? But for Narayan, one might say there *is* no ending.

The grandmother’s objections to the story-writer are similar to the process of the story itself. Over time the details have slipped away, but life goes on; one remembers what one can, but is not determined by facts that no longer hold sway in one’s memory. The tale the grandmother tells is about her own mother, Bala, who is abandoned by her husband soon after their marriage. Bala eventually drags her reluctant husband back to their hometown; he had by then been away for thirty years, and she for twenty. No one recognizes them or can confirm her version of the story. Narayan describes their consequent disorientation: “Most of the land marks were gone, also the people. . . . Viswa could not find anyone to answer his questions” (*GT* 35). They decide to move to another village, where Viswa will create himself anew as a gem merchant. In story-telling, as in life, there is always starting over.

Thus, story-telling is not story-writing; the young man’s writing fixes events and details in place, whereas the grandmother’s telling is organic, its details malleable. Narayan frequently remarks that those who read his stories and then ask him detailed questions at interviews have the advantage over the author, who seldom goes back to familiarize himself with what he has written: his life, his memory of the stories, and his re-telling of them move along. In fact, in “The Grandmother’s Tale” the story-writer, years later, literally reincarnates the experience of Bala and Viswa, as he had heard it: “One morning, two years

ago,” he writes, “I had a desire to revisit Number One, Vellala Street, in Purasawalkam, where all of us were born in one particular room.” He continues:

We habitually considered the house as the focal point of the entire family scattered in other districts, visiting it from time to time. My friend Ram [fictionalized in *The Hindu*] was also curious to see the house and the environs as I described it in *My Days*. We drove down to Vellala Street in Purasawalkam, but found no trace of the old house. It was totally demolished, cleared and converted into a vacant plot on which the idea was to build an air-conditioned multistoried⁶ hotel. Among the debris we found the old massive main door lying, with ONE still etched on it. Ram made an offer for it on the spot and immediately transported it to his house, where he has mounted it as a showpiece. (GT 39)

In several of the stories in *The Grandmother's Tale*, Narayan utilizes this trope of returning to a place one once knew, and finding it nearly erased. “Emden,” for example, is an account of the oldest man in town, who is prompted by his diary entry from 51 years before (“Too lenient with S. She deserves to be taught a lesson” [107]) to hunt down “S” and see about that lesson he still means to teach. “Trusting his instinct to guide him. . . but there was no trace of Gokulam Street. . . . He stopped a couple of others to ask. . . and that did not help. No coconut tree anywhere. He was sure that it was somewhere here that he used to come, but everything was changed. All the generations of men and women who could have known Gokulam Street and the coconut tree were dead—new generations around here, totally oblivious of the past. He was a lone survivor” (112). The reader sees that the facts remembered by the storyteller in “The Grandmother's Tale” and by the elderly man in “Emden” are frangible, and finally of less consequence as confirmed events or places, than as occasions for meaning for the teller—in fact, as existential triggers for transformation or transcendence.

Closely related, therefore, to Narayan's interest in the

ephemeral nature of memory is his fascination with piecing together the souvenirs that seem to give meaning to the little semiotic bits we think we recall. This expresses itself in the apparent human need to tell stories that “remind” the teller of connections, real or imagined. In “The Grandmother’s Tale,” for example, the old lady tells her grandson her father’s tale, at least as she remembers it: “Viswanath established himself as a gem expert in Kumbakonam. He acquired a house not far from the river. He sat in a small room in the front portion of his house and kept his wares in a small bureau, four feet high, half glazed.” Then, the storywriter adds a parenthesis that demonstrates how the process of piecing stories together takes shape as a metonymy in his life and memory: “Th[at] heirloom is still with the family,” he writes, and “[w]hen I was young I was given that little bureau for keeping my schoolbooks and odds and ends. I had inscribed in chalk on the narrow top panel of this bureau ‘R.K. Narayanswami B.A.B.L. Engine Driver.’ My full name with all the honors I aspired to. I wonder if one can detect any trace of that announcement now. I have not seen that heirloom for many years” (*GT* 36). Nor, of course, has the reader—but both the reader and Narayan have by now seen the achievement of the honors to which the boy had aspired. Again, the cloudy memory, the vague question about the present condition of the chalk marks of the child, but the steady hold on the line of connection between the pun on “babble” for which the story *writer* has gained fame, and the great-grandfather’s tale that only exists (and changes) in the *telling*. Thus, memory serves as the engine driving the outpouring of tales, and the stories themselves come into being as partial reinscriptions or even misprisions of the earlier chalk marks.

Likewise, in the story “Uncle,” in which a boy, raised by someone who may or may not be his uncle, only gradually hears bits and pieces of rumors of what his real father was like: “The photo was very faded, I could glimpse

only a mustache and little else; the man was in European clothes—if what they said was true, this was my father. . . . Again and again I was prompted to ask the question ‘What am I worth? What about my parents?’ but I rigorously suppressed it. Thus I maintained the delicate fabric of our relationship till the very end. . . .” (*GT* 308, 312). The embroidery that is storytelling demands care, not as a guarantee that one gets the facts right, but lest too careful analysis should unravel its tenuous web of significant strands.

Many writers have been fascinated by this theme, but in Narayan’s case this seems especially to be so. The effects of writing as a device of memory and self-creation dominates “Second Opinion,” for example, which offers an ironic portrait of a boy who lives in the books he reads. Their stories suggest an identity to which he might aspire, much like the B.A.B.L. engine driver, and which he might yet create for himself:

Whatever [the books] might have meant, they all seemed to hold forth the glory of the soul, which made me survey myself top to toe and say, “Sambu, who are you? You are not the creature with a prickly stubble on the chin, scar on the kneecap, with toenail splitting and turning blue. . . you are actually made of finer stuff”. . . . Into this, shattering my vision, would come hard knocks on my door.” (*GT* 131-32)

More comic, “Salt and Sawdust” describes a “collaboration” between a wife and her husband (a weaving supervisor) in the writing of *her* book. The husband’s slight additions are praised by the editors, who encourage him to expand his notes into a full-length book, while her manuscript languishes in their estimation. She had felt great anxiety on the question of whether to write in English or in her native Tamil: on the one hand, she had worried, “my conscience dictates I should write only in my mother tongue”; on the other hand, when her husband agreed with her concerns, she had objected: “Don’t you realize that English will make my novel known all over India if not the whole world?”

Her husband, however, had seen this contentious language question as a non-issue: "He began to feel," writes Narayan (referring as much to himself, one suspects, as to the husband in this story), "that silence would be the safest course, fearing, as in a law court, any word he uttered might be used against him" ("Salt and Sawdust" 75). She ultimately solves the dilemma by writing a little in both languages, but is essentially dependent upon the one in which an idea presents itself in her act of composition. Despite the wife's trendy literary worries, what finally gets published is a book of recipes—and these, principally supplied by the husband. Read in the context of his other storytelling-related tales, this one is a joking reminder that the written word is no more (or less) substantial, at the end of the day, than the spoken story. Both pass through vagaries of memory and composition; both present themselves as a compromise between intentions and circumstances.

The commentary on narration that Narayan gradually accumulated in his various novels, short stories, and essays, suggests a quiet humility about the relative importance of any one's contributions to the world of letters, a commentary nicely summarized by two final stories from the novelist's own life. They are both recorded during a trip he made to the United States. The first:

At twelve p.m., Henry took me along to meet Miss . . . , someone or other, name has gone out of my mind, Chairman of the English Department. . . Lunched with her and three others. . . As usual with the English department anywhere, they were cautious and on the defensive. . . . "Are your books translated?" "Into what?" "English?" "I write in English." This brought the conversation on to the edge of the precipice. (*Dateless Diary* 65-66)

The story nicely contextualizes the valorization of the visiting Indian "guru," less known for his work than for his image, and thus the victim of the story told of him, rather than by him. "English studies," he concludes, "work on the basis that a dead author is a good author. He is passive and

still while you explain and analyse him in the classroom; having a living author on hand may be like having a live lobster on your plate.” Finally, in one of the great closing lines of a book, Narayan’s conclusion to *My Dateless Diary*: “After lunch we part, G[reta] G[arbo] saying, ‘How I wish we could stop time from moving and always taking us on to a moment of parting! Good-bye’” (203). Apparently, in spite of the more famous line by which she has been “storied” ever since, Ms. Garbo did *not* want to be alone. Coming at the end of one of Narayan’s books, it offers a possible answer to the oft-posed question of why he, or any writer, sits down to tell a tale.

Notes

1. *GT* will be listed throughout the text to refer to *The Grandmother’s Tale, and Selected Stories*.

2. As recounted in *Reluctant Guru* and *Dateless Diary*, on his trips to the United States he is orientalized by Americans—their fascination with the caste system, with Indians as gurus, with the Indian joint-family, etc.—and he remarks that “It is very interesting to view myself as a specimen of this system” (73). But this brahmin, in turns, objectifies Chicagoans: “On Thanksgiving 70 (or 700) million turkeys are consumed in the state—on this day the general paralysis of public life is thorough—no letters delivered at all! No shop, no bank, nothing doing, ‘no, nothing’ (to quote a Los Angeles down-town hotel clerk). This is a ‘Legal’ holiday, which means it is a complete one. Friday, that’s tomorrow is going to be a holiday without much legal mention, I’m sure, because it’s wedged in between Saturday and today” (*Dateless Diary* 78).

3. In the collection under discussion in this essay, “The Blind Dog” is perhaps the most clearly allegorical: “In a few days the dog learned to discipline his instinct and impulse. He ceased to take notice of other dogs, even if they came up and growled at his side. He lost his own orbit of movement and contact with his fellow creatures” (*GT* 121). Later, when freed, he nonetheless returns. “‘Death alone can help that dog,’ cried the ribbon seller, looking after it with a sigh. ‘What can we do with a creature who returns to his doom with such a free heart?’” (124).

4. His essays, of course, deal with many such contemporary concerns. Writing in 1974, for example, Narayan remarks that “the time has come for us to consider seriously the question of a Bharat brand of English. So far English has had a comparatively confined existence in our country chiefly in the halls of learning, justice, or administration. Now the time is ripe for it to come to the dusty street, market place, and under the banyan tree. English must adopt the complexion of our life and assimilate its idiom. . . . Bharat-English will respect the rule of law and maintain the dignity of grammar, but still have a Swadeshi stamp about it unmistakably, like the Madras handloom check shirt or the Thirupathi doll” (*Reluctant Guru* 57).

5. Commenting on *The Financial Expert*, Suresh Raval notes that “Narayan has no interest in this novel, as in most of his other novels, in probing the complexities of the self and its relations to the community. On that score, he remains firmly entrenched in Indian values, and confines his literary attention to the surface of everyday individual and social existence. And he does this with a measure of detachment and indulgence. Consequently, the crises that occur in this novel, as in his other novels, never develop into tragic moments. Nor are the melodramatic elements of a given crisis treated in a manner antithetical to their overall light-hearted but authentic portrayal of individual and social life. Narayan’s detachment as a writer stems from his immersion in the details of everyday life in the context of his story and its main characters. And this accounts for his avoidance of all obtrusive, larger philosophical or social perspectives by which a writer might express or dramatize a commitment. This attitude produces the ‘realism’ of Narayan’s art, creating the illusion that what Narayan has portrayed has indeed an authentic objective counterpart in Indian social reality” (97-98).

6. Pun intended.

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