Virtual Narration as Allegory of Immersion

Virtual narration, as I propose to define the term, is a way of evoking events that resists the expectation of reality inherent to language in general and to narrative discourse in particular. Philosophy may periodically relativize, destabilize, and even reject the notion of reality, but narrative and expository language know little of these doubts: even in an atmosphere of radical antirealism, language remains firmly rooted in truth and reality. The unmarked case of modality is the indicative, and to narrate in the indicative is to present events as true fact. The repertory of semantic categories at the disposal of narrators—or essayists, for that matter—often forces the writer to a firmer commitment to facts than caution would call for. It is through tacked-on modal markers that language defactualizes, relativizes, or switches the reference world from the speaker’s reality toward a nonactual possible world. In the type of narration I call real, the narrator presents propositions as true, and the audience imagines the facts (states or events) represented by these propositions. As long as the narrator uses the indicative mode, the reference world is identified as the world in which this narrator is located. The real mode of narration is found in both fiction and nonfiction and is independent of the truth value of the discourse: even the false can be told as true fact; otherwise lies would never deceive and errors never mislead.

But the real mode is not the only way to evoke events to the imagination. With appropriate markers of unreality, the reference of sentences can be diverted to the realm of the counterfactual, hypothetical, or merely possible, or to one of the numerous domains of mental life: dreams, beliefs, desires, goals, and commitments. Events may even be called to the imagination as nonexistent. The processing of a negative sentence—for instance, “Mary did not kill her husband”—involves imagining the world in which Mary actually kills her husband. In the narrative mode I call virtual, the expectation of reality is loosened by an effect that involves the optical interpretation of virtuality. States and events are evoked indirectly, as they are captured in a reflecting device that exists as a material object in the textual world. This reflecting device could be a mirror, story-within-the-story, photograph, movie, or television show. By describing the material support of the representation—a support that functions as primary discourse referent—through such rhetorical devices as ekphrasis, paraphrase, or summary, the speaker conjures images of the reflected world. When these images form a story, the speaker indirectly produces a narration, or the effect of one, even though his discourse is focused on something other than the narrated events. To the extent that the reader of the virtual narration is able to reconstrue these events, virtual narration becomes “as good as” real narration while remaining pragmatically distinct. This phenomenon activates another lexical meaning of the term virtual: “for all practical purposes” (as in “virtual dictator”).

As an example of virtual narration, consider this description of an engraving titled The Battle of Reichenfels in Alain Robbe-Grillet’s novel In the Labyrinth:

The picture, in its varnished wood frame, represents a tavern scene. It is a nineteenth century etching, or a good reproduction of one. A large number of people fill the room, a crowd of drinkers sitting or standing, and, on the far left, the bartender standing on a slightly raised platform behind the bar. (150)
As the picture is being read, however, a scene emerges in greater and greater detail; the signs of “pictoriality” gradually disappear, and the scene acquires a life of its own that increases its vividness. Though the following passage still describes the same picture, it does so in a mode that can pass as real:

The soldier, his eyes wide open, continues to stare into the half-darkness a few yards in front of him, where the child is standing, also motionless and stiff, his arms at his side. But it is as if the soldier did not see the child—or anything else. He looks as if he has fallen asleep from exhaustion, his eyes wide open. (153)

The transition from virtual to real narration is not a return to the primary level of reality, where the picture exists as object, but rather a recentering into the world of the picture. Freed from its flat and static nature, this world now becomes animated, sustains narrative action, and takes over as textual actual world. We know that we have left the primary textual world for good and that the recentering is complete when we read, “It is the child who speaks first. He says: ‘Are you asleep?’” (ibid.).

As a technique of representation, virtual narration is rarely maintained for more than a few paragraphs. A case in point is Julio Cortázar’s very short (three-page) story “Continuity of Parks.” This mind-bending text has been described by Brian McHale as a “strange loop, or metalepsis” (Postmodernist Fiction, 119–20; the term strange loop is borrowed from Douglas Hofstadter’s Gödel, Escher, Bach, and metalepsis from Gérard Genette). As a strange loop, the story presents the literary equivalent of the Escher lithograph Print Gallery, in which a spectator contemplates a painting of a town that loops back upon the gallery and includes the spectator:

A man reads a novel in which a killer, approaching through a park, enters a house in order to murder his lover’s husband—the man reading the novel! The “continuity” in this text is the paradoxical continuity between the nested narrative and the primary narrative, violating and thus foregrounding the hierarchy of ontological levels. (McHale, Postmodernist Fiction, 120)

What McHale does not discuss is the technique through which the hierarchy is violated. At the beginning of the story we are told that the character on the primary level—let us call him “the man (or reader) in the armchair”—has been reading a novel for a few days and has permitted himself “a slowly growing interest in the plot, in the characterization” (“Continuity,” 63). At this point the book is still an opaque object, described by means of literary metalanguage (“novel”). The real reader does not see the world of the novel until a virtual narration begins. The development of this narration parallels the gradual estrangement of the reader-character from his material surroundings:

The novel spread its glamour over him almost all at once. He tasted the almost perverse pleasure of disengaging himself line by line from the things around him. . . . Word by word, licked up by the sordid dilemma of the hero and heroine, letting himself be absorbed to the point where the images settled down and took on color and movement, he was witness to the final encounter in the mountain cabin. (ibid.)

“He was witness”: the man is now recentered into the fictional world; but we real readers have
access to this world only through its reflection in the man’s consciousness. The virtual narration is less the description of a text than the description of an act of reading.

Despite his absorption in the plot, the man remains appreciative of the narrative art; the fictional world is experienced as both a reality and a fabrication:

A lustful, panting dialogue raced down through the pages like a rivulet of snakes, and one felt as if it had all been decided from eternity. Even to those caresses which writhed about the lover’s body, as though wishing to keep him there, to dissuade him from it; they sketched abominably the frame of that other body it was necessary to destroy.

Nothing had been forgotten: alibis, unforeseen hazard, possible mistakes. It was beginning to get dark. (64)

As a fabrication, the fictional world is perfectly planned: “Nothing has been forgotten.” Yet as a reality it is full of “unforeseen hazards.” The virtual mode of narration emphasizes this dual perspective through its unique ability to filter the reflected world through the reflecting medium. In the last paragraph, however, the narration reverts to the real mode, and the reader-character loses sight of the text as textuality. The screen of his mind is now entirely occupied by the characters and their actions:

Not looking at one another now, rigidly fixed upon the task which awaited them, they separated at the cabin door. She was to follow the trail to the north. On the path leading in the opposite direction, he turned for a moment to watch her running, her hair loosened and flying. (65)

As the future murderer enters an estate and sees a man in an armchair, the man reading the novel has become so deeply absorbed in his reading that the world of the novel becomes the only reality: the two-level ontology of Cortázar’s story has collapsed into a single level. This collapse becomes evident when the last sentence ends the story rather abruptly:

The door of the salon, and then, the knife in hand, the light from the great windows, the high back of an armchair covered in green velvet, the head of the man reading the novel. (ibid.)

Why isn’t the murder narrated? Because the reflecting object is the consciousness of the man in the armchair, and consciousness is terminated by death. Virtual realities, be they text-created or computer-generated, are normally safe environments for the experiencer, but the parable of “Continuity of Parks” suggests that when they are lived too fully they are no longer protected from death. For those who cannot breathe under water, total immersion leads to a fatal deprivation of oxygen.

In Cortázar’s story, immersion comes easily to the fictional reader. When he opens the book, he has already read most of the text, he is familiar with the fictional world, and he nears the climax in the action. If I can judge by my own experience, it takes much more time to read the first fifty than the last fifty pages of a traditional narrative, because during those first fifty pages the reader must construct characters, setting, and motivations, while in the last fifty pages she can harvest the fruit of this labor. Once the fictional world is in place, it seems to evolve by itself. For an account of the struggle that precedes immersion, let us turn to Italo Calvino’s If on
There cannot be any better way to introduce this work than to quote a virtual narration that constitutes a *mise-en-abyme* (miniature replica) of the whole plot. Toward the end of the novel one of the characters, the writer Silas Flannery, describes a literary project:

I have had the idea of writing a novel composed only of beginnings of novels. The protagonist could be a Reader who is continually interrupted. The Reader buys the new novel A by the author Z. But it is a defective copy, he can’t go beyond the beginning. . . He returns to the bookstore to have the volume exchanged. I could write it all in the second person: you, Reader. . . . (198)

The same scenario is repeated throughout the novel, generating a tale of frustrated immersion: as soon as a fictional world begins to solidify around the reader, he is expelled from it and must start all over again with a new book.

In the first of these embedded novels, whose title is the same as that of the main book, the disorientation of the reader and his efforts to find his way in a strange world are reflected within the fictional world itself through a virtual narration that retraces the formation of images in the mind of the reader. Because its operations are foregrounded, the reading mind is objectified within the text as a visible reflecting surface. We see not only what it reflects but also the active process by which it captures textual input and translates it into a representation.

In contrast to the situation in Cortázar’s story, the reader is not merely a character in the primary fictional world, reading a book about a secondary reality. Rather, he is a “you” involving what David Herman calls a “double deixis” (“Textual You and Double Deixis”). On one hand, this “you” refers to a character in the main plot reading the book (he will turn out to be male and have a love affair with a female reader, Ludmilla); but on the other hand, the deixis extends to the real reader outside the fictional world. You—and I—are made witnesses of the mental operation through which we form the mental representation of a fictional world. We get to know this world, as we are told how to construct it:

The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter. . . . All these signs converge to inform us that this is a little provincial station, where anyone is immediately noticed. Stations are all alike; it doesn’t matter if the lights cannot illuminate beyond their blurred halo, all of this is a setting you know by heart. (10–11)

The process of world construction involves the activation of familiar frames of knowledge and the import of real-world experience. Despite the text’s reluctance to yield information, the reader should be able to form a representation of the setting because “stations are all alike,” and this is a typical station. But the text does its best to frustrate the process: “The lights of the station and the sentences you are reading seem to have the job of dissolving more than of indicating the things that surface from a veil of darkness and fog” (11). Ironically, by tracing step by step the emergence of the fictional world in the mind of the reader, the text prevents this emergence. The fictional world remains partially hidden behind the activity that constructs it.

Up to this point the virtual narration could be read as the representation of the act of reading a novel from a point of view external to the world of this novel, as was the case in the Cortázar story. The third-person narrator of “Continuity of Parks” is located in the same world as the man
in the armchair—namely, the primary level of reality within the global fictional universe—and he represents the mind of the reader by making use of narratorial omniscience. If the “you” of Calvino’s text designates the actual reader, then the implied “I” who describes the text as text should normally refer to the author of the novel. On the other hand, if the “you” is read as a character you, the “I” should be read as referring to a narrator individuated as author-persona. Communication presupposes that sender and receiver be members of the same world. But as an imaginative construct, Calvino’s text is free to challenge the ontological basis of communication. The speaker is neither the author nor an author-character but the protagonist of the novel: “I have landed in this station tonight for the first time in my life. . . . I am the man who comes and goes between the bar and the telephone booth. Or, rather, this man is called I and you know nothing about him” (11). The description of the reflection of the fictional world in the reader’s mind thus originates in the fictional world itself. The narrator’s ability to read the reader’s mind creates an ontological paradox, not so much because it transgresses ontological boundaries—after all, authors have access to the minds of their characters—but because it transgresses them in the wrong direction: characters are not supposed to be aware of readers. If the real world is level 0 on the narrative stack and the primary fictional world level 1, then we have a narrator at level 1 who describes the reflection of the world of level 1 in the mind of a member of level 0.¹ In Cortázar’s story, by contrast, level 0 is not involved. A narrator on level 1 describes the mind of a reader on level 1, which reflects a fictional world of level 2.²

As the text progresses, the passages of virtual narration that present the narrator and the fictional world as reconstructed by the reader (“something must have gone wrong for me” [13]) become sparser, until they are totally displaced by real narration (“I walk along the platform” [24]). This should come as no surprise: as the text yields more information about the setting and characters, whether in the real or the virtual mode, the fictional world becomes less puzzling and the characters better profiled. Finally at home in the fictional world, the reader can follow the action without asking new questions with every new sentence. The fog has been lifted, immersion is complete, reading from now on will become easy, but the challenge may be over. For, as Ludmilla, Calvino’s Dream Reader, states in the main plot:

Reading is going toward something that is about to be, and no one yet knows what it will be. The book I would like to read now is a novel in which you sense the story arriving like still-vague thunder. (72)
If the first effect is fog, I’m afraid the moment the fog lifts my pleasure in reading will be lost, too. (30)

Thanks to the defect occurring in the material copy of all the embedded novels, however, the pleasure of the story arriving never yields to the disappointment of the story arrived.

In both Cortázar’s and Calvino’s texts, virtual narration functions as a distancing device that emphasizes the textual nature of the represented reality. It locates the reader on a lower level than the world focused upon, thus preventing recentering into this world. This anti-illusionist, anti-immersive interpretation of virtual narration is justified as long as the mode is maintained. But as we have seen, the device hardly ever dominates a text from beginning to end. Through its very instability, virtual narration subverts its own self-referentiality. The tendency to revert to regular narration is so strong that the reader usually fails to notice the transition to the real mode. We can no more observe the stages of our own immersion than we can watch ourselves falling asleep. It is only retrospectively, like a person who awakens from a dream, that the reader
realizes that the virtual image has come to be experienced as primary reality. Immersion cannot be reflected upon from within immersion—this would amount to destroying it—but it can be forcefully enacted by the text from a state of distanced contemplation. In this enactment, virtual narration functions as launching pad, not as destination. Its fate is to fade into real narration, so that immersion can be lived as well as allegorized.

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1 Actually, since If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler is an embedded novel within the book by the same name, we can say that a narrator of level 2, skipping one level, describes the contents of a mind of level 0.

2 If the referent of you is interpreted as a reader-character, the paradox occurs one level up: a narrator of level 2 records the mental operations of a reader-character of level 1.

References