The Transparent Peasant: On the Narrative Voice in John Berger's *Into Their Labours* Trilogy

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Abstract John Berger's *Into Their Labours* (1992) was written "in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called 'backward,' whether they live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis" (xxix). This paper examines the semantics of such a literary strategy by analysing, first, the narrative voice and, second, narrative techniques of embedding and metalepsis in order to argue that Berger's approach to the "backward" bestows a false narrative coherence on a much more complex and intrinsically unrepresentable experience of (French) peasantry. Two key notions to help understand my argument are betweenness and subaltern. The former stands for the misunderstood boundary between the narrator of the trilogy and his protagonist(s). The latter refers to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous thesis on the impossibility and/or limitation of representing the marginalised and disempowered group of people, the "backward" in Berger's sense.
Key words Berger; narrative theory; narrative techniques; post-colonialism; Spivak

In his introduction to *Into Their Labours* trilogy (1982), John Berger remarked that it had been written "in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called 'backward,' whether they live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis" (xxix). But what does Berger mean by the phrase "in a spirit of solidarity with the 'backward'"? How does it reflect the way of story-telling? And, finally, what implications for stories, characters ("the backward") and the author himself does a particular way of storytelling have? These are the three main questions I want to discuss in the following paper using one particular story from *Into Their Labours* trilogy (from *Once in Europa*), "Boris Is Buying Horses," as my prime example.

In order to examine the storytelling, I will begin with a narrative (close-reading) analysis. Arguably, the most important narrative category in the process of storytelling

is the narrative instance.[1] "Boris Is Buying Horses" is told by a narrator who openly acknowledges his presence in the story. He is a writer ("my books" (Berger 213)) and a horse dealer ("In the spring I had to deliver a third horse to him" (Berger 221)). Moreover, at the beginning we learn that he is now writing/creating a life story of his friend, Boris ("Sometimes to refute a single sentence it is necessary to tell a life story (Berger 213) and "[Boris says,] 'Now you are writing the story of my life'" (Berger 216)).

Such a narrative situation bears an important implication for the mode of storytelling. Firstly, like Watson telling a story of Holmes' adventures, the nameless narrator tells a story of eponymous Boris. He takes part in the action, but mainly as a narrator—a witness, archivist, or memoirist. And as such Gerard Genette would call him a homodiegetic narrator located extra- and intradiegetically (Genette 1980 227-252). The first term has to do with the narrator's presence in the story he tells whereas the last two with the narrative levels which I will discuss in due time.

Now let me analyse the homodiegetic narrator to a greater extent. As I have noted, he seems an eyewitness or biographer; he is well acquainted with the protagonist and has predominantly first-hand knowledge concerning, for example, his childhood, family background, failed marriage, or the incidents of his being teased and mocked by school children (Berger 214). In several cases the narrator indicates an additional source of narrative information by attributing it to other characters ("All this was observed by the neighbours" (219), "One of the young men looked out through the window and saw their car parked opposite" (217)) or Boris himself ("[Boris says,] 'Now you are writing the story of my life'" (216)). Furthermore, that Boris functions as a story source is also indicated by a frequent adapting of his perspective when reporting the story.[2] In consequence, a considerable number of passages are focalised through Boris: "He believed that the unsaid favoured him. And yet, despite himself, he dreamed of being understood" (215), "Before he saw her, he was telling himself that, after all, he had only lost half his sheep" (234), "Boris decided to remain in the mountains" (234).

These textual phenomena seem to point out a sort of faithfulness and realism on the part of the narrator ("I say nothing. I go on writing" (216)). There are, however, other textual phenomena that shed a different light on the narrator of "Boris Is Buying Horses." Consider six following passages:

1. The young in the village nicknamed her the Goose—*for reasons that are not part of this story*. (213)
2. The month of August was the month of Boris's triumph. *Or is glory a better term?* (225)

3. … Marc, *who*, with his pipe and blue overalls, *is the sceptic of the Republican Lyre*, the perennial instructor about the idiocy of the world. (226)
4. The trees form a copse *which I would be able to see now* from the window, if it were not night. (242)
5. Once again she laughed, this time quietly. *Later he was to recall* this first morning that he found himself in the kitchen … (219)
6. Every time he visited her, he brought her a present; the lamb was only the first. (219)

The passages above display the narrator's considerable power over his narration. (1) shows him as the ultimate material gatherer, the one who decides what is included in or excluded from the story; and also the one who has a broad knowledge of the events as prolepsis in (5) and frequency figure in (6) demonstrate. (2) exemplifies the narrator's inability to decide for a more appropriate name for Boris's business success (linguistic limitations). These textual phenomena illustrate another side of the same coin (the narrator). This side clearly indicates that he is not only a faithful storyteller, but also a creator who feels free to go against famous Henry James's rule of a narrator's meekly telling the story, staying in the shadows. No; the narrator in "Boris Is Buying Horses" does not hesitate to enter the stage of his storytelling as the main character, backgrounding Boris. (3) and (4) are exceptionally good cases in point. Both have to do with the abovementioned level inconsistencies. I have noted that the homodiegetic narrator is located variously extra- or intradiegetically. This level uncertainty lies in the fact that Boris's life story is a narrative told "between the moments of action" and as such called an embedded narrative (see Keen 111, see Genette 1980 217). In other words, "Boris Is Buying Horses" consists of two levels, "the now" and "the then" divided by approximately a twenty-year gap. "The now" level is marked by an opening ("Now I come to the sentence that I want to refute" (Berger 213)) and a closing ("So I have told the story" (Berger 243)) whereas "the then" is the embedded narrative—the story of Boris.[3] However, the level construction is not always sustained, as (3) and (4) have illustrated; (3) explains Marc's characteristic behaviour and (4) serves to acknowledge the narrator's immediate situation. Narratively speaking, in (3) the narrator located at an intradiegetic level (within "the then") breaks the level and gives additional information on one character as an extradiegetic narrator ("the now"). The tense also changes—from past to present. There are several instances of the phenomenon, called metalepsis, on pages 215, 225, 226, 232, 242 of my edition of *Once in Europa*. Again they all attract attention to the narrator and his narrative mediation (Genette 1980 234-237; see Nelles 350).

To sum up, at the beginning of the story, the narrator says, "Sometimes to refute

a single sentence it is necessary to tell a life story" (Berger 213). A few lines down on the same page we learn that this single sentence to be refuted is "Boris died" (Berger 213). The narrator thus suggests that Boris is going to be the subject of the story. Such an assumption complies with a general, macro-strategy of John Berger[4] who, as I have quoted at the outset of my paper, has written his trilogy "in a spirit of solidarity with the so-called 'backward'" (Berger xxix). However, my conclusions seem to question John Berger's idea for tree reasons.

Firstly, the narrative techniques of, say, the homodiegetic narrator, metalepsis and embedded narrative in "Boris Is Buying Horses" not only characterise the medium (literature) but also indicate the ongoing process of aestheticisation (or, as some say, more tellingly perhaps, falsification). Therefore, being self-reflexive, the narrative devices "conspicuously foreground an act of narrative," says Jeffrey Williams (100). As a result, the referential function and the story's contents (the life and death of Boris) become backgrounded, what leads to a conclusion that in the literary text processing and codification, narrative devices can overshadow the story contents and instead of subjectification of the protagonist, we deal with his objectification. This brings to mind a (post-)imperialist, (post-)colonialist argument that "in the case of western knowledge produced about the non-western world ["the backward" in Berger's case] the object of thought disappears under the weight of western representation" (Morton 41).

Take Boris; not only objectified, he is also seen as a mute (or illiterate to some extent) for whom the narrator must give voice.[5] Consequently, the character exemplifies a general strategy in the entire trilogy, where John Berger aims to address the experience of "the backward," say, by giving names to them, to villages they live in, to cafes they drink beer in, or to valleys they breed their sheep in. But, specifically speaking, who is the narrator of "Boris Is Buying Horses"? In a way he belongs to the community he describes, he is a horse dealer. On the other hand, he is not a peasant—he is a writer with enough time on his hands to create fiction ("my books" (Berger 213)). In other words, the narrator occupies the position of betweenness (see Spivak 284-285) or Derrida's *antre*, a privileged position predicated on the questionable grounds of his education, eloquence and culture. In his book on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stephen Morton makes reference to Spivak's work on Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present*, and states that in the western Enlightenment tradition, lack of education and culture has resulted in inferiority and led to a creation of an environment regulated by (intellectual) power. [6] As a result, in the story we deal with a "colonising" and "the colonised" (or the subaltern in Antonio Gramsci's and Spivak's sense[7]).

Secondly, from the position of betweenness, the narrator attempts to represent

(speak for) the peasant community via literary re-presentation under the assumption that "the small peasant proprietors 'cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must appear simultaneously as their master, as an authority over them …'" (Marx quoted in Spivak 276-277). Such an authority and betweenness presuppose transparency (Spivak 275).[8] To put more simply, the narrator in "Boris Is Buying Horses" at first glance effaces his role of the narrator—"I say nothing. I go on writing" (Berger 216)—to be a transparent, simple medium through which Boris communicates his experience. But one does not have to say anything to speak, does one?[9] Literature is never transparent, as Berger seems to hope.[10]

Last but not least, written in "a spirit of solidarity with the 'backward,'" the trilogy is in fact detrimental to "the backward." First, the term is an oversimplification negatively influencing the real community the narrator attempts to re-present. "The backward" is thus a Derridian catachresis, a term with "an abusive effect on those people, whose lives and experiences are named and defined by such master words" (Morton 35). Further, Stephen Morton comments that for Spivak such an instance of catachresis bestows a "coherent political identity" which in fact "is always already an effect of the dominant discourse that represents" (Morton 35) those who "live in villages or have been forced to emigrate to a metropolis" (Berger xxix).

Therefore, John Berger falls prey to one of the fundamental arguments of Marxism and post-colonialism—"worlding" which is "the assumption that when the colonizers come to a world, they encounter it as uninscribed earth upon which they write their inscriptions" (Spivak 1990 129; Morton 18). *Into Their Labours* exemplifies how "the benevolent, radical western intellectual can paradoxically silence the subaltern by claiming to represent and speak for their experience …" (Morton 56). So instead of "shatter[ing] an opaque part of the ruling ideology" (Berger 2003 368), Berger's trilogy sustains it.

Notes

1. Gerard Genette explains that a narrator is the subject who "carries out or submits to the action," who recounts and/or participates, however passively, "in the narrating activity" (1980 213).

2. The phenomenon of adapting a character's perspective in telling a story is called focalisation, defined by Mieke Bal as "the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen,' perceived" (142). In other words, Genette clarifies, "the focus [of the narration] coincides with a character, who then becomes the fictive 'subject' of all perceptions, including those that concern himself as object" (Genette 1990 74).

3. Such a strategy of opening and closing the frames exemplifies several narrative topoi with which the story complies. One of them is the topos of embedded narrative, succinctly and comprehensively

discussed by Jeffrey Williams in *Theory and the Novel*. Firstly, as I have just noticed above, there is a narrative scene that sets the time and space of embedded story separate from the embedding story ("the now" and "the then" above). Secondly, we have narrative circle defined by Williams as characters whose "primary action is the delivery and/or reception of narrative" (108). In the case of Berger's story, indicates its main narrative source—the narrator—present in the story at all times; either as merely the narrator, "I say nothing. I go on writing" (Berger 216), or as both the narrator and a character, "In the spring I had to deliver a third horse to him" (Berger 221). The third feature of the narrative embedding is narrative cause also explicitly acknowledged by the narrator, "Sometimes to refute a single sentence it is necessary to tell a life story" (Berger 213). And Boris' life story is what seems to be needed to refute his death. In other words, the narrator proves that Boris in a sense did not die since he lives in his life story. This leads to the last, fourth, feature, narrative adverts, characterised as "explicit depictions of narrative-to-be-told and of the narrative desire of the narrative circle" (Williams 108). In "Boris Is Buying Horses" the role of adverts is played by passages such as "Sometimes to refute a single sentence it is necessary to tell a life story" (Berger 213).

4. In "Speech on Accepting the Booker Prize for Fiction" delivered on 23 November 1972, John Berger mentions his new project "about the migrant workers of Europe" (2003 253-254). *Into Their Labours* trilogy is a part of the project. In it, he wishes that "some of the voices of the eleven million migrant workers in Europe and the forty or so million that are their families, mostly left behind in towns and villages but dependent on the wages of the absent workers … speak through and on the pages of this book" (2003 254).

5. See footnote no. 4

6. "In *The Critique of Judgment,* Kant argues that it is primarily cultivated and educated men who can make judgments about taste and sublimity. For Spivak, this moment in Kant's argument is particularly revealing because it raises questions about those groups and societies who *do not* have access to the culture that Kant is describing. For if the moral subject needed culture to define *his* cognitive limitations in the face of the infinite structure of the sublime, what happens to those subjects who do not have access to Kant's understanding of morality or culture?" (Morton 115).

7. Subaltern encompasses "a range of different subject positions which are not predefined by dominant political discourses" (Morton 45). Originally Antonio Gramsci's term, it denoted "the unorganised groups of rural peasants based in Southern Italy, who had no social or political consciousness as a group, and were therefore susceptible to the ruling ideas, culture and leadership of the state" (Morton 48). Subsequently, the denotation has extended to define "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society" and, finally, a community or society without any coherent political and cultural identity (Morton 49).

8. "Two senses of representation are being run together: representation as "speaking for," as in politics, and representation as "re-presentation," as in art or philosophy. Since theory is also only "action," the theoretician does not represent (speak for) the oppressed group. Indeed, the subject is

not seen as representative consciousness (one re-presenting reality adequately). These two senses of representation—within state formation and the law, on the one hand, and in subject-prediction, on the other—are related but irreducibly discontinuous. … These immense problems are buried in the differences between the "same" words: consciousness and conscience (both *conscience* in French), representation and re-presentation. The critique of ideological subject-constitution within state formations and systems of political economy can now be effaced, as can the active theoretical practice of the "transformation of consciousness." The banality of leftist intellectuals' lists of self-knowing, politically canny subalterns stands revealed; representing them, the intellectuals represent themselves as transparent." (Spivak 275).

My reading of false transparency in Berger is reflected in his essay "The Storyteller" where he repeatedly uses the phrase of the village's continual "portrait of itself" (Berger 2003 368, 369).

9. "… for in the constitution of disempowered groups as coherent political subjects, the process of (aesthetic) representation is subordinated to the voice of the political proxy who speaks on their behalf. As a consequence of this conflation, the aesthetic portrait—symbolically representing disempowered people as coherent political subjects—is often taken as a transparent expression of their political desire and interests" (Morton 58).

10. In his essay "The Storyteller," John Berger writes that "the act of writing is *nothing* except the act of approaching the experience written about" (2003 366; my italics).

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