Literature as Virtual Reality

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"OPEN SESAME"

For me the opening sentences of literary works have special force. They are "Open Sesames" unlocking the door to that particular work's fictive realm. All it takes is a few words, and I become a believer, a seer. I become the fascinated witness of a new virtual reality. More accurately, I become a disembodied observer within that reality. The opening words instantly transport me into a new world. All the words that come after in each work do no more than give me further information about a realm I have already entered. The words are radically inaugural. They are the creation, in each case, of a new, alternative universe. I cite a few out of admiration for their generative power. I put them down pell-mell, in deliberate randomness, as they come to mind. This disorder stresses their heterogeneity. They are stored, so to speak, in separate partitions within that strange organic hard-drive, my memory. I shall have something to say about each, either now or later:

> At the beginning of July, during an extremely hot spell,
> towards evening, a young man left the closet he rented
> from tenants in S-----y Lane, walked out to the street, and
> slowly, as if indecisively, headed for the K-----n Bridge.
> [Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*]

> Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having

done anything truly wrong, he was arrested.
[Franz Kafka, *The Trial*]

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of the Forbidden Tree, whose mortal tast
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe . . .
(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*)

Peach tree soft and tender,
how your blossoms glow!
The bride is going to her home,
she well befits this house.
(Chinese *Classic of Poetry*, VI,"Peach Tree Soft and Tender")

Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill toward her, Lena thinks, "I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece."
[William Faulkner, *Light in August*]

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs . . .
(W. B. Yeats, "Leda and the Swan")

I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man. I am an unattractive man.
I believe my liver is diseased.
[Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*]

A number of features characterize these inaugural moments. They tend to be abrupt or irruptive. Each is a sudden intrusion on the reader, wherever he or she happens to be when the book is opened. They command attention. Having read these opening words, the reader wants to go on reading. The

words whisk the reader into a new place. He or she is enchanted in an instant and wants to explore this brave new world further. This can only be done by reading further, and so the reader is "hooked."

These opening moments tend, moreover, in one way or another to be violent. This is so not only in the way they suddenly interrupt whatever the reader was thinking or doing until the moment the book was opened. They also tend to be violent beginnings to tales of violence. This may be the relatively justified and benign violence to the self in the poems by Herbert or Hopkins, or the violence of sexuality in *Light and August* and "Leda and the Swan," or the violent stories of transgression told in works like *Lord Jim*, or the psychological violence of the really weird character who speaks in *Notes from Underground.*

The irruptive, transgressive violence of these beginnings is often proleptic or synecdochic, part for whole, of the work that follows. The climactic violence of *Lord Jim*, for example, when the hero allows himself to be shot, as expiation at last for his unwilling complicity in asocial acts, seems somehow foreshadowed in that image of Jim as like a charging bull. The violence of literature tends to involve either sexuality, or death, or both.

About violence in *The Swiss Family Robinson* I shall say something later. I add here and now, however, as a point of special importance, that this violence is experienced as pleasurable. This is true however ashamed we may be of the pleasure in vicarious violence a literary work enacts for us. Literature gives pleasurable violence even though the violence may be no more than the laughter engendered by the outrageous wordplay of a work like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* In the latter, for example, a chapter entitled "The Rabbit Sends in a Little Bill" turns out not to have anything to do with bills in the economic sense. The bill in question is a lizard named Bill. The Rabbit sends Bill down the chimney and Alice kicks him back up the chimney. In the Tenniel illustration, he comes flying out like a projectile. In another episode, Alice and the animals are dried off after their swim in Alice's tears by hearing the Mouse read aloud an exceedingly dry historical account. Such puns produce, in me at least, an explosion of laughter. Laughter too is violent,

as Yeats and Freud knew. All literary works have something of the laughter-producing weirdness of dreams. Laughter repeats the transgression from which it would protect us, while at the same time holding the transgressive at a distance.

WHY IS LITERATURE VIOLENT?

Why all this violence in literature? Why is that violence pleasurable? It seems as though literature not only satisfies a desire for entry into virtual realities but that those virtual realities tend to enact, however covertly, an approach toward the hyperbolic violences of death, sexuality, and the subversion hidden in the irrationalities of language. At the same time, literature in one way or another protects us from those violences.

Friedrich Nietzsche, as Paul Gordon has shown in *Tragedy After Nietzsche*, held that tragedy is essentially superabundant rapture (Rausch) and that all art is essentially tragic. "If there is to be art," wrote Nietzsche in *Twilight of the Idols*, "if there is to be any aesthetic doing and observing, one *physiological pre-condition* is indispensable: rapture." "Rapture": the word means being drawn forcibly out of oneself into another realm. That other realm is by no means peaceful. It is associated in one way or another with those excessive things I have named: death, sexuality, and the irrational side of language. Literature seizes me and carries me to a place where pleasure and pain join. When I say I am "enchanted" by the virtual realities to which literary works transport me, that is a milder way of saying I am enraptured by reading those works. Literary works are in one way or another wild. That is what gives them their power to enrapture.

OPENINGS AS THE RAISING OF GHOSTS

Shakespeare's plays might almost be taken as a counterproof of what I have been saying. They typically open not with a speech by one of the main characters but by dialogue among subsidiary folk. A Shakespeare play often begins with minor characters who establish the social milieu within which the main drama will be enacted. *Hamlet*, for example, starts not with

the appearance of the ghost but with a conversation between two sentinels, Bernardo and Francisco (unlikely names for Danes), on the battlements of Elsinore Castle. *Othello* begins not with Othello himself, but with a speech by Roderigo, a "gulled gentleman," victim of Iago's villainy. Shakespeare's beginnings, nevertheless, obey my law of an irruptive start in the middle of things. They instantly establish a new social space, the space within which Hamlet or Othello will work out his tragic destiny.

The opening of Hardy's *The Return of the Native* sets a scene, Egdon Heath. The heath is, the chapter title says, "A Face on which Time makes but Little Impression": "A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment."

The openings of *Mrs Dalloway, Lord Jim, Crime and Punishment*, Herbert's "The Collar," Faulkner's *Light in August* and many other works, however,establish in a single sentence a character, often a chief protagonist. For me the character springs to life with this sentence. The personage remains alive ever afterward somewhere in my imagination, as a kind of ghost that may not be exorcized, neither alive nor dead. Such ghosts are neither material nor immaterial. They are embodied in the words on the pages in all those books on the shelves waiting to be invoked again when the book is taken down and read.

Sometimes it is not quite the first sentence that brings the character alive. The opening sentence of the second chapter of *Pickwick Papers* brings Mr Pickwick to life for me, along with the distinctive ironic parodic voice of Dickens himself, the "Immortal Boz," as he liked to be called. What is parodied in this case is the circumstantiality of place and date that is expected of "realist" fiction. The sentence opening the second chapter picks up the *fiat lux* echo in the first sentence of the novel. Here is part of that first first sentence: "The first ray of light which illumines the gloom, and converts into a dazzling brilliancy that obscurity in which the earlier history of the immortal Pickwick would appear to be involved . . ." This opening parodies not only Genesis but also the pomposities found in official biographies of "great men." It also indicates Dickens's own inaugural power as author, light-bringer. The

echo of that in the beginning of the second chapter applies the same figure to Pickwick's appearance on a fine morning:

> That punctual servant of all work, the sun, had just risen, and begun to strike a light on the morning of the thirteenth of May, one thousand eight hundred and twenty-seven, when Mr Samuel Pickwick burst like another sun from his slumbers, threw open his chamber window, and looked out upon the world beneath. Goswell Street was at his feet, Goswell Street was on his right hand – as far as the eye could reach, Goswell Street extended on his left; and the opposite side of Goswell Street was over the way.

George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, in *Middlemarch*, to give another example of a deferred beginning, does not come fully alive for me in the opening sentences. The novel opens like this: "Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the Blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters. . ." This is circumstantial enough, but what really brings Dorothea to life for me is a moment in the opening scene with her sister Celia when, against her principles, Dorothea admires the jewelry they have inherited from their mother: " 'How very beautiful these gems are!' said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling, as sudden as the gleam [that the sun has just reflected from the jewels]."

The attentive reader will note how often these openings, though I have chosen them more or less at random from those that stick in my mind, involve in one way or another either the sun or the opening of a window. Sometimes, as in *Pickwich Papers*, both motifs are present. *Mrs Dalloway*, to give a final example, a few sentences beyond the opening sentence I have cited, shows Clarissa remembering an experience of her childhood:

> What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air.

The beginning of the world, even these imaginary literary ones, seems naturally figured by a rising sun or by a window opening from the inside to the outside.

Such openings, in third-person narrations, are also spoken by another voice, the narrator's. Even first-person narrations are double. The "I" as narrator speaks of a past "I" whose experiences are narrated in the past tense: "I struck the board . . ." Such opening sentences create the illusion of a speaker out of nothing but words. An example is the ironic understatement of Kafka's narrative voice. That voice tells about the most grotesque or horrific events in a flat matter-of-fact tone. The opening of *Paradise Lost* establishes the poet's voice as it invokes the Muse, just as the first sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* fabricates out of a few words an ironic narrator quite different from Kafka's ironic narrator. Austen's story-teller reports, with cool objectivity, the ideological assumptions of the novel's community. It does not wholly distance itself from those assumptions: "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife."

In spite of the immense variety of these opening sentences, they all function as the instantaneous creation of a fictive world. In all these cases, the opening sentences are radically initiatory. They are a genesis, a new birth, a fresh beginning. One of the main pleasures of reading literary works is the power they give to put aside our real cares and enter another place.

LITERATURE'S STRANGENESS

What are the main features of these virtual realities that we call literary works?

First feature: they are incommensurate with one another. Each is singular, *sui generis*, strange, idiosyncratic, heterogeneous. Literary works are "counter, original, spare, strange," to borrow a formulation from Gerard Manley Hopkins. That strangeness estranges them from one another. One might even

think of them as so many Leibnizian windowless monads, or as Leibnizian "incompossible" worlds, that is, as worlds that cannot logically co-exist in the same space. Each is the fictive actualization of one alternative possibility not realized in the "real world." Each is an irreplaceably valuable supplement to the real world.

Stressing literature's strangeness is a point of some importance, since much literary study (not to speak of much journalistic reviewing) has always had as one of its main functions covering that strangeness over, as the Swiss family Robinson killed or domesticated the animals, birds, and fish on their island. Literary study hides the peculiarity of literary language by accounting for it, naturalizing it, neutralizing it, turning it into the familiar. This usually means seeing in it as in one way or another a representation of the real world. Whether this accounting takes the form of relating the work to its author, or of trying to demonstrate that it is typical of its historical time and place, or characteristic of the class, gender, and race of its author, or of seeing it as a mirroring of the material and social world, or of relating it to conceptual generalizations about the way literary language works, the unspoken goal is to appease the conscious or unconscious fear people have of literature's true strangeness. We fear the way each work is incomparable.

To affirm that each work has its own truth, a truth different from the truth of any other work, sets what I am saying not only against mimetic or referential definitions of literature, but also against Heideggerian notions of literature or of "poetry" as what he calls the "setting-forth-of-truth-in-the-work," For Heidegger the truth set forth in the work is universal. It is the truth of Being. That truth is not something unique to the work, with a singular truth for each work. My definition of literature is closer to Derrida's explicitly anti-Heideggerian "concept" (it is not exactly a concept) of a poem. In "Che cos'è la poesia?," which may be crudely translated as "What Thing is Poetry?" and in the subsequent interview, "Istrice 2: Ick bünn all hier" (both reprinted in translation in *Points . . .: Interviews*, 1974-1994), a poem is figured as a hedgehog rolled up in a ball. (The strange German is Derrida's citation of Heidegger's citation of a sentence in the Grimm fairy tale of "The Hare

and the Hedgehog." In this story the hedgehog beats the hare in a race by sending the female hedgehog ahead to be waiting at the finish line. It is an example, Derrida says, of the "always already there.") The hedgehog image is a catachresis, as Derrida says, for what is idiomatic about each literary work. One form this takes is the approach toward coincidence of its meaning and the materiality of its letters. Derrida's refusal to translate the idiomatic Italian title of the first essay and his insistence on the "str" sound in the admirable Italian word for hedgehog, "istrice," in the interview, is an example of one form of specificity: dependence on the idiom of a particular language. For me too, each work is a separate space, protected on all sides by something like quills. Each work is closed in on itself, separated even from its author. The work is also separated from the "real world" and from any unified supernal world which all works might be presumed to put to work.

No doubt I am here, by making a conceptual analysis, committing again the error against which I warn. It cannot be denied that literary theory contributes to that death of literature the first sentence of this book announces. Literary theory arose in its contemporary form just at the time literature's social role was weakening. It was an oblique response to that weakening. If literature's power and role could be taken for granted as still in full force, it would not be necessary to theorize about it. The greatest ancient treatise on what we today would call literature, Aristotle's *Poetics*, appeared at the time Greek tragedy, not to speak of the epic (Aristotle's chief examples of "poetry"), were in their decline. In a similar way, the remarkable twentieth-century theoretical reflections on the nature of literature appeared just at the time literature in the modern sense of the word was in the process of fading as a primary force in Western culture. I am thinking of all those theorists from Sartre, Benjamin, Lukács, and Blanchot down to de Man, Derrida, Jameson, Butler, and the rest, not to speak of those statements by creative writers like Mallarmé and Proust who anticipated later twentieth-century reflections by theorists on the essence of the literary.

The efflorescence of literary theory signals the death of literature. Many people see literature as perhaps in mortal jeopardy, certainly as something that

can no longer simply be taken for granted. Theory both registers the imminent death of literature, which of course cannot die, and at the same time helps make that death-without-death happen.

This takes place by an implacable law that says you can see clearly something that is deeply embedded in our culture only when it is in the act of receding into the historical distance. Maurice Blanchot already quietly recognized that vanishing and its primary cause in an essay of 1959, "The Song of the Sirens: Encountering the Imaginary." Speaking of the novel as the primary modern literary form, Blanchot wrote:

> It is no small thing to make a game of human time and out of that game to create a free occupation, one stripped of all immediate interest and usefulness, essentially superficial and yet in its surface movement capable of absorbing all being. But clearly, if the novel fails to play this role today, it is because technics has transformed men's time and their ways of amusing themselves.

I shall return to this question of "technics." I shall turn also to Blanchot's notion of the way the *récit*, as opposed to the novel, is oriented not toward amusement but toward what he calls "the imaginary" or "literary space (l' espace littéraire)." The latter phrase is the title of a book by Blanchot.

A person can enter "l'espace littéraire," the space, for example, of *Crime and Punishment* or of *Pride and Prejudice*, in no other way than by reading the work. All the reading in the world of Russian or English history or of the biographies of Dostoevsky or Austen, or of literary theory, valuable as such knowledge is, will not prepare you for what is most essential, that is, most idiosyncratic, about these works. Henry James expressed eloquently the uniqueness of each author's work in a famous passage in the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*:

> The house of fiction has in short not one window, but a million - a number of possible windows not to be reckoned, rather; every one of which has been pierced, or is still pierceable, in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at their best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.

LITERATURE IS PERFORMATIVE UTTERANCE

Second feature: since a literary work refers to an imaginary reality, it follows that it makes a performative rather than a constative use of words. "Performative" and "constative" are terms from speech act theory. On the one hand, a constative statement names some state of affairs, as in the assertion, "It is raining outside." Such a sentence can, in principle at least, be verified as true or false. A performative utterance, on the other hand, is a way of doing things with words. It does not name a state of affairs, but brings about the thing it names. For example, in the right circumstances a couple is married when a minister or some other duly appointed person says, "I pronounce you man and wife." Sentences in literary works, such as the inaugural statements I have cited, for example, "She waited, Kate Croy, for her father to come in . . . ," look like constative statements describing a possibly true state of affairs. However, since the state of affairs does not exist or at any rate is not reachable except through the words, those words are actually performative. They bring Kate Croy, waiting in exasperation for her father, into existence for the reader. Every sentence in a literary work is part of a chain of performative utterances opening out more and more of an imaginary realm initiated in the first sentence. The words make that realm available to the reader. Those words

at once invent and at the same time discover (in the sense of "reveal") that world, in a constantly repeated and extended verbal gesture.

The imaginary realm opened by a literary work is not simply "made available" to the reader, however. The performative dimension of the work's words demands a response from the reader. Right reading is an active engagement. It requires a tacit decision to commit all one's powers to bringing the work into existence as an imaginary space within oneself. The reader must utter, in response to the work's invocation, another performative speech act: "I promise to believe in you." The famous opening sentence of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* makes that double performative, demand invoking a response, explicit. This is also another of those sentences that brings an imaginary character to life: "Call me Ishmael." Though this sentence might be read as a permissive: "You may call me Ishmael, if you like," or as an evasion, "My name is not really Ishmael, but that is the pseudonym I ask you to call me by," its strongest reading would see it as a peremptory demand: "I command you to call me Ishmael." The reader can only assent or dissent from this demand. He or she must say, "I agree to call you Ishmael" or "I won't do it. That sounds silly." Tacitly uttering the first responsive performative is the formal acceptance of a contract. This saying "Yes" is the "Open Sesame!" that gives the reader access to all the rest of Melville's huge work. If you agree to call the narrator Ishmael, you can enter the work. Otherwise not. Some such response to a demand that the reader accept the particular rules of a given work is necessary to all acts of reading.

LITERATURE KEEPS ITS SECRETS

Yet another feature of literary works follows from the condition that we can gain access to the unique world each reveals only by reading the words on the page. We can only know of that world what the words tell us. No other place exists where we might go to get further information. A novel, a poem, or a play is a kind of testimony. It bears witness. Whatever the narrative voice says is accompanied by an implicit (and sometimes even explicit) assertion: "I swear this is what I saw; this truly happened." The difference between literary

testimony and "real" testimony is that no way exists to verify or supplement what a fictive narrator says. What a real witness in the witness box asserts can be, in principle at least, checked against the testimony of other witnesses or by other means of verification. Such checking, however, does not disqualify the witness's claim that this is what he or she saw. The witness may be speaking truly of what he or she thought was there to be seen, even if it was not. Gaps and omissions in real world testimony can nevertheless often be filled in. Literature, on the contrary, keeps its secrets.

The reader can, for example, never know just what the two parties said when Gilbert Osmond proposed to Isabel Archer and was accepted, in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. This is because James's narrator does not directly recount that event. Nor does he tell the reader what happened to Isabel when she rejoined her husband in Rome, beyond the end of the novel. Nor can the reader ever know what was the content of Milly Theale's deathbed letter to Merton Densher, in James's The *Wings of the Dove*. This is because Kate Croy burns the letter, and the narrator does not reveal the letter's contents. The reader never knows just what were the contents of the Aspern papers, in James's novella of that name, because Miss Tina burns them before the first-person narrator can get a chance to read them. In a similar way, Baudelaire, in an example Jacques Derrida discusses, does not tell the reader whether one protagonist in the prose poem "La fausse monnaie (The Counterfeit Coin)" did or did not give the beggar a counterfeit coin.

It is, I claim, an essential feature of literature to hide secrets that may not ever be revealed. Sir Thomas Browne's example of this is the impossibility of ever knowing what song the Sirens would have sung to Ulysses, in *The Odyssey*. This is because Homer only cites the song of irresistible promise, which is not the actual song that Ulysses would have heard if he had yielded to the Sirens' enticement. Nor are these secrets, for example the ones I have mentioned, trivial or unimportant. The whole meaning of the works in question turns on what is forever hidden from the reader's knowledge. The reader would like to know, needs to know, in order fully to understand the work. An unappeased curiosity is one of the emotions generated by reading

literary works, but literature keeps its secrets. We would like to know just what the Sirens' song sounded like. Hearing the Sirens' song for oneself would be the only way to know whether Ulysses was exaggerating. Knowing that, however, might be fatal, as Maurice Blanchot asserts in "The Sirens' Song." In that essay the Sirens' song is taken as an allegory of the "imaginary" and of what is dangerous about literature in general. If you were to hear the Sirens' song you might be lured permanently away from the everyday world of mundane responsibilities. A long history can be adduced of statements in literary works themselves that express a fear of literature's seductive power. I shall refer to some later.

LITERATURE USES FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

One sign that literary works use language in a performative rather than purely constative way is the dependence of their creative power on figures of speech. Such figures assert a similarity between one thing and another. This similarity is often generated by words, rather than being a feature of things in themselves. Examples of the many varieties of this abound in the examples I have cited of opening sentences. Lord Jim is put before the reader in that simile asserting he is like a charging bull. In the poem from the Chinese *Classic of Poetry*, all the fragile beauty of the bride going to her new home is expressed in her juxtaposition with peach blossoms. Chinese poetry often puts a physical image and a human one side by side without asserting their relation, in a metonymical juxtaposition. The latent personification of Egdon Heath in the phrase "was embrowning itself," not to speak of the overt prosopopoeia in the word "face" in the chapter title, prepares for the extravagant personification of the heath in the rest of *The Return of the Native's* first paragraph. Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, is defined, in another form of metonymy, by that tiny attic room he lives in as well as by the hot weather the narrator begins by mentioning. Kate Croy's narcissism is figured when she looks at herself in the mirror. Samuel Pickwick's comic sovereignty is defined by the way he rises like the sun, while the sun is demoted to being his servant, "striking a light" for him at dawn. Lena Grove's inextinguishable

vitality is figured in the way she is always in motion. She has already come a "fur piece" from Alabama when the reader first meets her, bearing her illegitimate child within her. The Boy of Winander is defined by the way the cliffs and islands of Winander, in another personification, "knew" him. That poem begins with an extravagant apostrophe. An apostrophe is a trope in which the speaker turns toward someone or something and hails it. In the case of apostrophes to inanimate nature, the invocation is also a personification. To say "ye knew him well, ye cliffs/ And islands of Winander!" is to animate the cliff and islands, to imply that they might answer back, as the owls answer the boy's "mimic hootings" in the rest of the poem.

What can one say of figurative language's ubiquity in these inaugural sentences? First, they indicate, as I have said, that these new births are performed by language. No metaphors, similies, metonymies, apostrophes, or personifications exist in nature, only in collocations of words. To say that Lord Jim exists as someone who comes toward you with his head down, like a charging bull, suggests that he exists only in language. Lord Jim is not to be found anywhere in the phenomenal world, however circumstantial is Conrad's description of the pseudo-world he dwells within.

Second, these figures illustrate the extraordinary power tropes have to bring an imaginary personage to life economically and elegantly. An example is the touching juxtaposition of peach blossoms and the new bride in the poem from the Chinese. The new bride, Lord Jim, and all the horde of such literary phantoms are effect of language. To say that Jim comes toward you with his head down, like a charging bull, combines, in a way characteristic of such literary language, several different tropes in one. The locution is an invocation calling Jim's ghost to come, as Ulysses invokes the shades of dead warriors in the *Odyssey*. Saying Jim was like a charging bull is a covert apostrophe or prosopopoeia hailing or interpellating Jim as one of the absent, the imaginary or the dead, thereby personifying him. It is a catachresis transferring a name ("charging bull") to what has no proper names, that is, Jim's imagined interiority as a person.

In the case of *Lord Jim*, as in so many other literary works, the protagonist is

dead when the narrator tells his or her story. Even if the protagonists are not dead at the end of the story, each already belongs to an absolute past by the time his or her book is published. Their ghostly apparitions haunt our brains and feelings, as the memory of Lord Jim haunts Marlow, the narrator of his story in *Lord Jim*, just as Marlow haunted Conrad, returning in several novels, and just as Marlow haunts the imaginations of Conrad's readers, you or me.

Third: it is true that figures of speech are an ever-present aspect of language used in its ordinary referential way, for example in newspaper headlines that often nowadays are allowed sly plays on words. Here are some real examples, the first from the *China Daily*, the rest from one issue of *USA Today* : "Medical Insurance undergoes Surgery"; " 'Green power' gets second wind" (a headline about windmill power); "U.S. taps Social Security reserves"; "Maturing boomers smack into the 'silver ceiling'." Nevertheless, the presence of tropes of one sort or another in almost all my opening sentences is a clue to the adept reader that he or she may be about to read something that would be defined in our culture as "literature." The puns in headlines are an understood convention. This does not make them, in most people's eyes, "poetry," though it would be possible to dispute that.

DOES LITERATURE INVENT OR DISCOVER?

Final feature of literary language: though nothing could be more important to know than whether the alternative world opened up by a given literary work is created by the words of the work or just revealed by them, nevertheless such knowledge is impossible to obtain. It is impossible to obtain because the words would look exactly the same in either case. Literature has often been defined in recent decades by its self-reflexivity or self-referentiality. Literature is said to be distinctive because it refers to itself and to its own way of working. The great linguist Roman Jakobson, for example, distinguished literary language from other uses of language by saying it manifests "the set of language toward itself." I think this feature of literature has been greatly exaggerated. By appeal to a latently sexist distinction, it has misled many readers into dismissing literature for its sterile, feminine, and boring self-

reflexivity. Literature is thought to be like Kate Croy looking at herself in the mirror, as opposed to the virile use of language to refer to real things in the real world. Calling literature "self-reflexive" is a way of calling it powerless.

Most literary works, on the contrary, confess only infrequently to being something an author has made up and is manipulating. That explains why I as a child could take *The Swiss Family Robinson* as referring to a real place somewhere. Most literary works go right on talking as if the virtual realities they describe, with all their contents and events, have independent existence and are only being described, not invented. Who is to say that this is not the case, that all those alternative worlds have not been waiting somewhere for some author to find fit words for them? If so, they would go on existing there, waiting, even if their recording author were never to appear.

I think of all those novels Fyodor Dostoevsky is said to have had in his mind, no doubt wonderful works. He just never got around to writing them down. One cannot quite say that those unwritten novels did not exist. Their mode of existence, however, is exceedingly peculiar, The words of those works that *do* get written down would be exactly the same whether or not their referents pre-exist the words or not. Literature may therefore be defined as a strange use of words to refer to things, people, and events about which it is impossible ever to know whether or not they have somewhere a latent existence. That latency would be a wordless reality, knowable only by the author, waiting to be turned into words.

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