Questions for R. K. Narayan

JUDITH BROWN

1. Can a world be unwritten?

THIS IS A QUESTION PERHAPS TOO PRETENTIOUS, AND CERTAINLY too abstract, for R. K. Narayan, the South Indian novelist best known for his modest wit and gentle optimism, yet it gets at the ways his fictional world quietly empties categories of meaning, loosens the ties of history, and drifts as if unburdened by knowledge of the contemporary world or its politics. The fictional landscape of Malgudi, created in Narayan's fourteen novels and many story collections, is best known for its dreaminess, its existence seemingly outside time. This apparent ahistoricity, along with the generally placid surface of his novels, has led to charges of an excessive niceness that represses or evades the brutal reality of colonial rule and its aftermath. Yet his novels, spanning the years 1935 to 1990, suggest historical and material modes of engagement with language that, even as they depend on irony and passivity, self-effacement and understatement, undermine the collusions of language and state; indeed, these passive modes of narration operate negatively as they undo, diminish, or void altogether their claims to certainty.

The question, as an open structure, does something similar. Preceding and suspending the certainty of answers, it creates the conditions for doubt and undoing. The seven questions of this essay explore submission, failed authorship, and the fate of letters in the volatile age of India's independence; they emerge from Narayan's fictional world and circle around the themes of language, colonial education, and narrative form. Imaginatively in conversation with the writer, these questions turn on writing and the conditions of its possibility, but they also extend beyond the work of the singular author to issues that today propel the study of literature at the edge, rather than the cen-

JUDITH BROWN is associate professor of English at Indiana University, Bloomington, and author of *Glamour in Six Dimensions: Modernism and the Radiance of Form* (Cornell UP, 2009). Her current book project is called "Passive States: Style and Global Modernism."

© 2016 JUDITH BROWN
PMLA 131.3 (2016), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

ter, of political change. This essay, then, is a recuperative gesture for a novelist read widely but not always seriously; it is also a meditation on what Narayan once called the "authority of that 'still small voice'" (Letter) or the power of quietist writing in a polemical age.[1] Narayan, I argue, undercuts the very grounds on which one might romanticize the town of Malgudi and its people by questioning and ironizing the political, historical, and aesthetic judgments that confront the colonial writer.

Writing in the English language in India had always been tied up with instrumentality and the machinations of empire. Young men from the very earliest days of the East India Company joined the enterprise at its lowest rank, writer, working in factories to further the aims of colonial commerce (Bernstein 7). From this time forward, writing in English would be bound to capital and the imperial will, a confusion that Narayan subtly satirizes throughout his career and especially in his postindependence novel *The Vendor of Sweets,* when a father is startled, even horrified, to learn that his son wants to be a writer:

> "Writer" meant in [the father's] dictionary only one thing, a "clerk"—an Anglo-Indian, colonial term from the days when Macaulay had devised a system of education to provide a constant supply of clerical staff for the East India Company. Jagan felt aghast. Here was he trying to shape the boy into an aristocrat with a bicycle, college-life, striped shirts and everything, and he wanted to be a "writer"! Strange! (21)

Ink-fingered bureaucracy offers nothing to the proud father who cannot imagine writing in any context but one with the taint of imperial transaction. To contribute to the literary arts is far outside the experience of the sweets vendor and will remain so, because his son is derailed by interests more mercenary than artistic.

Narayan reflected a great deal in print—largely in his weekly columns in *The Hindu* newspaper—about the possibility of writing fiction in India, especially during the 1930s and 1940s as the country waged its campaign for independence. As he made his bold choice to become a professional writer, he was aware that he was living in a moment of historical transition,

> . . . 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. ("Problem" 15)

What was lost, he suggests, was a detached and finely tuned rendering of the world—as well as a noninstrumental approach to literature. Aesthetics, in the face of the struggle for independence, was hardly an adequate arena for revolutionary energy. Yet the casualty was subtlety itself, as well as the humanizing, community-building activity of storytelling. Perhaps Narayan, a Brahmin from a part of the country that remained relatively remote from the independence struggle, was more attuned to aesthetic losses than those who suffered most the physical violence perpetrated by the colonial administration and its army. Or perhaps he understood that storytelling provided a culture strength and the capacity to endure, attributes too easily forgotten alongside the exigencies of political organization and change.

Choosing to write in English created further complications for Narayan and those others of his generation who made their literary careers in the colonizers' tongue. In *The King-Emperor's English; or, The Role of the English Language in the Free India*, for example, Mulk Raj Anand recognizes:

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> Long before the British quit India the question was being asked whether the English language, which, in the first instance, our alien rulers imposed on our country and which we later began to accept in increasing measure as a medium for conversation or writing, should be packed up, with much else, into the cabin trunks of the departing rulers and banished from our land. (1)

Raja Rao prefaces his novel *Kanthapura* by acknowledging that "the telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own." Yet he goes on to say that English is not "really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before" (vii). Despite the challenges and questions their choice provoked, Anand, Rao, and Narayan made English the medium of their work. "[I]t was the only language," claims Anand, "that came to hand in a difficult transitional period. And we wanted to say our say immediately, notwithstanding the political and moral censorship that inhibited our own languages" (16). Their choice entailed risk, including suspicion about their allegiances. One family friend, on hearing Narayan's plans for a literary career, made the point succinctly: "Unwisdom! Unwisdom!" he cried (Narayan, *My Days* 88). There would be epistemic consequences, as this old fellow understood, both for Narayan personally (his primary concern) and for fiction writing in India. Knowledge and education would enter into Narayan's novelistic imagination, as he created the fictional landscape of Malgudi, with the Albert Mission College and its Macaulayan mandate of aesthetic education figured prominently at its center. Aesthetic education, at least in Schiller's idealistic formulation, should aid the progress of democracy by marrying the body's impulses toward play with the drive toward form, yet in the British system, both at home and abroad, it rejected play in favor of the disciplined ideal of perfection. Writing with an uppercase *W* should embody the rigid, formal principles of the British Empire: this world, the British proclaimed, would never be unwritten. The project of unwriting, then, carried far-reaching implications for writers from the colonies setting out to enter the canons of English-language literature.

2. Why is *d* a perfect letter?

Narayan and his fellow writers chose to make the master's tongue the medium of their art, bringing to it the peculiarity of their own languages and habits of thought. The decision was not simply a creative incursion into the privileged domain of letters; it was also a scrambling of the linguistic codes on which British rule depended. Letters, in their singular form, carried cultural weight, as this question, taken from a British school examination, attests: Why is *d* a perfect letter? These nineteenth-century students—we might picture them bent over their books in the rigid formations of the exam hall—would hardly be invited to linger over such exam questions. Yet today the question seems more poetic than prosaic: what other than a poetic imagination might think about letters as having reached some lyric ideal, as being more than rudimentary indicators of knowledge about the language? What does it mean to imagine a perfect letter? One might take a poetic leap to conjure the possibilities—the perfect half-moon of the uppercase *D*, or the careful balance of the lowercase circle and its vertical stave—yet the attempt to pluck the perfect letter from a pageant of twenty-six contestants seems absurd. The question itself offers up language in its perfectability as a monument to the cultural authority of English as well as a tacit acceptance of its domination.

While D. J. Palmer, in *The Rise of English Studies* (22), and Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest* (135), both cite this exam question, they do not offer an answer. Besides, claims Palmer in his history, there is no

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"scope for the critical imagination" in exam questions that test a student's knowledge of linguistic perfection (22). Yet the imagination, outside the context of the nineteenth-century examination hall, seems the only possible ground for thinking through the perfection of a single letter. If we look to the historical moment that produces such questions, which express a simple faith in perfection, we discover ourselves on the confident ground of the mid–nineteenth century, when English was lauded as a language that had reached its apex. Palmer offers one account, from the very first professor of English literature at King's College, Cambridge. Marking the department's inauguration, Professor Thomas Dale made the following remarks in 1828 as he outlined the course of study, including the history of the language, from its "origin, formation, progress, and perfection": "[W]e may assume that a language to whose stock of words no material addition has been made for upwards of two centuries, may now be accounted *stationary*, or perfect in proportion to its capacity" (19). The language, static in its marmoreal finish, had presumably arrived.

The perfection of English was not a question concerning only the English nation; it of course affected India under the rule of empire. When English education policy with its "unbounded faith in examinations" (Palmer 16) was transported to India, it became more stringent as a way to protect the language:

> As a time capsule for English culture, India provided an ideal setting. The structure of Indian society, its multiple languages and multiple religions, eliminated some of the chief difficulties encountered in England in the preservation of a true national culture. . . . Linguistic stratification of classes permitted English high culture to be maintained in all its purity without the erosion that was occurring to polite literature in England. (Viswanathan 116)

In England, Viswanathan argues, there was a sense that the language suffered from its usage by all classes. In India, the usage could be controlled: "The control exerted through the formal institution of education further exploited the structure of Indian society to prevent English from degenerating into sheer vulgarity as in England" (117).

If in England English had reached its summit and achieved a kind of sculptural (or sepulchral) perfection that was now threatened by changing class structures and the linguistic change that inevitably resulted, in India the language might be better monumentalized, bolstered by the vast Indian civil service and system of English education. What better way than through attention to literature? Soon after Dale's lecture on the perfection of the language, Macaulay delivered his "Minute on Education," which reached its frothy height with the claim that "a single shelf of a good European library [is] worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." This was the basis of the English Education Act of 1835, whose effects continued to reverberate through India one hundred years later, when Narayan began his career.

One might picture a younger Narayan, quaking as he approached the dreaded exams that marked his progress through the Maharaja's Collegiate High School. His trepidation at writing the university entrance exams was justified: he failed spectacularly. "I had failed where I was most confident—English. I failed so miserably and completely that everyone wondered if I was literate at all" (*My Days* 53). "That horrible man, the question setter" (53) had scuttled his plans, and so the disappointed Narayan retreated into literature and the "luxurious sadness" (60) of tragic endings, reading anything—"an indiscriminate jumble" (58)—that might plunge him into the depths of emotion. Yet the writer would develop, attend a university, and become exquisitely aware of the ideological purposes that the English language and the literary canon served. Indeed, *The English Teacher*, published in the years immediately preceding

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

independence, should be read as an explicit statement about aesthetic education, both in Schiller's idealistic sense of the power of aesthetics to draw us closer to freedom and in Macaulay's reinterpretation of aesthetics to further cultural supremacy. The novel places us on the grounds of the Albert Mission College, where our protagonist, Krishna, the English teacher, halfheartedly teaches the greats of English literature, from the Renaissance through the Romantics. His boredom, stemming from his alienation from the educational system, is clear from the start: he sleepwalks through teaching, does it by rote, hardly prepares, and largely reads aloud to his classroom of equally bored students. The education he offers weakly extends colonial values but enlivens no minds, particularly his own.

In the novel's opening pages, the outraged school principal summons his teachers, including Krishna, to decry the degeneracy of the student body: "'Can you imagine a worse shock for me? I came across a student of the English Honours, who did not know till this day that "honours" had to be spelt with a "u"?' . . . He began a lecture on the importance of the English language, and the need for preserving its purity" (5–6). Does the *u* in *honours* matter? If language was to remain stationary, thus buttressing the firmament of British rule, its usage by colonials represented an ever-present threat, as Principal Brown understands (and as Homi Bhabha, better than anyone else, has explained). Those *d*'s and *u*'s thus bear the weight of a civilization on their curves and serifs. Although we might reflect on the aesthetic virtues provided by the letter *d*, the question of its perfection illuminates the provisional nature and historical contingency of knowledge: we cannot tell what makes *d* perfect, because the very premise of the question, the perfectibility of a language or a letter, evades our grasp. This is language monumentalized and driven to death: Narayan's novel begins on these grounds and works toward unmaking the codified authority of language.

3. Is this naive or ironic?

Not everyone loves this avuncular figure. Narayan's name elicits fond nods, as well as something more dismissive. He is associated with children's literature, a popular television series (*Malgudi Days*, aired in the 1980s and based on his stories), and with his longevity as the grand old man of Indian letters. But he has also been the subject of barbed criticism. "The number of allegations levelled at R. K. Narayan for culturally diluting the 'Indianness' of his stories—universalizing the classic Malgudi into an easily-accessible mixture of Everyman and Our Town—are legion," writes Ian Almond (146). Most damning is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her collection of essays *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, the formidable critic repeatedly dismisses his writings, implicitly for their quietism, explicitly for the ways his avoidance of conflict makes him the milquetoast author for the Western multicultural classroom.

The question is Spivak's—"Is Narayan naïve or ironic?" (530)—in a frustrated aside about the writer. Citing his "general niceness" (530), his avoidance of conflict, and his "limpid" prose catering to "a casual unmoored international audience" (77), Spivak finds in his writing the worst kind of cultural acquiescence as he leads his reader on the "jolly safari" of the English language in India (36). It is his approach to literature and literary history that provokes her question, which is one worth thinking about. His naïveté, at least in her terms, may be easily traced: not only does the writer inhabit a past that she cannot abide but also he longs for a community relation that she sees fraught with pernicious ideological ties. The implicit reader of Narayan's work is a tourist who has no understanding of or interest in the wider network of relations in which the work takes shape; instead, invited to engage in a fantasy of Indian life that sidesteps the real conditions of poverty, that reader-tourist can enjoy the sights without the burden of knowledge. Adding to this sense of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

blindered optimism, Priya Joshi writes, "R. K. Narayan's prolific novels and stories are realist portraits of the imaginary rural town of Malgudi, arguably containing little demonstrated sensibility to wide-scale reform" (210). Joshi does not explicitly condemn Narayan, but one senses that she, and critics more generally, recognizes his failure to tow a more trenchant political line. Narayan foresaw this complaint.

Spivak's question suggests that naïveté is inexcusable whereas irony is merely irritating. The naïf is complicit, willing to avert his gaze, to pretend things are otherwise. He is primitive, innocent, lacking in sophistication, and, while he may be expressive (certainly modern painters in India, including Jamini Roy and Rabindranath Tagore, exploited the expressive range of the naive), his passivity is contemptible. Spivak answers her own question: Narayan is unforgivably naive in a world that demands careful, knowing responses to ideological problems. She encourages a more instrumental view ("[I]nstrumentalize the essays that follow," she writes [34]) and promotes the imagination in its capacity to undo the legacy of the European Enlightenment. Strangely, she nowhere mentions *The English Teacher*, even though it does the kind of sabotage her work so pointedly advocates.

Writing in English, it is also worth noting, placed Narayan in a global commercial arena characterized by competition and the struggle for recognition. One might imagine the author's stance strategically (and thus at least somewhat instrumentally) in the ways that Pascale Casanova has envisioned: "In order simply to achieve literary existence, to struggle against the invisibility that threatens them from the very beginning of their careers, writers have to create the conditions under which they can be seen." Casanova does not consider the difficulty of colonial writers, whose claim to the work of art—that is, to literary value—is still, at times surprisingly, disputed; she argues however that writers should engage the conditions of recognition

> by inventing complex strategies that profoundly alter the universe of literary possibilities. The solutions that little by little are arrived at—rescued, as it were, from the structural inertia of the literary world—are the product of compromise; and the methods that they devise for escaping literary destitution become increasingly subtle, on the levels both of style and of literary politics. (177)

Aesthetic form too must play the market, developing strategies, even politically quietist ones that might offer new arrangements of the literary world.

This conundrum does not go unnoticed by Narayan. *The Vendor of Sweets* stages the economic and cultural struggle for visibility in comic terms when Jagan's son, having returned to India from a creative writing program in the United States, extols the money-making power of a new invention: a novel-writing machine. Just key in character names and a few other details, and voilà, you have a novel. Says the aspiring entrepreneur to his father, "[T]hese are not the days of your ancestors. Today we have to compete with advanced countries not only in economics and industry, but also in culture" (59). It is competition, then, that defines for him the creative writing process. His labor-saving device promises to write the writer out of literary production altogether. The novel-writing machine is an ironic invention offered as commentary on books as commodities to be exchanged on a market that makes the writer obsolete. Narayan returns, with curious frequency, to such obsolescence, through his depictions of failed writers, foolish writers, or wannabe writers; that is, the writer is figured in the negative, becomes a figure of the negative. We see that Jagan was right: writing has not escaped the East India Company. Writers dream big but produce hackneyed work, do not finish their writing, or do not even write at all. And in his self-representations, Narayan emphasizes all the ways he avoids the labor of

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

writing. Why does he link writing with passive, feckless, or self-negating characters?

Narayan, especially cognizant of the structures that confined and limited the play of his particular imagination on the page, writes deceptively simple prose defined, nevertheless, by the complications of irony. Narayan is, in fact, habitually ironic, even as this mode—as Spivak's exasperated question bears out—is itself elusive, unpredictable, and difficult to pin down. The challenge of defining the rhetorical mode of irony, contemplated from Socrates through postmodern theory, stems at least in part from the unstable relation between text and reader: irony depends on a certain canniness in its interpretation and is thus subject to any number of contingencies. It engages complication, refuses to take itself seriously, insists that one thing can also mean another. The difficulty faced by any attempt to know irony is at the basis of Paul de Man's influential account in "The Concept of Irony." Traditional definitions of the term, de Man tells us, include multiple meanings, the movement between literal and figurative, and the gesture of "turning away," "though one feels that this turning away in irony involves a little more, a more radical negation than one would have in an ordinary trope. . . . Irony seems to be the trope of tropes, the one that names the term as the 'turning away'" (164–65). The trope itself mirrors the stance taken by Narayan: his naive turning away from politically pressing narratives, the circumambulatory pacing of his prose. Radical instability ensues in any attempt to theorize the working of his narrative, recalling the reliance of Linda Hutcheon on the negative prefix when she describes irony as "the unsaid, the unheard, [and] the unseen" (9). Thinking about irony will always be subject to irony's negative modes, which, de Man adds, "will always be interrupted, always be disrupted, always be undone by the ironic dimension which it will necessarily contain" (179). Hardly a simple mode of writing, then, irony turns on negation, on undoing, on the gesture of turning away from one system in order to suggest the shadow of another.

Learning to perceive the shadows—the tonal variations of Malgudi and not simply its placid surface—is the first lesson taught by *The English Teacher*. One comes to recognize the challenges hiding in plain view, in the comic modes and self-effacing voices of Narayan's characters. De Man suggests that irony "is the radical negation, which . . . reveals as such, by the undoing of the work, the absolute toward which the work is under way" (183). Now, absolute destruction might seem too strong when discussing the work of Narayan, but could not radical negation be an element of his famously ironic style? Radical negation does not, of course, necessarily imply radical politics. Hutcheon categorizes irony as "transideological" (9). If it does not offer a political stance, what does it do? "Irony consoles and it promises and it excuses," says de Man (165). In Malgudi it does this and more, creating space for rethinking, revising, and unwriting.

This rhetorical mode shares something with Schiller's attempt to reinvent the political landscape and thus approach freedom through an educated experience of the aesthetic. His concept of play as an imaginative possibility where contradictory or antagonistic impulses can intersect, cross over, or otherwise meet without the violence of direct confrontation is especially helpful in thinking through Narayan's writing—repeatedly described as quiet, charming, subtle, gentle, and passive—at the height of the struggle for Indian independence. Oppositional impulses in Malgudi are expressed through ironic narration; irony will offer a way for Narayan to simultaneously embrace and turn away from overwhelming social and political conditions, as well as to negate a conception of the novel that duplicates or reproduces those conditions.

Does irony acknowledge the dynamic mobility of literature to resist conscription, as it were, and to operate in more subtle are-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

nas than those requiring active, warlike involvement? Balachandra Rajan's definition of the subtlety inherent in literature more aptly describes Narayan's narrative mode than Spivak's dismissive "jolly safari": "[T]he power of literature [is] to flow around ideologies, to acknowledge and even propitiate their powerful presences but [also] to interrogate them through circumvention rather than through the simpler forms of protest" (9). *Circumvention*: it is a precise word to describe Narayan's wit, his skirting around the difficult topics that nevertheless remain in sight. As Narayan plays with the capacities of the English language to express Indian village life, he circumambulates, as it were, the elephant of empire. Is he naive or ironic? He is both, employing naïveté as he turns away, undoing the very structures that the naïf appears to support. The terms of Spivak's question suggest that the naïf knows nothing while the ironist knows all: Narayan's fiction will, with all the evaporative power of irony, reject these premises and question the epistemological privilege of knowing itself.

4. Why not write poetry?

> I sat in my room, at the table. It was Thursday and it was a light day for me at college—only two hours of work in the afternoon, and not much preparation for that either. *Pride and Prejudice* for a senior class, non-detailed study, which meant just reading it to the boys. And a composition class. I sat at my table as usual after morning coffee looking over the books ranged on the table and casually turning over the pages of some exercise books. "Nothing to do. Why not write poetry? Ages since I wrote anything?" My conscience had a habit of asserting itself once in six months and reminding me that I ought to write poetry. (*English Teacher* 45)

Krishna, from the outset of the novel, has fancied himself a poet in need of both discipline and a suitable subject. He creates a new regimen, sets aside time to write, yet the words rarely come, though he imagines the brilliance of the poetry he will one day write, the poetic legacy he will leave behind. He fritters away his time, casually flipping pages and accomplishing little. His question, cast in the negative, is perhaps rhetorical, even if many answers spring to mind—a lack of talent, the weight of a foreign cultural tradition, his reluctance to make the effort. There are so many reasons *not* to write poetry. But the negative casting of the question, doubled in its own ironic asking, makes visible what remains unwritten.

The scene, set up to be self-mocking, culminates in an ironic takedown: "To-day I was going to make up for all lost time; I took out my pen, dipped it in ink, and sat hesitating. Everything was ready except a subject. What should I write about?" (45). His wife suggests he make her his subject. Accepting the challenge, he pens from memory thirty lines of Wordsworth's "She Was a Phantom of Delight," pretending they are his. "Aren't you ashamed to copy?" she says after she realizes these lines come not from her husband but from her *Golden Treasury* anthology. "No," he replies. "Mine is entirely different. [Wordsworth wrote] about someone entirely different from my subject" (47). Is he being naive or ironic? Is the poem different if it has a different address, a different object as its phantom? This exchange raises questions about original and copy and situates those questions in the context of colonial India and its practice of aesthetic education. Krishna insists that his repetition of Wordsworth can never be Wordsworth: the introduction of a new subject in a new context absents or negates the original poem's center. Reciting Wordsworth's poem transforms his wife, Susila, and envisions her as the phantom of writing. And this is what she will become.

Is it significant that Krishna never really finishes a poem in the novel? Why not have him write poetry? The obvious reading is

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that his writing can only reproduce the colonial master, that it will be inevitably inferior and comic in its simple mimicry. Yet the will is there. Krishna has big plans for a poetic future, especially when he dreams of the home he will buy with his wife: "A room all for myself where I can sit and spin out great poetry" (51); "I shall write immense quantities of poetry when I settle here, I think" (60). Although his grand oeuvre exists only in fantasy, it significantly defines his sense of self. He is moved by the English canon and aesthetic experience generally (he is entirely swept into the fury of *King Lear* as he reads it to his students), coming closer to what Christopher Nealon defines as the poetic, something that is vaster than stanzas on the page:

> I am moving across language that shifts from thinking of poetry as the name for a kind of thing made by poets—either literal writers of poems or artists generally—to thinking about aesthetic experience as marking a kind of human capacity, whether or not it produces traditionally aesthetic objects. (868)

What is poetry good for?, Nealon asks, and he finds as a partial answer the unrealizable in it:

> "[U]nrealizability" suggests that the significance of poetry is not captured by the language of making or purpose but that it is a type of activity that puts pressure on the social meanings of both . . . this demurral from instrumentalization opens up a space of bewilderment about the present that is potentially critical, even as it risks valorizing uselessness as such. (869)

Is this not the ground of the question that Krishna asks, of the failed pursuit that nevertheless inspires and informs him? His failure to write poetry leaves his future as a writer uncertain. There is something more at stake here, and Narayan signals a shift in the notion of writing that will come with the death of Krishna's wife.

5. What is the fate of letters?

The English Teacher recounts both a tragedy—the sudden illness and death of Krishna's wife—and a ghostly visitation from her through writing, which brings with it a profound reimagining of aesthetic education in India. Krishna eventually discovers a way to empty Wordsworth's poem and to find a new, as yet unwritten place from which to write India. He learns by absenting himself, by giving himself over to the otherness in language. He must unlearn, unmake, and detach from the rational languages he knows. The central event, then, in Narayan's autobiographical novel, is this turn away from realism, fact, or materiality and the turn toward a phantom who offers writing as a passive encounter with the otherworldly or foreign. Only in this turn does poetry become possible. One thinks of the gaping hole at the center of Virginia Woolf's novel of grief, *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs. Ramsay dies, suddenly and without warning. The death at the heart of that narrative, as in *The English Teacher*, disrupts the novel's, and the reader's, equilibrium. Time passes yet stands still in Woolf's account of a ten-year period punctuated by the excision of lives, marked by square and brutally felt brackets: "[Mr. Ramsay stumbling along a passage one dark morning, stretched out his arms, but Mrs. Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before, his arms, though stretched out, remained empty]" (128). The sentence, in all its awkward syntax, demotes the subject and with it its sentimental attachments. All that is left is the empty house, haunted by its past and standing like a dilapidated monument at the edge of a grave:

> Nothing it seemed could break that image, corrupt that innocence, or disturb the swaying mantle of silence which, week after week, in the empty room, wove into itself the falling cries of birds, ships hooting, the drone and hum of the fields, a dog's bark, a man's shout, and folded them round the house in silence. (129–30)

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Death and the passage of time reorient space, folding the noises of life into the absence that, while once a room or house, is now a beautifully realized figure for loss and for the insignificance of human lives against a vast and indifferent universe.

Krishna, too, discovers earthly indifference to the death of his wife. Death in this novel, as in Woolf's, will make formal claims on the novel, demanding a different mode of narration in its wake. In time Krishna turns to a less tangible representation of his wife, as Lily Briscoe turns to her painterly representation of Mrs. Ramsay, as if desire itself could bring these women back in every form but the material one. Lily turns to abstraction, just as Narayan turns away from literary realism to a form of representation that may be termed supernatural, magical, or fantasmatic. Introduced to a psychic medium who helps Krishna make contact with his dead wife, he begins to communicate with her through writing, first with the medium's acting as amanuensis, then directly. Writing brings his wife back to him, vaguely and uncertainly, and over a long period of time he feels the continuing presence of Susila. The break in the novel—from the domestic narrative that defines its first half to the death and psychic events that define its second—marks a shift from realism to abstraction, to a leap away from the visible known world to another, a world opened by experimentation and the willingness to let go of rational structure. Just as Woolf ventures away from the human in "Time Passes," part 2 of *To the Lighthouse*, Narayan moves beyond the limits of the human world. Krishna finds himself not immersed in broad universal time, however, but situated outside the limits of reason and in the presence of his spirit wife.

A letter determines his fate. Engulfed by grief—"The days had acquired a peculiar blankness and emptiness" (97)—he meets a boy on the street: "Are you Krishna of the English section? . . . Here is a letter for you" (105). The letter is from a stranger, the boy's father:

> Dear Sir,
> I received this message last evening, while I was busy writing something else. I didn't understand what it meant. But the directions, address and name given in it are clear and so I have sent my son to find out if the address and name are of a real person, and to deliver it. If this letter reaches you, (that is, if you are a real person) please read it, and if it means anything to you keep it. Otherwise you may just tear it up and throw it away; and forgive this intrusion. (106)

The following message comes from Krishna's wife, who wishes to communicate with Krishna using this man as a medium. It leads to Krishna's reconnection with his wife through the messages she sends by the stranger, who describes Krishna as "the unknown man for whom a letter was sent" (110). What better way to describe the colonial subject on the receiving end of a foreign message? Krishna eventually meets the man who has been scrawling out Susila's messages from the spirit world: "The blank sheet was filling up. Letters and words danced their way into existence" (114). The words come with a fury (the pencil tearing at the page) and are filled with errors that test Krishna's faith: "'Do you remember the name of our child?' The pencil wrote: 'Yes, Radha.' This was disappointing. My child was Leela" (115). Precision, Susila later explains, is an earthly concern.

There is a question to which the ghost repeatedly returns. Krishna burned most of Susila's letters in the hope that he might expunge his grief. But she insists that some remain: "At every sitting she urged me on to look for her sandalwood casket and the fourteen letters" (127). The letters are never found, although the possibility and uncertainty of their existence are thematically central. The dream of the letters must remain unfulfilled, and the point is not lost that they represent negation. Krishna burned them, but his ghost wife claims they have survived. We cannot know for sure if they exist or not. In the novel, they exist in the form of absence, a

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

hopeful absence, an absence that is part solace, mixed with confusion and uncertainty in what we might now see as a characteristic Narayan formulation. What is the fate of these letters? What, Narayan implies, is the fate of Indian letters more generally? What has been lost? What remains unwritten? What remains to be discovered?

The possibility of the letters as a material sign of Krishna's past happiness, rendered immaterial, becomes a lingering hope, a reason to continue. Their presence-absence hovers over Krishna like the uncertainty of fate itself. Longing now defines the letters, but so does something lighter, more laughable. He creates new possibilities for himself in letters, especially as he contemplates his resignation letter from the Albert Mission College:

> I would send in a letter which would be a classic in its own way, and which would singe the fingers of whoever touched it. In it I was going to attack a whole century of false education. I was going to explain why I could no longer stuff Shakespeare and Elizabethan metre and Romantic poetry for the hundredth time into young minds and feed them on the dead mutton of literary analysis and theories and histories, while what they needed was lessons in the fullest use of the mind. This education had reduced us to a nation of morons; we were strangers to our own culture and camp followers of another culture, feeding on leavings and garbage. (178)

Here we have Krishna, perhaps Narayan too, amplified, politicized, and polemical. But this letter is not sent: Krishna revises and rewrites it many times, finally settling on this: "Dear Sir, I beg to tender my resignation for personal reasons. I request you to relieve me immediately . . ." (179). His letter turns away from rage, speaking the avoidant and small-scale language of a personal matter. Krishna, Narayan underscores for us, is not a revolutionary hero or a hero of any sort. Rather, he chooses the quiet and conflict-free path. The unwritten letter of resignation speaks with a volume that is dialed up by our frustration and by the irony of its being unsent. It speaks in an unexpected voice, a voice from the shadows, a voice that Principal Brown, and indeed generations of readers of Narayan's work, has not heard. This is the only moment I know in Narayan's fiction where open political commentary interjects, even as it is distanced, layered, ironized, and silenced by a plot that will not have the colonial authority read it.

That silence has a lot to do with Narayan's narrative stance. We cannot know, he seems to say, the fate of letters that are lost or that are still seeking their proper form. The author turns away from the Romantic sensibility that has governed Krishna's approach to language. Demoting the ego, he moves away from any notion of a knowing or actiox-based hero. The secular and skeptical voice of the English teacher is altered, even evacuated, as he finds himself confronting a new crisis, one associated with language and with his relation to the past.

6. What claim does the past have on the present?

Or, how nostalgic are these novels? Malgudi might be said to emanate from the kind of longing that Susan Stewart describes as the "social disease of nostalgia" (ix). In this view of nostalgia, sadness perpetually seeks its lost object in a Lacanian circuit of desire. The "desire for desire" (23) keeps the nostalgic suspended in an ideological web of longing, yearning for that mythic space before difference sundered the dream of unity, authenticity, and pure, unalienated language.

Stewart's beautifully compressed argument about the animating dreams that propel nostalgia is immediately convincing. But does Malgudi suggest a wider desire to restore an enchanted past? Narayan's embrace of the past through the hazy streets and back alleys of Malgudi stirs fond memory and seems to

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

remove us from the political urgencies of the present. Yet resistant to change, the town refuses teleological logic: time is not a critical concern among its loafers and its lives lived in slow motion. The novels move themselves out of the determining framework that time imposes, so that the division into tenses to separate past, present, and future becomes unimportant. In many ways this defiance of the logic of industrial, secular time, which too is a legacy of the British,[2] is antimodern. Except that Malgudi incorporates the demands of the working world, the recognition of scheduled time, even as it leaves space for multiple conceptions of time. The presence of the railway station (the origin of Malgudi, Narayan has explained) brings timetables into account, whether characters abide by them or not. Krishna eventually takes himself out of measured time when he quits his job. The novel ends as he makes himself independent from the colonial structure, choosing to join a small, freewheeling school with no structure to speak of, save for the thatched roof, the mud and bamboo walls, and the story hours that fall at any hour. Personal decisions reverberate, or promise to reverberate, in this microversion of noncooperation. There may be an effect of timelessness in Malgudi, but history always presses in on the town's inhabitants. The reader is reminded of changes in the quiet patterns of Malgudi life: a Quit India rock goes through a distant window in *Swami and Friends*, Gandhi inspires love and struggle in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, a chai seller's fortunes change after independence in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, and the English teacher ultimately rejects English education.

Is Krishna's Malgudi nostalgic? Consider Svetlana Boym's distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgias—one a cover for absolutist strivings (for a pure religion, a pure nation, etc.), the other more open to the ambivalence that constitutes longing for a different time or space. Reflective nostalgia incorporates both yearning and irony, loss and its aftermath; the sense of pleasure in the backward glance is still thoughtful, recognizing limitation and the complication that a fantasy of return must remain a fantasy. The ache here is sought after, indulged, and contextualized, even if the contextualizing places us back in a less indulgent present. Not all nostalgics seek to live solely in the past, after all.

Boym stresses the wistfulness at the heart of the "off-modern," which is an accurate enough description of Narayan's career:

> [T]here is a tradition of critical reflection on the modern condition that incorporates nostalgia. It can be called "off-modern." The adverb "off" confuses our sense of direction. It makes us explore side shadows and back alleys, rather than the straight road of progress; it allows us to take a detour from the deterministic narratives of history. Off-modernism offers a critique of both the modern fascination with newness and the no-less-modern reinvention of tradition. (9)

Off-modernism encapsulates Narayan's skepticism about the modern age, even as Narayan fully and comically participates in its reinvention. He is hardly a modernist if we hold strictly to modernism's experimental forms, rejection of the old, and evacuation of god. But he participates in that movement and in that moment, even from the rustic coconut mats and charpoys of Malgudi. Global modernism, perhaps, has yet to account for the affective possibilities offered by writers like Narayan, who do not write novels in the ways we associate with Anand, Rao, Ahmed Ali, Premchand, or Tagore (among countless others), that foreground political commitments, or by writers like G. V. Desani, who do not tear away the conventions of novelistic form. Yet Narayan keeps storytelling at the center of cultural life and recognizes that the work of the writer—even if laughably without result, even if devoted to something more like unwriting than writing—contributes something essential to modern life.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

7. What is the value of unwriting?

Narayan's fictional world unwrites a colonial legacy that connects the writer with the account books of empire on the one hand and with the makers of the literary canon on the other—that is, Narayan revalues language, placing it outside an ordering regime based on hierarchy and inside a community of consumers. His fictional world suggests modes of unwriting through the negation that irony promotes and through a ghostly correspondence. And it suggests the power of the lost text, the unwritten text, or the potential text by the would-be writer, who must remain a shadowy figure, off-center, angled away from canonical traditions and thus bound up in a kind of negativity, despite whatever pleasures attend his or her suspended stance.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith writes in *Contingencies of Value*, "For like all value, literary value is not the property of an object *or* of a subject but, rather, *the product of the dynamics of a system*" (15). Global modernism, the literary exchange that renegotiates historical and aesthetic relations as we have conventionally understood them, is always transactional modernism, which carries with it, as Harish Trivedi reminds us, the "whiff of pervasive economic implication" (1). Art in the age of empire is involved in a continuous process of negotiation and exchange, circulating around questions of value and commerce. What, for example, is the value of literary writing in the colonies, and of writing in English? How might one frame the value of writing at the extraordinary moment of regime change? Narayan's novels are immersed in these questions, as if working out, on every page, the cost of writing itself. In the world of Malgudi, the value of work, rooms, sweets, kitchen staples, and of everyday living is always at play. For Narayan, literary value exists in an economy of goods and services, of home prices and home repairs, of family inheritances, and of the necessity for work (even as writing, especially the pretensions of the writer, is consistently mocked). Malgudi's printers—Narayan devotes two novels to them—are not printing fine literature; what rolls off their presses are self-published golden thoughts of fatuous officials, wedding invitations by beleaguered fathers, colored fruit juice labels, business cards and stationery, annual reports, and bank ledgers. These are the texts on which the town depends for its daily functioning. Narayan thinks about the work and business of writing, from the mental effort it takes to give birth to an idea to the physical effort needed to crank out its result on an old treadle printing press. The labor of writing comes up repeatedly in his memoirs, even as he writes with studied effortlessness.

Narayan stages, in the dreaminess and soft vacancies of Malgudi, the capacities of unwriting. He has fashioned a way to write about India that requires both an exhibition of the vacuity of the old way (the letter *d*, Macaulay, Wordsworth, and so on) and a display of another way through a tale of failed authorship. One does not find experimental form in the novels of Malgudi, just layer upon layer of ironic commentary about the town, its inhabitants, its historical moment, and the activity or inactivity of writing. Emerging in his comic episodes and in his baffled characters is the recognition of the importance of keeping things unsettled, in suspension, or visible only in their negation. In *The English Teacher*, Krishna's future is inactive, because Krishna will be opting out, quitting his job, moving beyond any framework of economic or imperial exchange. If the English empire and the English language are productive—that is, tied up with the capitalist profit motives that governed colonial administration and education—Narayan emphasizes the unproductive in response. *The English Teacher* refuses us any sense of progress, forward-moving time, or productive activity. Rather, the inaction at the end of the novel contradicts the doing that is required in the frame-

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press

work of economic exchange: it is a model of noncompliance that goes beyond passive resistance as we have historically understood it in early-twentieth-century India. The unwisdom of writing figures centrally across the Malgudi works as a reminder and an invocation of the enabling, if uncertain, powers of unwriting the world as we have known it.

Notes

My thanks to the friends and colleagues who commented on earlier versions of this essay, including Constance Furey, Don Gray, Susan Gubar, Patricia Ingham, Madhavi Menon, Eyal Peretz, Ranu Samantrai, and Shane Vogel.

1. Although Narayan is an immensely popular writer, his work has not instigated commentary equal to the breadth and duration of his artistic output. There are exceptions, of course, including John Thieme's excellent monograph.

2. See Vanessa Ogle's history of the effects of the time reform movement in the colonies.

Works Cited

Almond, Ian. "Dissolving 'Indianness': How Europeans Read Indian Fiction." *Orbis Litterarum* 60 (2005): 145–58. *JSTOR*. Web. 8 Apr. 2013.

Anand, Mulk Raj. *The King-Emperor's English; or, The Role of the English Language in the Free India*. Bombay: Hind Kitabs, 1948. Print.

Bernstein, Jeremy. *Dawning of the Raj: The Life and Trials of Warren Hastings*. London: Aurum, 2001. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817." *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 145–74. Print.

Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents." *Hedgehog Review* (2007): 7–18. Web. 10 Sept. 2013.

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters*. Trans. M. B. Debevoise. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.

de Man, Paul. "The Concept of Irony." *Aesthetic Ideology*. Ed. Andrzej Warminski. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. 163–84. Print.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge*. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Joshi, Priya. *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*. New York: Columbia UP, 2002.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education.'" *History of English Studies Page*. Ed. Rita Raley. Dept. of English, U of California, Santa Barbara, Sept. 2002. Web. 20 Nov. 2013.

Narayan, R. K. *The English Teacher*. 1945. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980. Print.

———. Letter to Georges Cuibus, Bucharest, Rumania. 6 Oct. 1964. Box 12. R. K. Narayan Collection. Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, Boston U.

———. *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*. 1961. New York: Penguin, 1983. Print.

———. *My Days: My Memoir*. New York: Picador, 1974. Print.

———. "The Problem of the Indian Writer." *A Storyteller's World: Stories, Essays, Sketches*. New York: Penguin, 1989. 14–19. Print.

———. *The Vendor of Sweets*. 1967. New York: Penguin, 1983. Print.

Nealon, Christopher. "The Poetic Case." *Critical Inquiry* 33.4 (2007): 864–86. *JSTOR*. Web. 19 June 2012.

Ogle, Vanessa. "What Time Is It? The Pluralization of Time and the Global Condition, 1870s–1940s." *American Historical Review* Dec. 2013: 1376–402. Amer. Historical Assn. Web. 9 July 2014.

Palmer, D. J. *The Rise of English Studies*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965. Print.

Rajan, Balachandra. *Under Western Eyes: India from Milton to Macaulay*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999. Print.

Rao, Raja. "Author's Foreword." *Kanthapura*. 1938. New York: New Directions, 1967. vii–viii. Print.

Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Trans. Reginald Snell. Mineola: Dover, 2004. Print.

Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. Print.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2012. Print.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Durham: Duke UP, 1993. Print.

Thieme, John. *R. K. Narayan*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007. Print.

Trivedi, Harish. *Colonial Transactions: English Literature and India*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. Print.

Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1989. Print.

Woolf, Virginia. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt, 1989. Print.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2016.131.3.622 Published online by Cambridge University Press