



A vallev in Norwav

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THE PERCEPTION OF FICTION

Cay Dollerup

A great respect for common sense and for the individual reader permeates Bent Nordhjem's closely knit *What Fiction Means* (1987). Taking his examples from English narrative fiction, Bent Nordhjem discusses the relationship between perception (reading) and the aesthetic percept, specifically the novel. He accepts that even the best critical overview ("simultaneous reading") is not perfect and will tend to make some passages and themes stand out rather than others. However, in his study, Bent Nordhjem focuses on the beginning and the ending of a text, as the points where a reader embarks on the fine balancing act which constitutes the aesthetic reading process, and where the author takes leave of his creation.

Taking Bent Nordhjem's "endings are interesting not so much by the support they offer the reader as by the trouble they give the writer" (49) at face value, we shall here concentrate on a beginning, on the opening words of a work of fiction.

I shall discuss some readings of the beginning of the short story *The Ring* by Karen Blixen (Isak Dinesen). The aim is to illustrate readings as experienced by our readers. What we see are therefore 'progressive readings' to use Bent Nordhjem's term.

The short story in question was published in 1958 in both Danish and English in the collection *Skabneanedoter* and *Anecdotes of Destiny*.¹ In it, a newlywed couple go for a walk to the sheep-pen on their estate. The young wife, who has vowed to herself never to keep any secrets from her husband, is happy beyond her wildest dreams. She has a minor altercation with him while they are at the sheep-pen, and walks home by herself. On the way, she wanders into a grove where she encounters a dangerous sheep thief. So as to make him disappear, she offers him her most precious possession - her wedding ring. During this transaction, it falls to the ground; the thief vanishes. When she meets her husband again, she tells him she has lost her wedding ring but does not know where.

52 Danes, 8 Americans, and 2 Canadians read this short story in our studies, where readers report in the course of their readings; we shall focus exclusively on their responses to the first 40 lines. These contain a long description of the happiness of the young wife, Lovise, and end with a location of the story in time (June). The first 40 lines of the short story run as follows:

The Ring

Karen Blixen

One summer a century and a half ago, a young squire and his wife went for a walk on their estate.

They had been man and wife for a week. It had not been easy for them to marry, for her family was higher in rank, and wealthier, than his. But the two young people - who were now twenty-three and nineteen years old - had loved one another from childhood and had been faithful in their love. At long last her haughty and purse-proud parents had had to give in.

Words cannot describe the happiness of the newly-weds. Now there would be no more brief, stolen meetings and little tearstained billets-doux smuggled in and out. Before God and men they were now one, they could walk arm-in-arm openly for all the world to see, and drive in the same carriage, and thus they would walk and drive to the end of their days. Their distant, unattainable paradise had descended to earth and - strangely and delightfully - had turned out to be full of all the small everyday things: fun and games, morning coffee and evening tea, horses and dogs, hayloads and thunder-showers and rainbows.

Konrad, the young husband, had solemnly vowed to himself that from now on no stone should lie in the path of his beloved, nor any shadow fall there. The young wife, Lovise - Lise to her friends - felt that for the first time in her life she was as free as a bird, because from now on it was unthinkable that she should have any secret from her husband.

The simple, rustic atmosphere in Lise's life at the estate charmed and delighted her every day.

She frequently had to stop in the middle of her chores to laugh at the thought of her husband's worrying that the life he could offer her was not truly up to her standard. Not long ago she had been playing with dolls; now, brushing her own beautiful hair, arranging things in her linen cupboard and putting flowers in water, she had come straight back to her happy world of childhood: things were done with profound, solemn ^{gravity} and ceremonious care - and all the time you were fully aware that you were playing.

It was a lovely morning in June. Light fleecy clouds drifted high in the sky, and the air was full of fresh, sweet scents. Lise wore a white frock and a large Italian straw hat with light blue ribbons. She and her husband took a track, winding romantically through the garden and the park, which then became a path leading across the meadow, between clusters of large trees, across a creek and along a grove, to the sheep-pens. ...// 133



Rosenborg – originally a royal summer residence (c. 1625)

The 'motive'

Bent Nordhjem argues that for an act of perception to take place, there must be a motive, that is, "an attraction between the patterned object and the self /of the reader/ which makes the latter regard the former as interesting, relevant, valuable, etc." (19)

We can follow the creation of this attraction in some extreme responses:

The most obvious of these are those where the 'non-self', the 'patterned percept,' in this case the short story, is rejected by the reader. Such a rejection is illustrated by the following readings:

"'One summer morning a century and half ago, a young squire and his wife went for a walk on their estate' That's some beginning. Yawn." -"/'Words cannot describe the happiness of the newlyweds.'/ At this stage I would have stopped reading if I were reading this on my own." (32FDk/69).²

"'Words cannot describe their happiness.. .they were now one.' It sounds a bit corny. Yack!" - - -
"Their distant, unattainable paradise had descended to earth. Whenever I read stuff like that I groan inwardly." (7MCan/88)

A rejection does not necessarily happen at such an early stage, however. We may quote two other readings where rejection and acceptance are in the offing at the beginning but are not fully realised until later on:

"'Now there would be no more brief, stolen meetings and little tearstained billets-doux.' If I did not know the author, this would make me expect some sentimental nonsense." -"/...they would walk and drive to the end of their days'. This is a bit ironic." ---"/ Konrad the young husband/ had solemnly vowed to himself that from now on no stone should lie in the path of his beloved, nor any shadow fall there.' I begin to feel that their relationship is ridiculous." - - - "/They hear about sick lambs/ I start lik-

ing the story a bit.” - - - ”/Lise starts walking back home on her own/ I do not like the story nor her. It is so full of contradictions.” (26MDk/69)

”“One summer morning’. ‘It was a summer morning in the country’ (This is a quotation from the opening lines of a Danish classic). ...// 134 ... This rarely happens in my readings but here it is: a stylistic quotation.” - - - ”/The simple rustic atmosphere in Lise’s life at the estate charmed and delighted her every day’. I have concluded that the story is worth reading. Although the style is complicated, it is wellwritten: A fairytale style which begins some kind of fairytale story.” (8MDk/69)

The stages of meaning

In *What Fiction Means* (31-32), Bent Nordhjem makes distinctions between four stages of meaning, implying a taxonomy:

”To understand a text is to grasp its meaning. So, if understanding is a step-by-step process there must also be stages of meaning. The number of such stages is, in principle, indefinite; but they fall naturally into the following categories:

(1) Every particle of a text (every word, or for that matter, every prefix or suffix or every combination of words) is a lexical entity, or bundle of semantic possibilities. What we might call the ‘lexical meaning’ is then, the pre-textual meaning stage.

(2) As soon as the pre-textual meaning is incorporated into a context, a selection takes place: some of the pre-textual possibilities are scrapped while others are retained. The ‘contextual meaning’ of a word (etc.) is the meaning it acquires when it becomes part of a longer (yet unfinished) text.

(3) The third stage in the evolution of meaning may be termed ‘significance’. A word becomes significant when it is grasped as part of the whole structure. This is the case if it contributes to (interacts with) the perspective of the whole.

(4) The fourth stage occurs when a part of a text is no longer thought of as a linguistic item but as an object, an act, an incident, a setting, a character, etc., in short, when attention shifts from the manner of the description to that which is described. Anything described in a story may achieve, or contribute to, a ‘symbolic meaning’ and thus interact with the perspective.” (*What Fiction Means*, 31-32).

The first stage in Nordhjem’s analysis concerns the fact that every textual particle has potential meanings.

Among the readings we have fairly clear-cut examples of lexical units making their way in the responses: ...// 135 ...

Danish readers often make note of old-fashioned formal elements in Karen Blixen’s mode of writing; these observations are summed up as follows : ”I notice that nouns have capitals and we find ‘aa’ instead of ‘å’.” In this particular case, the reader even uses the orthography for placing the story: ”It is fairly old.” (4FDk/88).

However, in the readings of this beginning, only one reader takes note of a specific word: ”‘She and her husband took a track’. ‘Track’ is not a common word for a walk.” (3MUs/88). Conversely, many readers respond to the proper names of the characters:

"Their names:/Konrad and Lovise, they are/ comical. This was probably not intended." (39F/69) One reader even suggests a symbolic meaning in part of the husband's name in the following, untranslatable suggestion: "Oh, so his name is 'Konrad'. He may be a 'rad (archaic: a clever fellow)'. Maybe it is symbolic." ("Ah, han hedder 'Konrad'. Måske er han en rad. Måske er det noget symbolsk." (7FDk/88)

In one case a reader begins to single out a word as if it were a key word: "'They had been man and wife for a week.' If I was doing a feminist study of the story, I would say - Why not husband and wife or man and woman?" - "'Before God and men'. It sounds strange; 'men'. It's just because I always notice the language." (8FCan/89)³

There are numerous examples that phrases combine with others to contribute to a whole, 'a percept' (Nordhjem's third stage).

Some readers report all wordings they consider emphatic and worthy of note in the course of the reading: "They are newly-weds." - "'childhood'. It is a piece of information." - "'her haughty and purse-proud parents had had to give in.' obstacles." - "'little tearstained billets-doux'. This is a pastiche." - "'they could walk armin-arm'. Now they can show off their relationship to the world." (12MDk/69)

In the following example the reader expands on a social gap between the newly-weds:

"'for her family was higher in rank'. This is a difference in social class." - "'the stolen meetings'. We realise that it had been hard for them to get one another." (31 MDk/69. This line of interpretation is then abandoned.)

In the passage chosen, however, this feature in the literary experience is really seen most distinctly in rejections: "/First three lines/. I just feel we are in for something." - "/c. line 10/ ... // 136 ... Yeah, romantic, isn't it." - "/stolen meetings'/ Oh, no: does it go on in this way?" - Laughter: "It's just her name, Lovise. It sounds funny." - "/c. line 25/ This is banal." (23FDk/69).

Nordhjem's 'fourth stage' where parts of a text cease to be linguistic entities and merge into an organic whole, a 'percept', such as a character, a setting, and the like, is found in most readings.

We may quote two examples of how readers recreate the setting, at the beginning:

"'a century and a half ago, a young squire and his wife went for a walk on their estate.' This makes you think that they are pretty well off." (2FUs/88)

"One summer morning ... At long last her haughty and purse-proud parents had had to give in/These are the first 8 lines/. These lines definitely paint a clear picture of what is going on. I envisage a large meadow, eighteenth century. A guy with a hat and moustache. They are very much in love, and it is a wonderful day in a very rural atmosphere." (4MUs/88)

The general orientation at the beginning

Nordhjem states that "there can be no progressive reading which does not begin, however tentatively and conjecturally, to make assumptions about the general direction the work is taking." (30)

This 'taking of bearings' is one of the most striking features in the reader responses. It is certainly apparent in several of the above excerpts. It is particularly obvious in responses which have an evaluative or anticipatory character.

The following series of statements contains evaluations and, at the same time, relates the short sto-

ry's world and the style of the narrative to extratextual phenomena: "One summer morning ...a walk on their estate'. My first impression is that this is going to be a fairy tale." - "They loved one another from childhood...' Funny ages to be married at. A long time to be dedicated, since childhood." - "strangely and delightfully -... hayloads and thundershowers and rainbows.' Funny things to think of, being married." - "the young husband had vowed himself that from now on no stone should lie in the path of his beloved, nor any shadow fall there. Lovise, felt that ...she was free as bird'. I don't understand why she was 'free as a bird'. Now she has to tell him everything, so I don't understand why she is free." (5FUs/88) ...// 137 ...

This interplay with the text then leads to anticipations such as

"her family was higher in rank, and wealthier, than his.' So this puts things in place. I expect the story to deal with the rich father." (39FDk/69)

'c. 1. 40'. It is just a kind of introduction to how they met. The only thing I can see is that everything is too perfect and maybe they are in for a downfall. The beginning is kind of slow." (1 FUs/88)

"because from now on it was unthinkable that she should have any secrets from her husband.' This sets you thinking that there is going to be some sort of secret ...It is a good introduction." (6FUs/ 88)

"the parents had given in.' One appreciates that there is a difference between what it (i.e the text) says and what one 'feels. We get a premonition of conflicts which have existed before, and which may be stirred up again." - "Words cannot describe the happiness of the newly-weds. etc.' Her happiness has been described in such exuberant terms, so artificially. It appears to be a house of cards." (15MDk/69)

The interplay

The scholar reading this article may object that what I have presented above is confused. Nevertheless I have tried to quote the reports of readers fairly, and in actual readings there are no easily definable rules that readers have to abide by.

In Bent Nordhjem's discussion there is, on the printed page, a taxonomy of difference between the lexis of stage 1 and the 'percept' of stage 4.

In the readers' readings there is no such barrier, not even a typographical one:

"Until ...rainbows.' Nothing special has happened. We have only got the introduction of a story." - "At her name, 'Lovise', we get an insight; there may be conflicts in their marriage." (34MDk/69)

Similarly, it will have been noticed that I have omitted to produce examples of Bent Nordhjem's stage 2, the contextual meaning of lexical terms.

It is far from my intention to criticise Bent Nordhjem for a point he never made: Nowhere does he posit the existence of any gap between the lexis and the 'percepts'. ...// 138 ... On the contrary, my point is that critical works such as Bent Nordhjem's can provide useful critical tools for our understanding of the process of reading and the enjoyment of literature: "In the final analysis, the quest which vitalises the art of fiction is motivated by a deep-rooted ambition to discover the blend or system of balances that yields the elixir of fiction. No doubt this is a quest that may go on in perpetuity because the goal is

elusive and indefinite; but that only heightens its potency as an artistic motive.” (27)

Neither reader response criticism nor Bent Nordhjem’s approach provides the ultimate answer; but they can be used to illustrate one another. This opens up the way for a fruitful dialogue, for an open-minded mutual respect. Bent Nordhjem’s perceptive work covers the critical side with common sense, perception, and level-headedness.

The last qualities are also those which I have personally appreciated most in my association with Bent Nordhjem over the thirty years that I have known him, as teacher, researcher, and fellow administrator.

Notes

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1. The story differs in its Danish and English version, a feature discussed in *Literary Translation, Potential Interpretations, and Criticism*. See this homepage # 163.
2. Some statements are edited for clarity. (One problem facing reader response research is that it is often necessary to edit statements to cut out all the ‘noise’ (incomplete sentences)). The statements made by Danish readers have been translated. Quotations from the text are from the translation of the Danish text which we had to undertake because of the author’s (legitimate) deviations between her Danish and English versions. ”...” indicate readers’ speeches. ‘...’ are usually quotations from the text. - shows a pause, usually between two speeches. - - - indicates excisions. ...// 139 ...The readers are referred to by numbers; and otherwise as follows: F=female; M=male; Dk=Danish; Us=American; Can=Canadian. The final figure gives the year when the interview took place. The interviews in 1968 and 1969 were part of a study of ‘tension, intensity and the like’ in responses. The 1988 and 1989 study was undertaken to complete our picture of reading in process.
3. Except for the response ”She sees this ring in terms of the two men; one of them gave it to her, the other kicked it away.” (1. 265-266) 8FCan/89 does not take up this strand of ‘men’ later on.



The park of a Danish estate

