A Departure and a Return: Back to Self-expression

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Abstract

This article attepmts to investigate the motives of a contemporary American writer, Charles Baxter, for making a personal appearance in one of his short stories. The move is particularly interesting because Baxter is an objective author who has cultivated his omniscient narrator into an eyewitness observer of, and a commentator on, the phenomenal world. Baxter's appearance in the tale is a sign of subjective involvement reminiscent of past narrative conventions that are no longer in use.

My invvestigation finds that Baxter's motive behind the move proves to be a desire to comment on his own act of narration and to disclose its contradictions and limitations to the reader. This act of self-revelation is very much in keeping with the self-reflective moves of modern fiction. But Baxter adds to modern fiction's recognition of its lost claims to imitation and representation by criticizing its claims to creation. Self-critically, he admits that the claims to creation takes modern fiction back to the subjective, self-expressive and self-assertive acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century narrative conventions.

When an objective author makes a flesh-and-blood appearance in one of his tales, he arouses curiosity and forces the reader to question the act. Charles Baxter is a contemporary American writer who has striven to cultivate the subjective imagination of the creative consciousness, and its release in the all-pervading presence of the omniscient narraor, into an empirical act of narration that depends on observation.[1] His omniscient narrator has thus acquired powerful shades of the on-looker's manner of narrtion.[2] Throughout three collections of short stories, this narrator has struggled to become an eyewitness observer of, and a commentator on, the phenomenal world. Nevertheless, Baxter makes a personal appearance in the concluding story of the second collection, *Through the Safety Net*, only to resume his usual form of cultivated omniscience in the third collection. And since the gesture seems to subvert his predominant objectivity and reserve by going to the extreme of making the author personally involved in the story, it forces the reader to question its nature and implications.[3] Why does Baxter make a personal appearance in one of his tales after he has striven to give his narrative voice a detached and restrained tone? Has he decided to retreat from his concurrence to the march of literary theory by reaching back to the eighteenth and nineteenth-century narrative convention?[4] Or does he have special reasons for doing so? And if the case is so, what are these reasons, and what message does he wish to communicate by making his appearance in his short story, "A Late Sunday Afternoon by the Huron"?

Baxter's appearance in the story does not seem to be a falling back on the eighteenth and nineteenth-century narrative convention nor a retreat from the attitude of reserve and detachment because the story, despite its author's personal appearance on the scene, retains a narrator and maintains a sense of separateness between the two figures, author and narrator, in their function in the story. The narrator plays his objective role of eyewitness observer of, and a commentator on, the park scene while the author remains a character in the story who does not interfere with the activity of the narrator. He makes his appearance on the scene, privately reflects on some of its aspects and then departs without disturbing the flow of the story. The narrator continues to observe and report phenomena uninterrupted.

The sense of separateness between the two figures materializes best in their temporal and spatial presence in the story. The eyewitness narrator presumably arrives first. He opens the story, sets up the setting and introduces the characters as they gradually make their appearance on the scene. He strives to follow their moves and describe their activities during the day. The duration of his story is twelve hours and five minutes. It opens around 10:25 in the morning and closes at 10:30 in the evening. The author appears with his wife and son at 2:30 in the afternoon and departs at some indefinite hour before sunset.[5] Characters start arriving at the park scene four hours before the author makes his appearance. Others continue to arrive after his departure. Their moves into and out of the park scene do not depend on the author's presence. And the narrator's description of their activities is totally independent of the author's visual perception of the place.

Such perception is identifiably limited. On his arrival at the park, the author first announces the manner in which he and his family intend to spend the day. His wife and son have "walked down to the water pump, to work the handle, listen to it creak, and put their hands in the cold water as it comes at last, gushing out. Perhaps they will drink the water, taste its heavy mineral content" (206). Significantly, the author's description of his wife and son's activity occurs in uncertain terms. He is not sure if they are going to taste the water or not. He is not the eyewitness narrator who can follow them to the water pump and ascertain all moves. He is an ordinary character in the story.

This identity is extensively reductive of the author's role in the story. His decision to be inactive during the day does not affect the characters' activities nor the narrator's description of their moves. Speaking of how he wishes to spend the day, the narrator says: "I'm lying here on the grass in the shade, some distance downstream from everyone else, dozing off for a moment." Significantly, the action on the park scene goes on. The next paragraph reads: "On the second inning, Groh's Chevrolet is at bat" and the following runs: "Rolfe looks up from his book, his eyes slightly wet" (206). The eyewitness narrator continues to describe and narrate regardless of what the author does. The author is not a narrator on whose wakefulness the action depends. Hence, his next assertion "I myself have dozed off" is juxtaposed against Rolfe's sleeplessness: "Rolfe is not asleep" (209). People are still awake and active and the narrator continues to observe and describe their moves despite the fact that the author has fallen asleep.

Although it frees Baxter from association with subjective writers, the sense of separateness between the narrator and the visiting author does not explain why the author makes his appearance in the story. However, the author's private reflections on the scene and his isolated comments on some of its aspects, combined with the sense of separateness between the two figures, do provide suggestive hints. The gist of his reflections is the assertion that he wishes to, but cannot, write a story. Because such an assertion goes hand in hand with the narrator's successful act of story-telling, it consequently draws attention to this act and its tactics.

The first of these reflections occurs as the beauty of the scene awakens the author's artistic sense and materializes in a desire to write a story: "I think about all the people here, the beautiful random motion of everyone taking the day off, and for an instant I think of fitting them into some kind of a story." Yet something in the scene itself defeats this desire: "There is no story here" (208). Although he does define the force that contradicts his wish and makes it "impossible," the author insinuates it before he departs from the scene.

The moment of the author's departure is characterized by a last glance at the people and an attempt "to fix them into a scene of stationary, luminous repose, in which they would be given an instant of formal visual precision." This desire for aesthetic contemplation that precedes creativity is not realized: "I cannot do it," the author admits.[6] And he soon explains his defeat, saying: "These people keep moving out and away from the neat visual pattern I am hoping for" (212). Life as a process, a constant movement in space and time, defeats the author's attempt

to freeze its objects into a state for aesthetic contemplation, before transforming them into fictional entities.[7] To such defeat by process the author seems reconciled. His final words before he departs are: “What a relief it is, sometimes, not to tell a story about these people” (214).[8]

The author’s defeat draws attention to the narrator’s successful act of story-telling and its maneuvers.[9] The most prominent feature of this act is its reliance on actual observation of people and phenomena. For example, the narrator follows the changes in the sky, caused by the movement of the clouds during the day, in an eyewitness manner. First, at 10:40 in the morning: “The midmorning sky is flecked with cirrus clouds, fleecy lines of ice crystals twenty thousand feet overhead, often the vanguard of a low-pressure front. It might rain” (197). Next, at 11:40 the “cirrus clouds, overhead an hour ago, are now near the east horizon” (200). And, at 1:30: “Stratocumulus clouds appear in the west, moving visibly across the sky in a straight-edged line. For the first time today, a cloud covers the sun. But the cloud continues to move eastward, and the sun reappears” (203). And later on in the day: “More broken clouds appear in the sky from the west, greater in thickness, some with dark centers. With these clouds passing in front of the sun, the effect is that of some one hitting an outdoor light switch” (204). The narrator’s accurate description of natural phenomena and the immediacy of his responses to their changes leave no doubt as to his actual presence on the spot. He is an eyewitness of the scene .

His presence and attitude as an on-looker also surface in the narrator's introduction of people into the park scene and his description of their activities during the day. For example, he reports Lincoln and Evie's arrival in a detailed manner of virtual observation:

> Among these early arriving families a couple, holding hands at the fingertips, stands next to the water. They appear to be unmarried and in their early twenties. Now he is taking off his blue cotton jacket and dropping it on the grass; then he takes off his shoes and socks and rolls up his cotton cuffs. (197)

Such an on-looker's manner of narration characterizes the narrator's description of all people and activities during his twelve hours of presumed presence on the park scene.

The narrator's success with his eyewitness technique depends on his manipulation of language and themes. To the problem of life as a process (a constant movement in space and time that defeats the author's attempt to write a story), the narrator responds in clever shifts in verb tenses depending on whether he catches people at the beginning, in the middle or at the end of their activities. For example, engaged in the description of Lincoln and Evie as well as a thirtteen-year-old boy, who happens to be nearby and could be discerned simultaneously with the couple, the narrator misses the moment of the O'Hara family's arrival. Therefore, he shifts his present tense into the past when reporting it: "The O'Hara family arrived here thirty minutes ago." By the time he spots them, "the mother has already set up a red-checkered plastic tablecloth," and the narrator

shifts into the present perfect tense. But once on the spot, he can resume the present tense when he describes Mr. O'Hara "at the grill" as he "squirts fluid over a heap of coals" (198). The successive shifts in verb tenses enable the narrator to maintain his eyewitness manner of representation in the middle of the fluid flux of process.

Alongside with shifts in verb tenses, the narrator also employs thematic parallels to help him cope with the fast temporal and spatial shifts caused by process and, subsequently, to preserve his eyewitness act of narration. One of these links occurs when the narrator, involved in describing the arrival of the four teenagers, misses the arrival of the Sinclairs. Unable to pin that moment in his time-sequence, he introduces the family in the following manner: "Another family, the Sinclairs, sets up a complicated lunch" (200). The narrator frees himself from process by depending on the theme of lunch preparation, a major preoccupation of people in the park that day. This reliance allows the narrator to dispense with the necessity of having to freeze the Sinclair's arrival in time. Now he can comfortably report the rest of their activities in the present tense; Matt "plays catch with his father"; Mrs. Sinclair "ties their mongrel terrier, Jesse, to the leg of the picnic table"; the grandmother "sits in a folding chair, touching her gray hair" (200).

Thus, the story that the author cannot write becomes possible through the eyewitness narrator's manipulation of language and themes. Through his maneuvers, time ceases to be a problem and process falls under control. The

author's helpless confrontation with the flux of life triumphs, in the narrator's hands, into a story.

Neverthelss, the story is called "A Late Sunday Afternoon by the Huron." The emphasis in the title falls on the author who makes a late appearance on the scene (precisely at 2:30 in the afternoon) not on the narrator who presumably arrives first and begins his description as early as 10:25 in the morning. And the question that subsequently urges itself is why does the title emphasize the defeated author and neglect the triumphant narrator?

The emphasis in the title falls on the author not on the narrator because the narrator, unlike the author, never makes an actual appearance on the scene. He pretends to be on the spot and strives to create the illusion of being an eyewitness observer of its events when, most probably, he is sitting at his desk at home preoccupied with the act of writing a story. And the story, despite its contrary assertion, has signs that testify to the narrator's absence and retreat from the scene.

One of these signs is the fact that the narrator's description of the scene involves heavy drawing on geographical facts and historical information about the place, not mere observation of phenomena. The narrator's attempt to geographically orient the scene of action runs in the following manner:

> Delhi Metropark stands 850 feet above sea level and is located six miles west of Ann Arbor, Michigan, along the Huron River. This river originates in Pontiac lake to the north and flows into Lake Erie, eighty miles downstream. The latitude of this spot is

> 42 degrees, 52 minutes, 30 seconds, the longitude 83 degrees, 52 minutes, 30 seconds. (197)

The description goes beyond ordinary scenic presentation. It shows reliance on the narrator's scientific knowledge of the place. Such knowledge the narrator could not have readily received by looking on the scene. It could have only originated in a different experience that either precedes, or succeeds, exposure to the scene but is never simultaneous with it.

Similarly, the historic pieces of information that intersperse the action disclose an act of reading in the history of the place that goes beyond visual perception:

> The Potawatoni Indians, who once lived here, part of the larger Alogonquian group, were pushed during the late-eighteenth-century migrations into this area from the south and west by the more warlike Sioux. The Potawatonis were a largely agrarian people; for the most part, they grew corn, fished and hunted. Among their tribal ritual was a festival of the sun. (211)

In his act of writing the story, the narrator seems to have researched the history and the geography of the place, an act of artistic deliberation and studied calculation that exists out of the context of actual observation and immediate representation and seems to undermine the narrator's claim to eyewitness narration.

The story also undermines its narrator's claims to eyewitness narrtion through subtle allusions to his invention of episodes and details. For example, the

eyewitness narrator has recourse to invention in his introduction of the teenagers into the scene. Prior to their advent, the narrator speculates on its necessity: “This place would not be what it is unless it had a carload of noisy eighteen-year-olds. They are here” (199). It is hard to believe that the group would show up the moment the narrator reflects on the necessity of its presence. The narrator must be making assumptions and drawing on foreknowledge of similar places during his act of writing the story. He must have invented this particular group instead of actually seeing it on this particular day.

The narrator also alludes to his involvement in imaginative invention of details when he describes Mrs. O’Hara during her act of counting out tuna-salad sandwiches. To this effect the narrator writes: “The movement of the wind traced through an elm stops her, and she sniffs the air. She is lost for two seconds and keeps her eyes tightly closed. No one sees her do this” (198). The narrator indicates that he is the only one who witnesses Mrs.O’Hara closing her eyes. The implication is that he does so because he has invented the act, not necessarily seen it. The admission to inventiveness subverts the eyewitness technique and its claims to actual observation and objective representation.

Objectivity also collapses in the occasional shifts to pure, uncultivated omniscience. The narrator falls on this practice when he decides to describe people’s private responses and inner thoughts. As Lincoln kisses Evie and she “inhales his work, seeded into his skin,” the narrator comments, “she does not know yet if she minds it” (204). The narrator could have witnessed the act of kissing but not Evie’s emotional response to it. Similarly, the narrator can spot

Rolfe's annoyance at the radio turned out loud by the teenagers, but he must be elaborating when expressing Rolfe's reflection on the group: "A ruined life ruining other lives" (207).

The story thus employs the eyewitness technique only to subtly undermine it. It affirms its narrator's presence on the scene and simultaneously testifies to his absence and retreat. It asserts the narrator's actual observation of the phenomenal world and his objective representation of its occurrences, while disclosing the subjective nature of his preoccupation and his involvement in creative acts of the imagination. The story thus admits that the eyewitness technique is a device it employs to make itself possible, a deception it plays on its reader. This deception the story seems unwilling to maintain and prefers to disclose to its reader. The disclosure becomes necessary because the story perceives the limitation of the device and the contradiction between its theoratical assertions and practical procedures. The author's appearance in the story has made such disclosure possible. His presence has drawn the reader's attention to what the narrator is doing.

The story's reflection on its own workings finds enfrocement in the sense of identification between author and narrator that exists simultaneously with their sense of separateness. This other sense resides in the manner in which the visiting author enters the scene. The narrator does not introduce him as he introduces the other characters, in the third person. The author comes to the front and speaks of himself as "I." This manner of advent to the scene indicates that the author is not a separate character from the narrator. The sense of separateness

is created to make the self-reflective act possible. But the sense of identification is maintained to underline this act and point it out to the reader. Baxter wishes to assert, through such identification, that the two figures are nothing but two faces of one person; each face represents a stage in the creative process; one of perception; the other of expression. The author perceives phenomena but is unable to express its shifts and moves except through his narrator's presence and maneuvers. However, of these facts he wishes to make no secret. He reveals his procedure, including its limitations and contradictions to the reader.

This act of self-reflection is very much in keeping with the modern trend in fiction that gave birth to this story . Dated 1985, the story came into being when fiction had not only lost its claims to imitation but was also becoming oriented toward a powerful recognition of its own "autonomous existence" (Stierle 89).[10] Subsequently, the move "prestructured by the very form of fiction" for its readers has become one from "quasi-pragmatic reception producing illusion to a reception of fiction" that discloses its own "fabricated character" and subjugates it "to the reader's critical judgment" (Stierle 104, 95). Baxter shares this "self-referential character of fictional discourse" with modern fiction (Stierle 101). His appearance in the story is a sign of auto-referentiality.[11] My reading of the story, generated by such an appearance, is proof that the story is echoing the demand of its time for the reader's "conscious reception in which the act of reading is accompanied by theoretical reflection" (Stierle 87).[12]

But the story also adds to modern theoretical assertions. From a disclosure of the falsity of its own claims to representation, it has moved to assert that its involvement in creative acts of the imagination is necessarily both subjective and self-expressive. In other words, while sharing with modern fiction a recognition of lost claims to imitation, the story self-critically elaborates on the point of creation.[13] Such elaboration takes the story back to its initial point of departure from eighteenth and nineteenth-century narrative subjectivity. The story has departed from past narrative conventions only to fall back on them. It condemns subjectivity only to assert its own inability to dispense with it.

Notes

[1] Baxter shows dissatisfaction with the level of objectivity accomplished by his omniscient narrator in his story "Media Event" in the same collection, *Through the Safety Net*.

[2] E. M. Forster's sharp distinction between the omniscient and the on-looker narrator fades out in Baxter's narrative voice (56).

[3] According to Wellek and Warren an "objective novel" is that which "may disguise and almost conceal the attitude of the writer" (23).

[4] The drive away from the eighteenth and nineteenth-century narrative voice into a more objective stance has been going on for decades, and its beginnings could be traced back to Forster's condemnation of Thackery and Fielding for sharing their confidential commentaries on individuals with the reader (57), as well as to Henry James's call to eliminate the author's apology for attempting to represent life, a gesture he considers as a sign of subjectivity and condemns in Fielding, Thackery and Trollope (662).

[5] My interpretation of this gesture as a real move by the author comes in direct opposition to the common theoretical assertion voiced by Wellek and Warren: "Even in the subjective lyric the 'I' of the poet is a fictional 'I'" (25), but my reading depends on an entry to this collection of short stories in which Baxter gives information about his personal life -- informatiom that he does not supply in the other two collections.

[6] Keats in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” presents an ideal moment of aesthetic contemplation before transforming the objects contemplated, the urn and its figures, into a story in the poem.

[7] Marin draws attention to this problem in his discussion of the “iconic proposition” of a painting and its “narrative proposition,” a problem generated by the story’s existence in time and the necessity for its emergence within the space of representation (296).

[8] This resignation could be explained by refernce to Sontag’s article that perceives the modern artist as a “victim of the craving for silence” (7), a gesture that she interprets as an appeal for self-abolition and for the “abolition of art itself” (5).

[9] Sontag asserts that there is no such thing as silence, and Baxter speaks through his narrator (10).

[10] Todorov takes it for granted that “we no longer refer to literature in terms of imitation,” and that novels “do not imitate reality,” but rather “create it” (67-68), and Gombrich considers it a mistake to hold that “‘representation’ is a copy of the ‘external form’” (1167).

[11] Although he discovers, and criticizes, auto-referentiality in other tales of Baxter, Johnson misses it in “Late Sunday,” for he describes the author’s appearance as a “gently intrusive presence of the artist” (621).

[12] Kakutani equally misses the sense of auto-referentiality in Baxter's appearance in the tale, for he interprets the story as an "impressionistic picture of a small Michigan community enjoying iteslf at the park on 'the day of forgiveness.' "

[13] Sontag considers the myth that "treated art as an expression of human consciousness" as an early "more unreflective version" of the myth of art (4), while Baxter self-critically re-asserts this myth.

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