

SVEND ERIK LARSEN

The Rational and the Impossible

A Pound of Flesh

In her autobiography *Out of Africa* (1937), the international best-selling Danish writer Isak Dinesen often praises her thoughtful and thought-provoking Somali housekeeper Farah. On one occasion, after having narrated *The Merchant of Venice* to him, she gives us an account of his reactions that reflects the cultural differences and preferences of the two:

Here was a big, complicated business deal, somewhat on the verge of the law, the real thing to a heart of a Somali. He asked me a question or two as to the clause of the pound of flesh: it obviously seemed to him eccentric, but not impossible; men might go in for that sort of thing. And here the story began to smell of blood, - his interest in it rose. When Portia came upon the stage, she pricked his ears; I imagined that he saw her as a woman of his own tribe, Fathima with all sails set, crafty and insinuating, out to outman man. [...] the Somali, who in real life have a strong sense of values, and a gift for moral indignation, give these a rest in their fiction. Still, here Farah's sympathy was with Shylock [...] »What?« said he. »Did the Jew give up his claim? [...] He could have used a red-hot knife. That brings out no blood. [...] He might have taken little bits at a time, with a small scale at hand to weight it on, till he had got just one pound. Had the Jew no friends to give him advice? [...] Farah [...] now took on a dangerous aspect as if he were really in the Court of Venice, putting heart into his friend or partner Shylock [...] His eyes flickered up and down the figure of the merchant before him, with the breast bared to the knife. » [...] he could have taken small bits, very small. He could have done that man a lot of harm, even a long time before he had got that one pound of his flesh.« I said: »But in the story the Jew gave it up. « »Yes, that was a great pity [...],« said Farah. (Dinesen 1985, 268 ff.)

This brief story, about the telling of a story, highlights a cluster of problems: the relation between fictional and actual worlds, between fictionality and narration, between action and rationality, between action and agent or subject, and between world, enunciation and subject. And maybe several other relations as well.

I shall take a look at this narrative and conceptual complex in light of two important theoretical works, both from 1991. My choice of references is not entirely arbitrary: their basic approach shows certain similarities that underline the shortcomings of both in dealing with literature, in spite of the stimulating arguments they unfold. But they also show marked differences that allow us to develop their argument further. The books are Paisley Livingston's *Literature and Rationality* and Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Both authors are philosophers with a logical bent who are trained in literature, and both of them try to illuminate some essentials of literature

through non-literary theories. Livingston does so mostly through socio-philosophical theories on action, decision making, intentionality, and rationality related to naturalist and realist fiction, mainly Dreiser and Zola; while Ryan relies first and foremost on possible-world logic in a softened version that is accessible also to non-specialists in highly formalized semantics and mathematical logic, and refrains from detailed textual analyses.

First, I will introduce the two theoreticians with a brief reference to Walt Whitman's poem »Crossing Brooklyn Ferry« and then I will proceed to enlarge their perspective. Neither Livingston nor Ryan has, to my knowledge, read Whitman's classical poem, but I aim to demonstrate that their theories put various methodological constraints on them.

Dr. Livingston, I presume

Paisley Livingston works from a fundamental, so-called »rationality heuristic« (Livingston 1991, 5) which admittedly does not cover the entire field of literary interpretation. On the other hand, it is regarded as a necessary but not sufficient component in *all* literary analysis. Therefore, it is labelled a privileged but fallible heuristic. The basic and intuitive assumption is that we, as humans, cannot avoid interpreting human products in terms of purposiveness and thereby drawing upon a shared knowledge of our everyday experience of human action and behavior, our »daily affairs« (Livingston 1991, 2). Things may seem weird, but we approach them in trying to establish a certain rationality with reference to human intentionality. The basic, not entirely tacit but nevertheless non-theorized assumption is that there is always an *iconic* relationship between works of literature and everyday experience, similar to but less sophisticated than the ideas discussed by the American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce under the heading of »collateral experience« or »collateral observation« and »universe of discourse.«

In a series of letters from 1909 to his friend and philosophical colleague William James, Peirce explains:

I do not mean by »collateral observation« acquaintance with the system of signs. What is so gathered is *not* collateral. It is on the contrary the prerequisite for getting any idea signified by the Sign. But by collateral observation, I mean previous acquaintance with what the Sign denotes. This if the sign be the sentence »Hamlet is mad«, to understand what this means one must know that men are sometimes in that strange state; one must have seen madmen or have read about them. (Peirce 1998, 494)

Such observations are made independently of the actual signs but, on the other hand, they refer to a universe delimited by the signs as a universe of shared interpretations. Peirce also discusses the problems of such universes in his series of lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1903. Signs may have several subjects. In the above case it may be Hamlet, it may be individual instances of madmen, it may be particular descriptions of madness. From a logical point of view, Peirce claims, such subjects are universes of discourse which establish the conditions that make the proposition true because they contain the implicit know-

ledge necessary to understand and decide the truth value of the proposition and the specific instances to which it refers. Ultimately, all propositions belong to one aggregate common universe »which we in ordinary language denominate the Truth« (Peirce 1998, 168). Peirce's point is that this inclusiveness also holds for fictions, because what we take to be true about fictions is true with reference to the texts independently of the ontological status of the objects referred to by the texts:

Once [the storyteller] has imagined Scheherazade and made her young, beautiful, and endowed with a gift of spinning stories, it becomes a real fact that so he has imagined her, which fact he cannot destroy by pretending or thinking that he imagined her to be otherwise. What he wishes us to understand is what he might have expressed in plain prose by saying, »I have imagined a lady, Scheherazade by name, young, beautiful and a tireless teller of tales, and I am going on to imagine what tales she told.« This would have been a plain expression of professed fact relating to the sum total of realities. (Peirce 1998, 209)

This presupposed shared knowledge, whether regarded as real, possible or imaginary, constitutes for Peirce a basic iconicity in the relation between sign and object in any semiotic process, allowing us to form a totality out of partial objects. The signs delimit what we are supposed to locate as our understanding in a certain universe of discourse; the collateral observations secure that we have an understanding of the signs (Peirce 1992, vol. 8, par. 178s; vol. 2, par. 556).

Rationality operates as an explanatory framework only in relation to human activity – such is Livingston's claim, and it therefore necessarily includes a notion of purposiveness and intentionality. Whatever notions of rational order one might introduce, they are never mechanical or stocastic (that is a-rational) (Livingston 1991, 15). Not being fond of the term subject or subjectivity, Livingston instead says that rationality revolves around an agency, or agent, to which we attribute desires, beliefs, plans, and so on. He adopts an »agential perspective on rationality« (Livingston 1991, 179). From this perspective he derives the dictum (although more in the nature of Aristotle's rhetorical ethymeme than of his logical syllogism): »no rationality, no agent; no agent, no text« (Livingston 1991, 10), meaning that if we cannot trace any rationality, we cannot find an agent for an action; and if we do not have an agent, we will not have a text displaying an action; ergo, actions in texts will have a basic rationality to be used as the pivotal point of literary analysis. Irrationality, therefore, forms a contrast to rationality by being a relation to agents and not to their rationality, although the notions through which it is analyzed are derivatives of the rationality concepts. Ir-rationality does exist, but is never fundamental; it may turn out to be rationality on another level, whereas as a-rationality belongs to another agentless category (Livingston 1991, 127). Metaphors, bestowing human action with, for example, a mechanical and thereby a-rational meaning, are necessarily false and shed a dubious light on the rationality of the narrator's act of narration (Livingston 1991, chap. 3), as Livingston exemplifies in an analysis of Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier*.

But in contrast to Peirce and others, Livingston does not make any theoretical point of this parallel between a presupposed world of material and social reality and a narrated world of literature. Ontology does not interest him. Therefore, and in spite of his non-dogmatic openness and detailed philosophical reflection, Livingston's rationality heuristic only concerns rationality depicted *in* literature, not the rationality *of* literature in social reality; only the rationality of actions carried out *in* the narrated universe, not the rationality of the actions carried out *with* literature; the agents are only agents *in* literature, not agents *of* literature. Questions of, for example, meta-fictionality, auto-referentiality, interpretability, the social use of literature, literature as a type of speech act – in short, questions of the cultural pragmatics of literature – are left out. And they cannot just be asked in a subsequent analysis, because they presuppose another approach to literature.

Although Livingston makes refined subdivisions of rationalities and agencies in literature that are useful for the analysis of parts of narrated action, literature as a transformation of reality is not part of this reflection. He would read *The Merchant of Venice* like Farah, or maybe like the narrator of Dinesen's short account. She, in her capacity as narrator, makes guesses about the intentions and thereby about the rationality of Farah. She does so by letting us know at the same time that Farah's understanding does not cover the whole truth of Shakespeare's comedy, yet she does not tell us or him what more there is in it. And she cannot add this to her story. If she did, either to us or to Farah, she would be forced to show contempt for Farah's limited conception, and that would go against her point; she would be suggesting that the readers might not be familiar with Shakespeare's play. In brief, a basic rationality interrelating the levels of story and discourse and the cultural pragmatics of the text *has* to be tacit. This may be the reason why Livingston seems to neglect it.

Crossing the First Time

Whitman's poem *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* (1867/1881) has a narrative core that draws upon our shared knowledge of the ›daily affairs‹ in New York that are similar to the ongoings of any metropolis close to the sea or a river: people crossing East River returning to Brooklyn from their work in Manhattan, gradually mingling with all the busy people in Manhattan as well as in more general cityscapes. This is a rational action on the level of the *individual* citizen, an atomistic rationality positing individuals as islands of rational behavior. There is also a rationality on a *collective* level, although one cannot point to a clearly delimited agency of action on an individual level or from an external viewpoint (cf. Livingston 1991, chap. 6). But what seems irrational may turn out to be rational, according to Livingston, either as a kind of power balance (I only do or don't do this or that if you also do or don't do it) or as in traffic: the immanent rationality of traffic is made in order to organize the traffic; there is no transcendental purpose in traffic. The repeated descriptions of people integrating into

anonymous flows, including the lyrical I, refers to this collective rationality of *balance* and *public flow*.

However, the people crossing and floating in the urban setting is not the dominant agency of the poem. It is the *I*. Although the participatory activity of the *I* is essential to the action in the poem, we are witnessing a very limited view of the unfolding of subjectivity. In fact, the *I* has two projects. First, to observe people in mingling with them, being confronted with them, and being absorbed by the crowd; and, second, to describe the effects on the *I* itself that force it to maintain a marked distance to people. Therefore, one rational chain of action is the attempt to integrate the *I* and the crowd – to be one with the crowd (which, of course, is completely irrational) – »everyone disintegrated yet part of the scheme« (Whitman 1969, v. 7). Another rational series of actions, related to the second project, is to write poetry about the delicate balance between the *voice/*I* and the crowd and to circulate it – to »[pour] my meaning into you« (Whitman 1969, v. 97). The poetic action is made possible because the purpose of the first action is impossible. Therefore, the rationality prompted by the second project is engendered by the impossibility of the first one, not in order to change it, but to use it.

In Livingston's perspective we encounter here two sets of mutually isolated rational actions to be analyzed separately, both of them transcending the rational basis in our »daily affairs« (Livingston 1991, 2). But in Whitman's poem they appear as integrated actions on the same level, part of the same narrated universe: to live and to write, to observe and to communicate, to disappear and to become a subject, to be place-bound and to be at home on the whole globe – this is one and the same thing, not in the world of the commuters on the ferry, but in Whitman's poetry, if and only if it becomes part of the world of the commuters. The *I* and the *you* of the poem play this double role in the socio-poetical communitarian universe. And this double structure, essential to the rationality of the poetic action, cannot be analyzed through further subdivisions of rational behaviors separating the acts *in* literature from the acts *of* literature. Here, they are kept together by a simultaneously a-rational and irrational paradox for poetry and fiction as cultural actions – as in Dinesen's story about Farah and Peirce's account of *Arabian Nights*, but not as in Livingston.

Coming Through the Ryan

Marie-Laure Ryan's starting point is different from Livingston's: her focal point is not the types of actions, but the types of universes in which actions take place. In *her* work ontology *does* matter a great deal. A basic definition of an »actual world« enables her to give a very fruitful and flexible account of the confrontation and intersection of worlds with a different ontological status. In contrast to Livingston, problems of meta-fictionality, auto-reflexivity, speech acts, and so forth, form a crucial part of the analysis to be performed in her framework (although she does not make any herself). However, her approach cannot be a supplement to Livingston's, remedying his shortcomings.

Her definition of the actual world, the pivotal point of her theory, is not cast in representational or referential terms or in Livingston's iconic framework, but rather in indexical or enunciative terms. »To be actual means to exist in the world from which I speak [...] According to the indexical theory of actuality, speech acts always take place in the actual world for their participants«; that is where they are located (Ryan 1991, 18, 22). This notion of world or universe is very close, if not identical, to the semiotic and phenomenological notions of world, life-world, surrounding world or *Umwelt* – that is, a universe defined as the interrelationship between surroundings and a bodily, meaning-creating and, particularly, sign-producing subject. The only difference is that the notion of body does not enter into Ryan's logical framework (nor into Peirce's notion of universe of discourse, as referred to above).

Ryan develops a series of »worlds« in order to be able to explain the specific role of fiction. Other worlds, as an »alternative possible world« is a modality of the actual world, are a world in which I might be able to speak and produce signs and thus can be turned into an actual world (for instance, when imagining the future or a place elsewhere on the globe); a »textual reference world« is a world in relation to which the propositions of a text are to be valuated (is it true on the basis of the text that Hamlet is mad?); the »textual actual world« is the image of the textual reference world proposed by the text (the world in which Hamlet is living and where some of Livingston's rational actions take place). This limited world is the actual world of dialogues and actions of a text. In this world, of course, »textual alternative possible worlds« may exist, that is, worlds imagined by the characters of the textual actual world, like Hamlet's vision of re-established order in the Danish city of Elsinore. The main point here is that as modalities and products of it, the worlds not called actual worlds nevertheless *are parts of the actual world*, very much like Peirce's understanding of the reality of the story teller making Scheherazade come alive for us. So, a fictional world is »the actual world of a textual universe projected by a text we call fictional« (Ryan 1991, 23).

Narrative structures, whether rational or not according to Livingston's criteria, are transformations of or transitions between states in the actual world of the textual universe, but are still located in the actual world where author and reader are located, modalities of their actual worlds because they are based on the actual process of sign production.

Ryan's presentation is, on the one hand, a dynamical account of how worlds of a different ontological and enunciative status are integrated into each other, and not just set up as parallels in a more or less iconic relationship. All such worlds constitute ways in which we situate ourselves in our actual worlds and, as an activity inside the actual worlds, reach out to alternative worlds – crossing boundaries between universes. But, on the other hand, probably because she underscores the role of the body, these worlds and the subdivisions in the narrative modalities of the textual actual world (for example, in knowledge worlds, wish-worlds, authentic worlds, etc. (Ryan 1991, 123)) end up as a classificatory and componential analysis of mental constructs.

She would appreciate Farah's approach to *The Merchant of Venice* as an expansion of his actual world inside this world, and not just as a narrowing down of the richness of Shakespeare's play to what he is already familiar with. And she would appreciate the tacit understatement of the narrator, thereby suggesting an alternative possible world that will never form the narrator's actual world, but always be a speech-act-related modality of it.

The Second Crossing

As far as Whitman's *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry* is concerned, unlike Livingston, Ryan would not focus in the first place on the people and their everyday rationality and its transformations carried out by the *I*. She would immediately indicate the changes in the boundaries of the actual world through the enunciative activity of the *I*: the ongoing transformation of perceptions through language that pave the way for new perceptions outside the boundaries of actuality, and so on. But the very moment her analysis unfolded she would have to define a content for the worlds produced by the sign process. At that point, the process would be reduced to the static components forming the stages of the process: we would move from a knowledge-world to a wish-world, and these, together with various other worlds or ›domains‹, can be described separately and, in the end, form a schematic system. The process would be reduced to a combination of worlds (cf. Ryan 1991, chap. 6).

Livingston's approach would contain a motive for narration related to his basic concept of rationality: the rational purposiveness of humans includes plotting and telling. Ryan's logical combination has no narrative incitements related to her speech-act definition of the actual world: as in traditional narratology, she refers to conflicts as textual instances to be overcome by a plot (Ryan 1991, 120). However, her approach also includes what she calls ›world-creating operators‹ (Ryan 1991, 22) like ›Let me tell you a story...‹ or ›I pretend ...‹ Such enunciative instances make us focus on the changes and expansions of our actuality in a continuous production of signs, whereas Livingston holds our ›daily affairs‹ to be a closed and fixed reference point.

The turning point in Whitman's poem, ›I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I knew I should be of my body‹ (Whitman 1969, v. 63-64), would in Livingston's view simply be a truism of everyday experience, one of the ›daily affairs‹, not an incentive to action. For Whitman, however, the awareness expressed by the *I* concerning the bodily constitution of his identity is the essential junction between perception and writing. Ryan would detect a complex combination of the logically defined universes in the utterance: an actual world determined by the enunciation, an alternative possible world produced by the future tense, a textual reference world comprising a reference to the body, and a series of particular ›domains‹ such as a knowledge-world, a wish-world, and so forth.

But she would only be able to observe the simultaneous manifestation of such worlds, not to explain why their combination is dynamic. The relation of body

and identity as constitutive of both actuality and rationality is foreign to both Ryan and Livingston. But not to Whitman. The text exemplifies, through bodily bound enunciative processes, the dynamic transgression of ontological boundaries as part of the actual world of humans.

Rain or Ryan?

Besides Farah's interpretation of Shakespeare in *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen also relates another event to us concerned with literature. One day while in the coffee field with her workers, she spoke in Swaheli verse to amuse herself.

There was no sense in the verse, it was made for the sake of the rhyme: - »Ngumbe npenda chumbe, Malaya-mbaya. Wakamba na-kula mamba.« The oxen like salt, - whores are bad, - The Wakamba eat snakes. It caught the interest of the boys, they formed a ring round me. They were quick to understand that the meaning in poetry is of no consequence, and they did not question the thesis of the verse, but waited eagerly for the rhyme, and laughed at it when it came. I tried to make them themselves find the rhyme and finish the poem when I had begun it, but they could not, or would not, do that and turned away their heads. As they had become used to the idea of poetry, they begged: »Speak again. Speak like rain.« Why they should feel verse to be like rain I do not know. (Dinesen 1985, 288)

The poetry becomes part of the actual world, not because of any marked rationality in the performance or content, and not because it envisions some kind of world or world-creating operators; only speech-creating operators are present: »speak again«. Dinesen and the Kikuyus do not understand each others' rationality and they cannot point to a shared possible world of any kind. Actuality occurs because of the spoken rhyme, that is, the bodily of location of speaker and listener in an actual world. One might call actuality through poetry and fiction the rationality of the impossible.

And this is, I believe, the rationality of multicultural encounters, exemplified here on the one hand by the Euro-African encounter through Shakespeare and the experience of poetry, that of lived culture, and on the other by the encounter between theoretical paradigms paving the way for different viewpoints on literature and culture. As culture is not only lived experience but lived experience in a world of symbols, culture is always lived experience on the conditions of a possible self-reflection; this double perspective of experiential instances and analytical frameworks is inherent in all cultural activities, but most openly in a multicultural perspective. In this perspective, rather than constituting a harmony between cultural and analytical positions, cultural identity is the capacity to use them. Like Farah. To this end neither Livingston nor Ryan alone will suffice.

References

- Dinesen, Isak: *Out of Africa*, New York 1985. [cited as: Dinesen 1985]
- Livingston, Paisley: *Literature and Rationality*, Cambridge 1991. [cited as: Livingston 1991]
- Peirce, Charles Sanders: *Collected Papers*, CD-ROM, Charlottesville 1992. [cited as: Peirce 1992 plus volume No. and paragraph No.]
- Peirce, Charles Sanders: *The Essential Peirce*; vol. 2, Bloomington 1998. [cited as: Peirce 1998]
- Ryan, Marie-Laure: *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington 1991. [cited as: Ryan 1991]
- Whitman, Walt: *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*, in: *American Literature*; vol. 2, ed. by Harrison Meserole et al., Lexington 1969 (1917-1922). [cited as: Whitman 1969]