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On the Chronicle

But what to call, say, James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which, although it began life as a magazine feature (in *Fortune*, of all places), is clearly something beyond journalism? What to call the likes of Lidiya Ginzburg's *A Blockade Diary*, Annie Ernaux's *A Man's Place*, Peter Handke's *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Claude Simon's *The Invitation*, Claudio Magris' *Danube*, Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices From Chernobyl*? Should we call such works of narrative prose documentary novels? Nonfiction novels? Works of creative/literary/lyric nonfiction? Simply essays? They are called all those things and more, and often in a single review, as critics cast about for the *mot juste*, then typically give up, in essence saying that a truly appropriate form term does not yet exist or does not even need to exist, since each of these books is a *sui generis* work, its form unlikely to recur.

Readers in the Middle Ages assumed that whatever was between the covers of a book had to be true; not until the 19th century did they begin insisting on separating the factual from the created, and indeed favoring the latter: the novel began to outsell all other genres. In our day, the novel is so dominant that it is only with irony that, in the titles of one modern novelist, José Saramago of Portugal, the names of the archaic factual genres often appear. From the original Portuguese, these titles translate as *The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, *A History of the Siege of Lisbon*, *An Essay on Blindness*, *An Essay on Lucidity*. With irony that was perhaps less intentional, when *The New Yorker* serialized Truman Capote's so-called nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, it appeared under the magazine's Victorian-sounding *Annals of Crime* department label.

Annals, histories, almanacs, diaries, journals, manuals, treatises, screeds, essays: these were some of literature's most popular forms before the novel's rise. But a *chronicle* is what a work of factual narrative prose was, historically, most likely to be called. Indeed, in Romance languages that still do not have the word *non-fiction*, a chronicle (or *cronica*, or *cronaca*) is what such a work is still called. Alas, once they arrive in the English-speaking world, chronicles tend to be marketed and reviewed as something else, most often as novels, sometimes as journalism. Yet factual English-language works of literature that could well be called chronicles add up to a impressive canon, including, from the 18th century, William Bartram's now obscure but once influential *Travels*; from the 19th century, Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* and Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*; from the early 20th century, John Millington Synge's *The Aran Islands*, T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, John Reed's *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Agee's masterpiece, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Ernest Hemingway's *Death in the Afternoon* and Rebecca West's *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*.

What would define such books as examples of the chronicle? They are works of factual prose offering artful and usually insightful descriptions of the real within a narrative that includes personal experience but looks well beyond it. In length, the chronicle can range from a mere fragment or note, as in Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquietude*, Botho Strauss's *Couples, Passersby*, Josep Pla's *The Gray Notebook* and Handke's *The Weight of the World*; to something longer, such as the feuilletons written by Joseph Roth (collected in *What I Saw* and *Report From a Parisian Paradise*), the *cronicas* of Clarice Lispector (*Selected Cronicas*), and the texts of Jacques Réda (*The Ruins of Paris*); a tome as geologically hefty as Tim Robinson's two-volume *Stones of Aran*; medium-size works like Pedro Rosa Mendes's *Bay of Tigers* and Javier Cercas's *The Anatomy of a Moment*; slim booklets like Alain de Botton's *A Week at the Airport*, and Geoff Dyer's *Another Great Day at Sea*. Of course, none of these have been identified as chronicles, since the term survives into our time in the English-speaking world not as the name of a literary form but as a verb: a story, essay, novel, memoir, history, biography, true-crime account, article, documentary, TV episode, podcast or feature film is said to *chronicle* something or other.

There are writers who believe that any factual book that is written well enough ought simply to be classified as literature and, in bookstores and libraries, shelved apart from regular nonfiction with its warren of subdivisions. That may not be practical, but it certainly should be the case for factual works that have as their main objective not the exposition of a particular subject but the art of prose. And these, not coincidentally, are what poets usually choose over fiction when they decide to try their hand at prose: the essay, the diary, the journal, the memoir, or that form that seems to have lost its name with the rise of the novel and that I am concerned with here, the chronicle.

It is a form, the chronicle, that can most easily be confused with the memoir. What chiefly separates the two is that the chronicle is ever only indirectly a slice of the writer's autobiography, sometimes, as in the case of Synge's *The Aran Islands*, leaving out autobiographical details altogether. Usually it takes the form of a quest — or an inquest, or both — into something beyond the self, be it the spirit of a place (Synge's and Robinson's islands, V.S. Naipaul's patch of the Wiltshire countryside in *The Enigma of Arrival*, Réda's derelict urban and suburban places in Paris, or, in the case James Attlee's *Isolarion*, a busy town street), the presence or influence of an historic figure (Dyer's D.H. Lawrence or Simon's Gorbachev), an entire people (Roth's eastern Jews), the human impact of some enormous catastrophe (Alexievich's nuclear meltdown, or Rosa Mendes's Angolan civil war), the way the constraints of an era and social class are poignantly reflected in the behavior of a man or woman as remembered by their daughter or son (as in the case of Handke and his evident disciple, Ernaux), how historical and artistic times can be evoked by tracing the history of a curious heirloom as it was passed down in a family (Edmund de Waal's *The Hare With Amber Eyes*).

In other words, although the chronicler often is a character in his chronicle (even if, as in the case of Magris, a teasingly invisible one), she or he is more interested in capturing and perhaps analyzing a slice of the world (however tiny or grand) than a slice of the self. The chronicle is chiefly centered on something

beyond the chronicler, although the chronicler can serve as the conduit to it, be affected and perhaps changed by it in turn, and use his personality and style to help the reader engage with it.

The Chronicle as Pilgrimage

It is also not unusual for a chronicle's writer to reflect on its writing, even using that as the thread that ties the work together. This may seem post-modern, but it has long been part of the form, and not only in the West. Japan has a deep tradition of this sort of writing, one that goes back to Sei Shonagan's *The Pillow Book* and beyond. Called *zuihitsu*, which translates as *running brush*, it is an observational, reflective or memoiristic sort of writing, usually presented in prose fragments, lists, and even verses that are connected to each other but range over a miscellany of factual subjects, from the amusingly banal to the philosophically insightful, all ostensibly jotted down spontaneously, inspired by the writer's immediate surroundings and worded as the writer's "brush" might have it, in its flow. In it what matters is not the subject, not the themes, not the story, so much as writing itself, the writing in action.

Examples of *zuihitsu* are not easy to find in English translation. One collection was put out in 2014 by Columbia University Press, which chose to call the texts essays. But the marketing copy for this book, *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays*, edited and translated by Steven D. Carter, calls *zuihitsu* a unique genre and makes it evident that something other than the essay is afoot:

A court lady of the Heian era, an early modern philologist, a novelist of the Meiji period, and a physicist at Tokyo University ... all wrote *zuihitsu*—a uniquely Japanese literary genre encompassing features of the nonfiction or personal essay and miscellaneous musings. For sheer range of subject matter and breadth of perspective, the *zuihitsu* is unrivaled in the Japanese literary tradition, which may explain why few examples have been translated into English.

Zuibitsu writers in the collection range from Matsuo Bashō, Natsume Soseki, and Koda Aya to Tachibana Nankei and Dekune Tatsuro — most of them being also writers of poetry and fiction. In their *zuihitsu*, they describe snowy landscapes, a foggy London, the cherry blossoms of Ueno Park, and rainy vistas, but also tell of coming down with a cold, the aesthetics of tea, the physiology and psychology of laughter, the trials of old age, raising children, sleeplessness, undergoing surgery, training a myna bird to say thank you.

Japanese chronicles also appear in *haibun* form, its great classic being *Narrow Road to the North* by Bashō, the Edo period haiku poet. Combining factual narrative prose and haiku, it is usually tied to a journey, often reflects on its own composition (particularly the origins of its haiku verses), and, like the Western chronicle, can take in other nonfiction forms like autobiography, diary, essay, prose poem, anecdote and travelogue. More recent Japanese chronicles include Yasunari Kawabata's *The Master of Go*, a painstaking, almost nouveau roman-like account of an epic championship board game, and Haruki Murakami's recap of the history and globe-trotting geography of his passion for running. Kawabata's book, along with the best known works of Hiroyuki Agawa, including *Ma no isan* (*Devil's Heritage*, 1953), have sometimes been described using that other term that modern critics have come up with for the chronicle: the *documentary novel*.

In China, similar factual literature has a much more recent vintage and is called *feixugou*. But accounts of *feixugou*'s origins and rise tend not to include what could be claimed as its masterpiece, *Soul Mountain*, by the Nobel laureate Gao Xinjiang. It predated the rise of *feixugou*, even if only by a few years, and so could not seek legalistic refuge in it, having instead to insist on calling itself fiction — all the more so because fiction was at the time in China still the only possible genre for narrative prose that wished to be regarded as literary. Gao is conscious of this: the genre argument pre-emptively plays out in the narrative itself, as its author vaguely and inconclusively defends its claim to being fiction when confronted with an officious imaginary critic (a censor?) and his belittling but rather accurate-sounding accusation that

the writer had slapped together “travel notes, moralistic ramblings, feelings, notes, jottings, un-theoretical discussions, un-fable-like fables, copied out some folk songs, added some legend-like nonsense of your own invention, and are calling it fiction!” (Gao 496–97).

Soul Mountain creatively chronicles a real pilgrimage undertaken across China by the author after he learned that he was not, as he had feared after a lung x-ray, mortally ill. It is almost as though he were a religious believer undertaking a penitential journey in gratitude for a health-restoring miracle, in the manner of the many Catholics who make the arduous pilgrimage along a route in Spain that is examined by the Dutch chronicler Cees Nooteboom in *Road to Santiago*. And it so happens that modern narratives that could be classified as chronicles do often take the form of a pilgrimage, albeit a secular rather than a religious one (or, in the case of Nooteboom’s, a secular pilgrimage about a religious pilgrimage). This serves to tie the modern chronicle back to the ancient chronicle and how it was used to record epic, world-altering, historic voyages such as Marco Polo’s, Tristan da Cunha’s and Vasco da Gama’s.

The term seems particularly suited in tone to chronicles that dig into history, either human or geological, as is the case with both Robinson’s and Nooteboom’s. Nooteboom, incidentally, wrote a chronicle, first published in 2002 and included in his English-language collection *Nomad’s Hotel*, in which he tells of a pilgrimage to the Aran Islands and meeting afterward with Robinson. He writes:

I go reading the first volume of Tim Robinson’s *The Stones of Aran* ... in the stillness of the night, which is accentuated rather than reduced by the sound of the storm outside, the island on which I find myself is created for a second time, but this time from words. I do not believe there is another book in the world like it. In this first volume, it is as if every meter of the coast, with its types of stone, plants, birds, stories, names and shapes has been described...he has achieved the impossible; by taking a geographical reality, describing it so meticulously and embedding it in a past of folk tales, legends and history he has thwarted the transience of at least one small part of the globe. (81-82)

Robinson's project reminds Nootboom of Proust, and he will say as much to the author, who then reveals that he was reading *Remembrance of Things Past* (a.k.a. *In Search of Lost Time*), first in English, then in French, while he was composing his own work. Robinson told Nootboom his other great influence had been the 19th century French romantic Pierre Loti and especially his travel chronicle, *The Marriage of Loti*. Robinson's own prose, though, while sure-footed enough, is given neither to Proustian flights of original thought and sentence length, nor to Loti's flourishes of lush lyricism. Unlike his Celtic Twilight predecessor on the islands, Synge, Robinson does identify himself and explain his presence and project, and while he is otherwise reticent to intrude in his narrative, this seems more a matter of personal reserve than of style and does not create the sort of aesthetic tension that Magris of Italy brings off with brio via his implied but invisible presence in *The Danube* and *Microcosmos*, his comparable but far more consciously literary chronicles regarding pilgrimages and microcosms.

In Robinson's first volume, *Stones of Aran: Pilgrimage*, the book's method becomes evident as soon as the third chapter, "Connoisseurs of Wilderness," in which, though it begins with a painstakingly precise, if not necessarily pictorial, description of a small stone ruin in one of the wildest spots on the island, we are soon learning about the magic-realist legends surrounding it, including the one about its being the tomb of an early saint who lived in a nearby cliff burrow and who, after gnawing off his lower lip worrying about his past sins, saw a golden one grow to replace it, so that he became known as Gregory of the Golden Mouth. Robinson then breaks with the tight focus on his island and broadens out to detail how this legend became interlaced with others, which enables him to roam geographically all the way to the Mediterranean, the Tiber River and the Vatican. Before ending the chapter, he moves on to another nearby structure of more recent vintage: a small stone circle created by the English artist Richard Long in 1975. This again enables the chapter to leave the island, for Robinson had first seen it on a poster for an art exhibit in Amsterdam.

It is evident that, as Robinson sought a descriptive label for his work, he also considered *excursion* and *incursion*, which often recur in his text (and could indeed be seen as synonyms for *quest* and *inquest* as the terms that apply to the basic forms the chronicle takes.) In fact, the book is otherwise geographically organized, and what divides its South chapters from its North chapters (with each chapter describing a slice of his island's coast as he circumnavigates it clockwise on foot) is a section called *Excursion* (in which he takes a break from walking around his island to row out with some fishermen to the tiny Brannock islands), leading me to suspect that he was going to title his first volume *An Excursion* (and the second *An Incursion*) before hitting upon the more intense *Pilgrimage*.

The Chronicle as Nonfiction Novel

We can enjoy reading Robinson's book even if we do not care to know all that much (or anything at all) about the Aran Islands. The same goes for the other books already mentioned here. For the chronicle is a form of factual writing that, like poetry, ought to be enjoyed primarily for its literary attributes. One review — of *The Explosion of the Radiator Hose* by Jean Rolin of France — even suggests that readers ought to pretend that what they are reading is not fact but fiction. Brian Hurley writes in *The Fiction Advocate*:

There must be people who can read Jean Rolin's *The Explosion of the Radiator Hose* and find it politically, historically, and culturally informative. These people must already know a good deal about the bloody wars in Central Africa in the 20th century, the immigrant experience in France, and/or the bureaucratic sinkholes of the international shipping industry. But I don't know about those things. I have to imagine them. So I see *The Explosion of the Radiator Hose* — a supposedly factual account — as fiction.

So it *is* a factual account, a nonfiction, yet Hurley will call it fiction, much as the publisher chooses to call it a novel. Yet it often sounds nothing like fiction. This is not the kind of passage that would naturally fit into a novel:

By the terms of the Pretoria Agreement, signed in December 2002, instituting a “transitional government” in Kinshasa, in the expectation of hypothetical elections, Joseph Kabila (Junior) was confirmed as President of the Republic, with Jean-Pierre Bemba as one of the four vice presidents. This promotion failed to silence the accusations of war crimes leveled against his movement, involving (to take just one example) atrocities carried out against the Pygmies in the Ituri River basin. In this region, elements of the MLC are suspected not only of having massacred the Pygmies, but of carrying out acts of cannibalism on some of their victims.

To counter these accusations, Jean-Pierre Bemba organized an exhibition of nine Pygmies in September 2004, on the stage of the Grand Hotel in Kinshasa, “dressed,” said a news agency dispatch, “in new suits that the tailor had not had time to adjust to their size.”

“The Pygmies of Mambasa,” the dispatch went on (this same phrase was also its title), “declared that they had not been eaten.” (Rolin 151)

So is it journalism? Or travel writing? A history? Subject-oriented nonfiction? To be sure, it touches on all those things; as the publisher’s promotional copy puts it, “fiction, autobiography, travel narrative, ‘gonzo’ journalism, and historiography are all parts of Rolin’s rollicking narrative.” Yet it is exactly none of those things. Unlike a journalist, Rolin is not out to ferret fresh facts or quotes. Nor is he trying to act as the reader’s travel guide. Nor is he trying to encompass or get to the bottom of a particular subject, or to appeal to those readers who might already be interested in that subject; his book does not really advertise its subject, or even declare it.

Rolin is, in fact, as much concerned with literature as with reality, and with reading literature into reality and reality into literature, marrying the two. He does not let the reader forget that his trip echoes the one Joseph Conrad made 115 years before and that inspired *The Heart of Darkness*. Rolin also speculates on how his adventure would be recounted by great authors of chronicles and quasi-chronicles like Proust and W.G. Sebald. In other words, Rolin is using a factual account of a novelistically adventurous trip into an

obscure part of Africa to deal with literature and to make literature, often as an essayist would, rather than a novelist. Sebald sought to distance his own essayistic narratives from the novel by calling them *prose fictions*, albeit for reasons he never got around to explaining or even justifying; I suppose Rolin, who may have been modeling his effort partly on Sebald's, could have contrived to call his book a *prose nonfiction* — because clearly the flow and effects of his writing, the literariness of his project, are what are paramount for him. And to do this, in this fiction-dominated age, you may have to take your cue from the publisher and pretend it is a novel. As Hurley writes: “The tension between believing this book, and pretending it's fiction in order to process it, is a thrill that Rolin should be proud to provide. It refreshes the obscurity and absurdity of human history.”

Yet the opportunity that the chronicle offers to fine prose is rated by some writers, including Somerset Maugham, above that which the novel offers. Maugham, for all his success as a novelist and short story writer, confessed that whenever he wanted to write for the sake of the prose, to, as he put it, string words together “so as to produce an effect of beauty” (Maugham 4), he chose to write of the real, as in his travel chronicle *The Gentleman in the Parlour*.

It was, in any case, the chronicle that all the early novels — including, as far back as the late 12th century, a narrative by Chrétien de Troyes of France about King Arthur, and, in the 1700s, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* — emulated and even tried to deceive the reader into thinking they were, at a time when books were still hard to produce, and so were very expensive but nonetheless supposedly worth every penny because of the learning and wisdom, not the entertainment, contained in them. The proto-novel grabbed the poetic license which the chronicle gave itself to embellish (a license which it had come to be seen as abusing too flagrantly in an increasingly scientific, skeptical, fact-valuing world) and took it to its extreme, making the entire work a lark, a folly, a fiction, for purposes either of hoodwinking paying readers, of entering into a Swiftian tall-tale complicity with them, or (as in the case of *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*) of satirizing more earnest efforts.

Fiction's steep cultural ascension in the 18th and the 19th centuries coincided with European nations' development of legal and regulatory systems and codes. No doubt fiction offered writers a way of sidestepping lawsuits and censorship. (Ironically, in China at least, this has come full circle in recent years: that nation's repressive government has grown wise to the subversive potential of fiction, with the consequence that narratively inclined writers are retreating into *feixugou*, which relies on real events but ostensibly has, like poetry, only literary aims — in other words, the prose nonfiction, the chronicle.)

In the West, the historic transition from fact to fiction can be seen even in the careers of individual writers. The first works by Charles Dickens in England and by both Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev in Russia were ostensibly factual chronicles — *Sketches by Boz* in the case of Dickens, *Sebastopol Sketches* in the case of Tolstoy, and *A Sportsman's Sketches* in the case of Turgenev. Soon, however, fiction took hold as the 19th century's dominant force in literature, claiming most great writers' attention — though Turgenev returned to the art of the true late in life, with his *Poems in Prose*, and Tolstoy wrote philosophical and religious texts throughout his career. Chekhov did venture impressively into the chronicle form with his investigation of a penal colony in *Sakhalin Island*. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, too, produced a powerful chronicle early in his career, *Notes From the House of the Dead*, which is usually classified as a novel even although, as many critics have pointed out, it is clearly not that, nor is it either an autobiography or memoir because Dostoyevsky made the aesthetic decision to remove his own personality from view, leaving the text to read, as he put it, like “the notes of an unknown.” This distancing strategy would be borrowed, no doubt in the spirit of homage, by Lidiya Ginzburg for her chronicles.

But if once the novel was only a made-up chronicle, now we ostensibly have a kind of novel that is not made up at all. Truman Capote coined the term *nonfiction novel* in connection with *In Cold Blood*, which was ostensibly factual but used a conventional novel's characteristic tone and stagecraft. *In Cold Blood* was a fake novel, as *Robinson Crusoe* was a fake chronicle, if less intended to deceive the reader.

More recently, Capote's ironic term has been taken up, apparently sans the irony, by one of France's most prominent contemporary writers, Emmanuel Carrère, who calls his most recent efforts "deeply personal non-fiction novels" (Ye) in which he uses "all the tools and tricks of fiction-writing, but on documentary material"(Ye). Perhaps overlooking the chronicle's long and rich history, which goes all the way back to the likes of Herodotus and Thucydides (a tradition to which a slim sequence of lyric chronicles by Handke pays homage with its title *Once Again for Thucydides*), Carrère sees his works as incursions into a "huge and partly unexplored continent of literature" (Ye).

The Chronicle as Inquest

But it is true enough that much of the chronicle's territory remains to be explored by the modern literary work. One great ingression into it, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, an intensely descriptive inquest into the home life of a Depression-era sharecropper family, should, with its deep-breathing ambition, the beauty of its *nouveau roman*-anticipating attention to objects and artifacts, and its sprawling modernistic structure, perhaps be to the chronicle what James Joyce's *Ulysses* is to the formally ambitious novel. But few have tried to follow the formidable trail it blazed, a recent one being *Poor People* by William T. Vollman, an attempt at a global era-version of Agee's book that—like the same astonishingly prolific author's colossal seven-book essay on violence, *Rising Up, Rising Down*—came and went with nary a stir.

Still, the modern chronicle does seem to be winning ground. In 2013, the word leading up to the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature was that an "investigative journalist" was in line to win it. It turned out to be Svetlana Alexievich, a Russian-language writer who identifies herself as Belarusian, Ukrainian and Russian. Although she has indeed worked as a journalist, she is clearly a literary-grade chronicler who in her books is consciously trying to make art out of her deployment and shaping of factual material.

But Alexievich, too, lacks a good word for what she produces, preferring to define rather than label it:

I've been searching for a genre that would be most adequate to my vision of the world, to convey how my ear hears and my eyes see life. I tried this and that and finally I chose a genre where human voices speak for themselves. Real people speak in my books about the main events of the age such as the war, the Chernobyl disaster, and the downfall of a great empire. Together they record verbally the history of the country, their common history, while each person puts into words the story of his or her own life.

That *chronicle* might the genre term that Alexievich wants seems likely when she calls what she writes “a history” — for, throughout history, it has been chroniclers who have recorded it. In the ancient world, down through the middle ages, the Renaissance and the Age of Discovery, history and literature met in the art of the chronicle — and chronicles were later used as source documents for actual histories.

History also often plays a role in more recent works that could be labeled chronicles, such as Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Simon's *The Invitation*, Rosa Mendes' *Bay of Tigers*, Ryszard Kapuściński's *The Soccer War*, and Leonardo Sciascia's *The Moro Affair*. In the latter book, which is very much an inquest chronicle, Sciascia, a Sicilian writer, subjects the ransom-note correspondence around the Red Brigades' historic kidnapping and assassination of a former Italian prime minister, Aldo Moro, to some arm-chair detective work that is nothing short of Proustian in its intellectual penetration and syntactical elegance. Sciascia's chronicle does not rely on field reporting, much less investigative journalism: he does not interview anyone or otherwise seek their comment; he does not visit the places mentioned or try to root out fresh facts; he does not tie his book into the ongoing flow of news commentary. He stands well apart from journalism and his book shows how a literary mind can not only deal with, and refresh, a hackneyed news event, but shift it away from the provinces of news reporting, opinion essay and nonliterary factual writing. In what happened, and in spite of the fact that it had already been comprehensively covered by reporters and pundits, Sciascia found space for intellectual and poetic speculation, places where literature could find something to gnaw on.

Sciascia's is, like all chronicles, a time-framed account of things existing or happening in the real world — starting with glow-worms, which curiously seem to be of particular interest to chroniclers. Handke devotes a chapter to them in *Once Again for Thucydides*, entitling it “The Glowworm Epopée.” And Handke's episode with glow-worms takes place in Sciascia's nation, more precisely in Friuli between May 29 and 30, 1988, when, writes Handke, “the insects' flashes across the entire Friulian plain glowed brighter than the stars above, as if it were the first hour of the glowworms' appearance this year, the celebration of their reappearance in the world” (Handke).

In *The Moro Affair*, Sciascia uses intellect, literary culture, and poetic sense to shed light on things, or cast them in a new (perhaps glow-worm-like?) light, or both. The recounting in time shapes his chronicle's discourse. And this would not be the case with an essay, which may start with a real artifact but often does not, preferring an abstraction, and while it may touch on other concrete things before it's done, it quickly lets the discourse, via themes and associations, take control of the composition's typically crooked lines.

And this is one of the perils of the modern chronicle — of the chronicle in a time when a rather severe literary divide exists between fiction and nonfiction (privileging the former), and when there is also professional, fact-based journalism to contend with. In these days, especially in light of an increasing suspicion of any narrative's claims to accuracy and truth, the chronicle stands not only to be misunderstood but mistaken, in its non-adherence to journalistic standards, in its uses or abuses of poetic license and other artistic liberties, for additional evidence of the laxity or falsity of those standards. In other words, although the literary chronicle should be seen as indeed literature and not journalism, it could easily be grouped with journalism and used to further undermine journalism's credibility. Hence the conventional media's latent or overt hostility to examples of the kind of factual literature that it has no name for, the eagerness of its reviewers to label such books as fiction or fictionalized accounts. And it may also explain publishers' resort, in those countries where journalism dominates factual writing, to the

inaccurate label of the novel or memoir: it protects the chronicle that from being judged, especially in a court of law, by the accuracy standards of journalism.

The New York Times calls Sciascia's *The Moro Affair* a reflection, a pamphlet, a little volume and finally a straightforward essay. Yet it is clearly more than any of that, and something other. Granting that there is even such a thing as a *straightforward essay* — the genuine essay, the one practiced by Montaigne himself, is the opposite of straightforward, crookedly progressing by oft-unexpected associations — could such an essay on a bloody current event begin with this lyrical and literarily allusive first-person passage:

Out for a stroll last night, I saw a glow-worm in the cracked plaster of a wall. I hadn't seen a glow-worm in these parts for at least forty years. That's why I took it first for a fragment of schist or a splinter of glass in the plaster and that it was the moonlight filtering through the branches which made it glimmer greenly. The idea that glow-worms had come back after all those years didn't occur to me. They were no more than a memory — from an age when little things were important and provided entertainment and joy. We used to call them cailedi di pecuraru — that's what the country folk called them. A shepherd's life was so miserable with nights spent over the flocks, that it seems only fair he should have the glow-worms as a relic or a reminder of the light, during the awesome dark. Awesome on account of the frequent cattle-raids. Awesome too because it was mainly children who were entrusted with the task of guarding the sheep. Thus 'the little candles of the shepherd'. And from time to time we would catch one, keeping it delicately cupped in our closed fist so as to suddenly reveal that emerald phosphorescence to our young playmates.

But it was really a glow-worm on that wall. I experienced an intense pleasure. A double pleasure. Somehow reduplicated. The pleasure of rediscovering a time — my childhood, its memories, this very spot, silent now, echoing then with voices and games — and the pleasure of a time to discover, to invent. With Pasolini. For Pasolini. Pasolini who was now outside time

but not yet, in this terrible land which Italy has become, transformed into himself (“Tel qu’me enfin l’éternité le change”). Brotherly and remote Pasolini was to me. A brotherliness without familiarity, guarded and, I think, full of mutual intolerances. There was a word which created for me a sort of barrier between us, a word he loved, a key-word to his life, the word ‘adorable.’ I may perhaps have written that word at one time or another and I’ve certainly thought it sometimes — but of a single woman and a single writer. The writer, needless to say, is Stendhal. But Pasolini found ‘adorable’ all that for me was already distressing about Italy (and even for him, since I recall his ‘adorable because it is distressing’ applied to the Lettere luterane — and how can one adore what distresses?) and was to become terrible. He found ‘adorable’ those who were inevitably to be instrumental in his death. (15-16)

This passage even contradicts Sciascia’s own estimate that his chronicle “has no literary quality and is only a hard and naked search for a hard and naked truth” (Sciascia). I strongly suspect this is true only in so much as it is true that his writing hero, Stendhal, modeled his own style on the “dry” language of the French civil code.

Imagine if Proust, rather than Zola, had written something like *J’Accuse*. This is what *The Moro Affair* is: an inquest chronicle about a real event written with the sentence elaboration, the crystalline analysis, and occasionally the lyricism of which the author of *In Search of Lost Time* was capable. Only that, in this case, time lost, and how it is lost, proves lethal. In the end, *The Moro Affair* is indeed a *J’Accuse* — against Moro’s closest political allies, demonstrating, as if by a process of forensic literary criticism, how little they did to save him, how ultimately they were, like Pier Paolo Pasolino’s adorables, instrumental in his death. We follow the chronological development of a murderous kidnapping as Sciascia analyzes (with dazzling semiotic perspicacity, speculative imagination and, concealed just beneath his intellectual discursiveness, a novelist’s sense of turning points and other narrative impulses) the content and language of each successive letter sent by the doomed and increasingly desperate Moro as his abduction is drawn out.

As a form, the chronicle can match the thoughtfulness, and sometimes the crookedness, of the essay, but it is perceptibly more dynamic. Even if often slowly, contemplatively, and usually with not much by way of a plot when compared to fiction, the chronicle does move: geographically, chronologically, in the real, the exterior world. To borrow from George Packer's description of Orwell's factual books, the chronicle continually slips between the particular and the general, the concrete and the abstract, narration and exposition. The essay, on the other hand, roams the mind and its banks of knowledge and memory, not directly the world. It need never move other than abstractly, mentioning a point B in real space or time only if and when the meanders of its exposition and style happen to alight on it by way of illustrational association, not much taking into account the narrative and dramatic unities of time, place and action.

The chronicle, in short, is the more narrative and vivid of the two thought-based prose forms — it is the more adventuresome cousin of the essay. But to call a chronicle simply a narrative essay, as often happens, is akin to calling a zebra a striped horse. There is no such thing as a striped horse — it is a zebra. And when the essay turns narrative, it is really not an essay but a chronicle, not a horse but a zebra.

Beyond Journalism

V.S. Naipaul, like Maugham, often bristled at the limitations of fiction: he thought the novel had peaked in the 19th century, was dismissive of the attempts of Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner to modernize it, and believed that factual prose was the better vehicle for capturing the complexities of the contemporary world. Although he wrote masterworks of traditional fiction like *A House for Mr. Bismarck* and *A Bend in the River*, he believed he was more likely to be outlasted not even by the innovative non-novels *The Enigma of Arrival* and *A Way in the World*, which overtly straddle the real and the imagined, but by the strictly factual *An Area of Darkness*, *Among the Believers*, *Beyond Belief*, *A Turn in the South* and *A Million Mutinies Now*, chronicles of pilgrimages he undertook to conduct inquests into parts of the world that were either not keeping up with the times or falling out of step with them. These are chronicles which, though heavily

reliant on interview-based, on-site reportage, Naipaul said ought to be considered literature, not journalism. Indeed, they obviously flout the standards of journalism, using fake names, perhaps to cover composite characters, and, when these characters hold forth, most of them sounding a lot like Naipaul himself, even resorting to some of his pet concepts: their “quotes” are clearly Naipaul’s personal renderings of what he heard, rather than journalistic transcriptions of what was said.

A relatively recent and successful attempt by a working English-language journalist at a true chronicle is *Night Haunts: A Journey Through the London Night* by Sukhdev Sandhu. Although it is inspired by a forgotten 19th-century journalist’s chronicle of nighttime London, it clearly sets its sights beyond journalism—it was published in conjunction with an art exhibit on its theme. Indeed, in the first chapter, about the police air patrol, which Sandhu calls the avian police, his sources are quoted responding to only one question, meant to prompt lyrical responses, not information: what do they see from the air at night that strikes them as beautiful? And much of the narrative is written in a rhapsodic register, as in this passage well into the chapter on night-time cleaners:

They operate in the aftermath. After the gold rush. They are instant archaeologists, rapid-response stoopers for syringes, fag ends, gig stubs, demonstration placards. They’re also alive to the present and future immiseration of the city, gazing impotently at an anti-spectacle of ragged dolls snouting through bins for half-smoked cigarettes and half-eaten burgers: crazies launching themselves head-first at brick walls; homeless guys clambering into the bottle-recycling skips to sleep. (31)

Like *Night Haunts*, many of the books that I would cite as instances of the modern chronicle and that are marketed not as novels but as factual works, are described in their marketing subtitle as a *journey*, even when they are by no means travel books. Take the Italian Robert Saviano’s *Gomorra*, which is subtitled as *A Personal Journey into the Violent International Empire of Naples’ Organized Crime System*. But Saviano’s is not a literal journey (he does not leave his hometown). It *is* a chronicle, however, and of both the quest and

inquest kind. A *New York Times* copy editor does call Saviano a chronicler in this headline (about Saviano's subsequent attempt at a fiction novel), but then implies that *Gomorra* itself was actually fiction: "In 'The Piranhas,' the Chronicler of Italy's Mobsters Tries His Hand at Fiction. For a Change?" The article itself calls Saviano's earlier books "works of exhaustive investigation told in a novelistic style with some novelistic license. They have both been praised and criticized as 'nonfiction novels,' 'docufiction' and works of 'investigative writing'" (Fisher).

But, as eager as such critics have been to see *Gomorra* as somehow fictional, neither they nor the author himself have ever pointed to any part of the work that is invented. It is not a novel; it is a chronicle. Saviano goes about the book in the way of a fairly erudite, witnessing writer, not as a professional journalist: a prose-wielding observer who is free to speculate, use figurative speech and literary allusions, who is indeed free to indulge in reporting that can be amateurish, not beholden to the professional rules regarding sourcing and attribution or perhaps even accuracy: his book is loaded with mere information, perhaps too much so for a genuine literary work, but the quality of that information, its solidity, should not be taken for granted, since much of it is unattributed. He has repeatedly pointed out that he sees himself as a writer, not a journalist, and, in the book, he continually sets himself apart from the reporters covering Camorra breaking stories, though they do sometime turn to him as a guide or source. In an interview, he described his method:

I wanted to reverse, in a way, the journalistic principle of keeping a distance—the right distance. I wanted to have the right approach and be near in a good way. By following the principle that belonged to the greatest photographer, Robert Capa. He says that the best picture is the one that's a little out of focus because if the focus is too good, then you were keeping a distance and not close enough to see the subject. So, I didn't want the book to be in focus. I wanted everything to go through me. The information, the names and the feelings—hoping that the reader would get what I was feeling. (DeCarli)

As with comedy, poetry, oral storytelling (such as that of the late Spalding Gray) and representational painting, in a literary chronicle a writer may, if there is a compositional advantage to it, choose to “lie” a bit where sophisticated readers would not care whether they were being told the literal truth, where they would only care that the writer was bringing off the effect the composition demanded. The globe-trotting Kapuściński was once ballyhooed as the world’s greatest reporter, but it turns out this claim was based on chronicles published in *The New Yorker* as journalism when, as has since been shown, he creatively reworked his material to literary ends. And the literary chronicle ought to have the poetic license to do some of this. The “I” in such a chronicle, for instance, may well be a version of the author retailored to suit the themes or the timbre of the chronicle’s quest — in essence a *dramatis persona*, much like the *semi-heteronym* Bernardo Soares who is the ostensible author of Pessoa’s *Book of Disquietude*. He or she may even be referred to in the third person, like a fictional character: a strategy employed by Mailer and Handke in their factual works, while Gao in *Soul Mountain* variously refers to himself in the first, the second, and the third person, even altering the gender of these pronouns. There is also much room for creativity in how writers perceive and interpret things, in how they tell their stories, with a touch here and there to bring off an effect, a little in the way that a stand-up comedian retouches autobiographical anecdotes to make them more surely funny.

But I would argue that chronicle writers have to stop at changing, without in some way denoting that they are doing so and justifying it, perfectly checkable facts, at purveying false knowledge or information, at altering the visible world, at renaming places and businesses, at creating fictional characters or composites who are presented in earnest as real, and at whatever other misrepresentations might be considered serious breaches of trust with the reader who has been led to expect factual writing (à la James Frey’s ostensible memoir *A Million Little Pieces*). The ancient chronicle might have deceived its readers in all these ways and more, but since the advent of professional journalism on the one hand and fiction’s

attainment of respectability, it seems silly to try to do so, and it makes nonsense of the reason for choosing to write a factual text instead of a declared fiction.

It seems to me that the principal challenge of modern chroniclers, their most defining artistic constraint, is to write well, intelligently and artistically while nevertheless observing the constraints of the real, to explore intellectually what reality unretouched seems to be trying to tell us in so far as it does align with the theme and purpose of the chronicle. What Robert Frost said of free verse applies, I believe, even more to the chronicle that does not respect reality: it is like playing tennis with the net down. Since the factuality of the text is in itself a fiction, why not just call it fiction and be done with it?.

Rosa Mendes's *Bay of Tigers*, which won the first major prize set up in Europe for factual writing, the Lettre Ulysses Award for the Art of Reportage, tells of the Portuguese author's perilous, fear-and-loathing trek through the former Portuguese colony of Angola toward the end of its long, post-independence civil war. It is yet another gonzo heart-of-darkness journey and another that is also an inquest: into what a conflict fueled by the Cold War superpowers had done to the soul of an infant country and to the souls, and bodies, of its ordinary people.

It opens with this author's note:

This is a book about simple things: the calmness of fear, the vitality of death. In June 1997, I landed in Luanda with the intention of journeying to Quelimane by land. My purpose was the most noble of all — that is, I had no purpose in particular. These pages are the atlas with which to read my trek: the emotional map of a route whose locales bear people's faces and where space and time are the coordinates that lie the most.

Everyone warned me: The war is still going on there. Some of my travel companions died.

There was no guarantee I would return.

I suspect the author's note to be an exercise in the poetic license that chronicles have always reserved the right to use. In fact, Rosa Mendes went to Angola as a freelance journalist, and some if not all of his

reporting appeared in a Portuguese magazine. His book-length chronicle, like Kapuściński's, is an artful, literary reworking of his reportage, going as far as to include hallucinatory sequences, presumably invented.

I met and briefly talked to Rosa Mendes on a New York City sidewalk once, and when I told him how frustrated I had been trying to figure out the crooked organizational scheme of his book, he confessed there really was none, that he had just decided to jumble the chronology of his journey. Why? I didn't have the chance to get him to clarify that, but I was left with the impression of a dense multiplicity of purposes. Rosa Mendes probably wanted the book's structure to mirror the chaos of a land shattered by war, but also to make it signal to the reader that the book ought to be taken as much more than a travelogue or fact-finding expedition, that it is, rather, a literarily challenging text, as well as an attempt at making something of what he found to be in pieces — an inquest given up as a bad job because what was in pieces remained in pieces. It is also meant to echo one of the books he was reading on his journey, *Atlas*, by the French theorist Michel Serres, and to reflect what Rosa Mendes warned us about in his note: that space and time are the coordinates that lie the most.

Mendes did also tell me that his book is not meant to be taken as journalism, for it does make use of the imagination — perhaps even more than the chronicles of Kapuściński, who himself knowingly noted that Rosa Mendes “is truly an inspired author, and not only because he is capable of the most perceptive observations. He has that most important quality — an extraordinarily powerful imagination” (Mendes). John D'Agata, the foremost champion of the lyric essay, also defends changing whatever you choose to change, including names and locations. This is in the tradition not only of poetry, but also of the ancient chronicles, with their fact-starved, legend-reliant weakness for fabulation, and I think it continues today in the *cronicas* published in Iberian and Latin American newspapers. Did the events that Brazil's Lispector, Portugal's Irene Lisboa, or Catalonia's Josep Pla describe happen exactly in the way

described? Probably, since they are usually too everyday to be imaginary, but the reader doesn't much care, anyway, as long as the effect is enlightening, charming or otherwise satisfying.

During his Angolan adventure, Rosa Mendes did, to be sure, interview people, and he was journalistically professional enough (no doubt for the sake of his magazine dispatches) to use a tape recorder to accurately catch their words and a camera to capture how things looked (none of the photos are used in the book, although at least one is mentioned and even described). But reporting, or clearly conveying topical information, is of course not his principal intent in *Bay of Tigers*, and it shows in the narrator's edgy angst and frequent patches of an out-of-focus, poetically heightened kind of writing that readers are unlikely to see in a book of journalism:

It accompanied me against my will, like a moon and a shadow. When I was forced to stop, it went on running, but as days passed, it began to notice me and turn. I was calm, it was not. It changed, softened, stopped.

Time stopped is a companion I neither asked for nor have the right to refuse. Time and I, in Caiundo, are enclosed in a tent that flays my nerves. Trapped in a billeting area in the Land of the End of the World, I release the only free part of myself and mentally brave the unknown, fly to a place located beyond any map, and in that intimate empire I contemplate time in complete immobility. The old Aztec shamans were familiar with such flight.

I breathe the air of the drowning man, and there is no anguish, no flailing. I breathe gusts of water. Each desert always confronts me in sight of a river — and there it is. UNITA wants to wait me out. As it knows that animals don't roam by themselves, it gave me a tent so I can waste away in private. When I'm done, they'll come to look, lament, and spread the word.

Exhuming everything that is mine, which is not much: a planet of Aristotelian cosmogony. I live in a flat, square universe erected on four pieces of cloth, with the melancholy vault of a

stall without stars. In outer space, there is a satellite with no intelligent life: they brought me a chair.

I sit down and read *Atlas*, by Michel Serres.

“Le livre que j’écris est plus la chair de man chair qu ma chair elle-même.”

I sit down and read *The Portable Paul and Jane Bowles*.

The first is excellent, the second a treasure. I can’t stand either of them. (29-30)

The Chronicle as Quotidian

Perhaps the most impressive inquest chronicle I have come across is Ginzburg’s Proust-influenced, bracingly intellectual account of a person’s day-to-day strategies for coping with the petty or great desperations of a Soviet city under siege in World War II. *Blockade Diary*, the title given to Ginzburg’s text by its English publisher, who tried vaguely to purvey it as fiction, is not a real diary either. Titled in Russian *Notes of a Besieged Human Being*, which deliberately echoes Dostoyevsky’s *Notes From the House of the Dead*, it contains a shaped, third-person narrative, even one with an equivalent of the unknown narrator in Dostoyevsky’s chronicle: a mostly undescribed man who replaces the author, no doubt in part to ensure that the work is also not mistaken for a memoir or indeed a personal journal. This character is not there to deceive or to create illusion: his fictionality is evident, and there is no attempt to make him look like more than a cypher; he is clearly not there for readers to believe in and identify with or cheer or be seduced by or otherwise judge, as would be the case with a hero in fiction.

Ginzburg’s work deals with one of the chronicle’s most natural subjects, the quotidian: the narrative throws up everyday instances of hunger and others hardships that the narrator experiences or observes, then dissects with the aid only of the author’s succinct and incisive observational powers, memory and intellect. The unknown male protagonist makes possible an artistic distancing that always sits well in the chronicle and was all-important to Ginzburg. She was not producing memoir but writing creatively about

the real in order, as she put it, to become located outside herself and be more objective and lucid about reality.

Ginzburg's chronicle deals with the everyday in an abnormal time. But the chronicle, especially in its brief forms, has always been happy to take the normal everyday as its subject. It is certainly what the Portuguese and Brazilian *cronica*, such as those of Lisboa and Lispector, chiefly deal with, as does Réda and one of his English-language disciples, John Taylor. The Times Literary Supplement labeled Réda's texts simply as *prose writings*. Réda's *The Ruins of Paris* chronicles his fitful, strictly observational, lyrical explorations of his own city and its suburbs, especially the lowliest, more overlooked nooks. What is he looking for there? His English publisher describes his little journeys as mirroring "life itself and a world that ceaselessly rises anew from its own ruins" (Réda), and called his aim a "searching for questions that can't be answered." Réda himself seems to be glimpsing a post-apocalyptic dystopia:

Near to the rue des Bons-Enfants and the rue du Plaisir (where, behind a corrugated iron fence, two cherry trees are starting to blossom), and with a much more pronounced sense of contrast, Saint-Ouren, like Paris itself, has its rue de la Gaîté. The rue des Boute-en-Train leads straight into the flea market —more exactly known as Malik. Some people think that you come here out of a taste for the decrepit, whereas it is the future that you survey. When electricity, gas and water no longer supply our homes, and life reverts to a living under canvas, right back to ground level, exchange and barter will again become the natural basis of trade. (89)

Chronicles of the quotidian can be even simpler, sketchier. Rubem Braga, a leading *cronica* writer in Brazil, published one that consists entirely of his trying to compose it one sunny morning while overhearing someone dutifully if disconsolately practicing the piano somewhere in his neighborhood. In one of her early chronicles about neighborhood life in the fascist-era Lisbon of the 1950s, Lisboa (persecuted by the regime and perhaps the greatest female Portuguese writer yet to be translated into English) does deal with a sensational event: a neighbor's suicide by hanging in the doorway to his

tumbledown little house across the street from Lisboa's apartment. But her chronicle dwells mostly on the casual aftermath: what her housecleaner, Mrs. Beatriz, has to say about what has happened; what the gossip is on the street and how it travels among the neighborhood's types; Lisboa's own witnessing of the arrival on foot of two humble hospital orderlies with a stretcher on a trolley to remove the body; then the orderlies walking the trolley on up the street before stopping to indulge in a long, heated discussion with two policemen about some practical problem or other; what the gossip was days later about the surviving common-law wife and daughter, and what this gossip says about Lisboa's chief gossip-monger, Mrs. Beatriz. Lisboa's chronicle deals meta-literarily with its own composition (translation mine):

I'm not happy with my reportage. It's not satisfying me.

Reportage is what I'm doing, isn't it? But reportage that lacks a certain tone, warmth, a certain circumstantial nerve, so to speak. I'm going to try another approach. (21-22)

Lisboa's chronicle ends this way:

Two days went by, and how many turns did the world take? The world of others, because in this poor corner of the city there were precious few changes. Mrs. Beatriz climbs my service stairs once again with her green bag in her hand, full of sighs. The weather is cold. She takes off her coat, puts on an apron and remembers — which is unusual for her, since she quickly forgets everyday happenings — the neighborhood's hanged man. She concludes thus her earlier observations:

His death notice was in the paper, which is surprising! Do you know... it wasn't even in the obituary section, nor in the accidents section, nor in the city section! It must have been the family who paid to have it put in, to acquit them [the newspaper's editors] of the responsibility for it. Because they [the editors] don't like to talk about these things; they're not allowed to...

It's said the wife is at risk of losing the house, Mrs. Beatriz says, delivering herself of her last important bit of news, her mouth pursed. But sooner or later she'd have to get out, so, so,

soÉ All these rustic old buildings are to be demolished, anyway, they're condemned! And the street needs to be widened, for aesthetic reasons and because of the automobiles, to make their passage easier...

That's too bad, I reply.

Well, yes, because of the views, your home will be worse off.

But see here, Mrs. Beatriz continues, tightening her mouth and using the language of the opinion columns she reads or hears read: shack-like homes, it's not right, in a city like ours...

(27)

Conclusions

In the last decade, Norwegian Karl Ove Knausgaard's five-volume *My Struggle*, an attempt to outdo Proust (it succeeded in doing so at least in terms of its length), is obviously a novel only in name, since the author, besides often digressing into fairly long essayistic passages that break with the classically novelistic style, tells intimate stories involving real people who retain their real names and were asked to sign legal releases over it, which seems to confirm the truth of what was written about them. And I would say that Sweden's Nobel committee, despite its founding brief to recognize "idealistic" literature, has grown noticeably appreciative of the realism of factual works. Only a clutch of primarily factual writers had won the award in the past — Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Winston Churchill, and the German historian Theodor Mommsen. But recently these have been joined by Alexievich, Handke (all of whose most accessible and talked about books are factual), Poland's Olga Tokarczuk (who, in her most recent works, such as *Flights*, mixes brief factual chronicles with lengthier passages of historical fiction), Naipaul (whose prize came only after he had published the magisterial non-novel *The Enigma of Arrival*), Doris Lessing (who won only after publishing two volumes of autobiography, with her most acclaimed fiction well more than two decades behind her), J.M. Coetzee (only after he had published the austere, Tolstoy-echoing sequence of self-

distanced memoirs, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, the prize being awarded, in fact, the very year after the latter came out in 2002), and Gao; I even suspect that another winner, Saramago, did not hurt his Nobel odds with the homage the titles of his novels pay to the old factual genres. All of which probably reflects the fact that we have entered a Baudrillardian time in which reality's foundations have at least partly crumbled and real events have in some ways become more fictional than fiction, leaving us in need of what a form like the chronicle supplies: more, not less, reality, a few more glow-worm-like specks of lucidity in what seems to be turning into a new Dark Ages.

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