

Liviu LUȚAȘ

Linnaeus University
Sweden
E-mail: Liviu.Lutas@lnu.se

METALEPSIS AND THE PAST IN FICTION: A STUDY BASED ON FRANCOPHONE LITERATURE

ABSTRACT: The aim of this study is to challenge the view that narrative metalepsis is incompatible with the writing about the past and history. I study three works by francophone writers in which metalepsis and another similar narrative device, syllepsis, are used in interesting ways in stories dealing in different ways with the past. In C F Ramuz's short story *Scène dans la forêt*, both devices are used in order to give the reader the impression of being in physical contact with past events and with the fictional events represented in the story. The past here is of an individual type. In Marie NDiaye's first story of her novel *Three Strong Women*, the individual past can be read as an allegory of France's postcolonial relation to the former African colonies. Metalepsis is used in order to suggest that the character accepts her past. In Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Biblique des derniers gestes*, metalepses are used in order to suggest a physical contact with the forgotten history of slavery.

Key words: Metalepsis, syllepsis, narratology, historiography, postcolonialism, historiographic metafiction.

The aim of this study is to challenge the view that narrative metalepsis is incompatible with the writing about the past, especially when this past is meant to belong to the real world. In this process, I will therefore distinguish between the past of individuals, both fictional and real, and history, which is the common past and concerns the real world. All these forms of the past can appear in fiction and

can be connected in intricate ways. The works analyzed in this article have been chosen in such ways as to highlight some such intricate connections.

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Paradoxical in nature, narrative metalepsis is considered as one of four paradoxical narrative devices by the Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology in Hamburg. These devices are paradoxical because they undermine the *doxa* of realistic fiction by violating the boundary between the world of the telling and the world of the told (cf. Klaus Meyer-Minnemann and Sabine Schlickers). Indeed, according to Gérard Genette's first definition, narrative metalepsis is "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse" (1988:234-235). The paradox of metalepsis is highlighted even more clearly when Genette states that "[a]ll these games, by the intensity of their effects, demonstrate the importance of the boundary they tax their ingenuity to overstep in defiance of verisimilitude a boundary *that is precisely the narrating (or the performance) itself*: a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells" (1988:236).

Devices which break the *doxa* in such ways are, at a first sight, not compatible with the goal of giving a realistic and trustworthy account of the past. Indeed, narrative metalepsis has even been considered as a signpost of fictionality, for instance by fiction theorist Alexander Bareis, who is of the opinion that "certain forms or subspecies of metalepsis can only occur in fiction" (2008:163). Fictionality, however, especially because of its connection to imagination, is not an easily accepted way to represent history. Indeed, the use of imagination in general in relation to writing about history has been the subject of much controversy. Works dealing with the Holocaust in particular seem to be the target of the harshest criticism by those who consider fiction inappropriate for the representation of life in concentration camps. Theodore Adorno's well-known quotation, "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric", is often echoed nowadays. This was the case when Ingrid Lomfors, in her review in the Swedish newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (2011), criticizes Elisabeth Åsbrink for using too much fiction in her book *Och i Wienerwald står träden kvar*.

The skeptical view on fiction in relation to historiography is a heritage left by the positivistic tradition in which historiography was born. According to this tradition, there is a need to separate history and imagination. Positivism did not rely on sources such as chronicles, myths or legends because of the predominance of imaginary elements and because they lacked scientifically verifiable data. A philosopher like Paul Ricœur also criticizes the use of imagination in historiography, since he finds imagination incompatible with the “alethic (veritative) dimension” of the historical discourse (2000:14). According to Ricœur, historians are constrained by reality. Their discourse and their methodology, which cannot avoid the use of documents and traces, are separated by a very clear line from fiction (1985:203-204).

However, a line of philosophers of history, such as Giambattista Vico, Claude Lévi-Strauss, the Annales School, Henri Corbin or Hayden White, have shown that imagination is an unavoidable element in all historiography. Ricœur himself observes in his analysis of the relationship between memory and imagination that imagination must be used in the case of a science in which human memory plays such a significant role. Even though memories are directly connected to experienced perceptions, Ricœur says that the “trap of imagination” (2000:66, my translation) cannot be avoided entirely. Memories, he concludes, exist in the same field as imagination, which leads to a curious parallelism between the phenomenology of memory and the phenomenology of imagination (2000:65).

The positivistic tradition has also been criticized by historians of the holistic tendency, who consider that its methodology does not allow access to the past in its totality. Henri Corbin, for instance, accuses demythologization, i.e., the abandonment of all sources which are not scientifically verifiable, of “historicist reductionism” (1985:29). The risk of such a methodology is one of a “collective amnesia” (1971:xvi).

One other aspect regarding history which involves imagination is its “linguisticity,” a term coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer to highlight the dependency of historical discourse on language. According to Hayden White, among others, the positivists have not succeeded in liberating historians from the yoke of language: “The use of a technical language,” claims White, “does not free the historian from the linguistic determinism to which the conventional narrative historian remains enslaved” (1978:115). The very essence of history involves language, says White. One detail which proves this is the word’s morphology,

incorporating “story”, something which indicates that history is not only a chain of raw facts, but also an emplotment of these facts, in other words a story. One important consequence is that the narrative dimension must not be neglected when dealing with history. Narrative entails the existence of a narrative instance, a conscience, and thus also an imagination, which distills raw reality in order to forge it into a linguistic shape. Acknowledging the linguisticity of history can contribute to a better understanding of the past. According to Bernadette Cailler, a historian who is aware of the rhetoric and stylistic dimensions of history can avoid some of the impressionistic traps of a certain type of historiography, as for instance the positivistic one from the 19th century, and a less hermetic separation between history and fiction could be beneficial to both of them (1998:19). This is also the opinion of French West Indian philosopher Édouard Glissant, according to whom fiction writers may be better suited than historians to look for the real past, which in many cases is not to be found through the use of a rigorous methodology, but rather by means of a “creative exploration” (2002:223).

However, when discussing an opposition like the one between history and fiction, it is important to be aware of the problematic meaning of the term *fiction*. Indeed, *fiction* in English can mean both a work of narrative prose in general, and something invented or not real. In German, there are two different words which can be used in illuminating ways when dealing with such issues: *Fiktionalität* for the notion of being a work of fiction, and *Fiktivität* for the notion of being invented (cf. Zipfel). Bareis proposes the use of a similar division in English between *fictionality* with the corresponding adjective *fictional*, which would refer to the classification of a work as fiction; according to Bareis this should not be confused with *fictitiousness* and its corresponding adjective *fictitious*, meaning that something is unreal (2008:171). Actually, as he puts it, “fictitiousness is not a mandatory notion of fictionality” (2008:154). In other words, just because something is fictional does not necessarily mean that it is fictitious. This line of thinking can be applied to narrative metalepsis: metalepsis can relate to reality although it can also be seen as a signpost of fictionality. This is actually something that literary theorists have shown in relation to metalepses. Indeed, Sonja Klimek (2009), Werner Wolf (2005) and Monika Fludernik (2005) have observed that some metalepses can even reinforce realistic effects.

Bearing these thoughts in mind, I will analyze three works of francophone

literature written by Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, Marie NDiaye and Patrick Chamoiseau, in which narrative metalepsis is used in very complex and interesting ways in dealing with the representation, or sometimes non-representation, of the past.

**FUSION WITH NATURE OR WITH THE STORYWORLD? – SCÈNE
DANS LA FORÊT BY C.F. RAMUZ**

The first work to be analyzed is a short story written in French by Swiss author Charles Ferdinand Ramuz. The story, entitled *Scène dans la forêt* was written in 1946, just one year before the writer's death. It is a good example of Ramuz's style, especially when it comes to his idiosyncratic use of verb tenses, as commented on by the critics (cf. Philippe Carrard 1980:314; David Parris 1983:130). These critics have difficulties explaining Ramuz's apparently ungrammatical use of tenses, viewing it sometimes as regional Swiss French usage. This explanation is not satisfactory in all cases, as can be seen, for instance, at the beginning of the short story:

They were felling down a beech in a clearcut area they had been put in charge of by the municipality. There were four of them: two old men and two young men; the old men were using the axe. The blows of the axe **are heard** from far away (my translation, my emphasis).

Ils étaient en train d'abattre un hêtre dans une coupe rase dont ils avaient été chargés par la commune. Ils étaient quatre: deux vieux et deux jeunes; les vieux maniaient la hache. Les coups **s'entendent** de très loin (Ramuz 1946:151, my emphasis).

What is striking here is the sudden change from the French imperfect tense (the *imparfait*) to the present tense. How can this change of tense be interpreted? There are several possible explanations. One is that this is a commentary by a homodiegetic intradiegetic narrator who hears the sounds from a place in the diegetic world. The problem here is that the *imparfait* had previously situated the narrator temporally outside the diegesis, giving the reader the impression that the narration was ulterior, i.e. that the events are told after they happened. How can

the narrator then suddenly hear sounds coming from a world situated in the past? This could be explained if a metaleptic transgression has occurred. The narrator hears the sounds coming from the world of which he tells, to use Genette's words, and which should be ontologically separated from the world in which he tells. This would mean that the extradiegetic narrator has crossed the boundary between the two worlds, thus entering into a kind of physical contact with the events of the story. It is as if the past made an intrusion into the present of the discourse of the narrator. By crossing the temporal boundary, the blows made by the axe seem to come out of the book, as though they refused to fall into oblivion. The metalepsis in this case would be a tool showing that fiction can be a way to fight the oblivion of the past.

This example of metalepsis could actually also be classified as a narrative syllepsis. Syllepsis, one of the four narrative devices in the typology developed by the members of the Hamburg Interdisciplinary Center for Narratology, was first defined by Genette as "the fact of taking together those anachronic groupings governed by one or another kinship (spatial, temporal, or other)" (1980:85). Genette emphasizes the temporal dimension even more clearly in his following comment on the device: "syllepsis [...] affects sequence (since by synthesizing 'similar' events it abolishes their succession) and duration (since at the same time it eliminates their time intervals)" (1980:155). Indeed, the confusion created between ulterior and simultaneous narration (cf. Carrard 1980:318), i.e. when the events are told as they happen, as well as the confusion between two worlds which are temporally separate, suit Genette's definition quite well. They also suit Sabine Lang's definition of syllepsis, since some of the examples she gives are the narrator's transition between a heterodiegetic and a homodiegetic status, or the narrator's transition between an intradiegetic and an extradiegetic level (2006:34-35).

Be it a metalepsis or a syllepsis, Ramuz's quotation above is interesting, since several interpretations are possible. The sudden use of the present tense may be a way to achieve a dramatizing effect, by giving the reader the impression of being closer to the diegetic world both temporally—thanks to the use of the present tense—and spatially—thanks to the presence of the narrator in the diegetic world. Another possible interpretation is that the story is perceived by the narrator both beyond the temporal boundaries and beyond the ontological boundary between

narrative levels. The use of the circumstantial complement “from far away” can be seen as an argument in favor of such an interpretation. Indeed, “from far away” is here ambiguous, since it could refer to the physical distance between the place where the event takes happens and a person in that world who hears the blows of the axe, but also to the metaphysical distance between the storyworld and the narrator’s world, the world in which one tells. The narrator transgresses the boundary between these two worlds and enters into a kind of physical contact, mediated by his auditory perception, with the events in the storyworld. It is as if the past made itself heard in the present of the narrator’s discourse, which could be the present of the reader if one sees this level as extradiegetic. By transgressing the temporal boundary between the storyworld and the present of the enunciation act, the sounds made by the axe seem to break their temporal confinement, refusing to fall into oblivion. The death of one of the four forest workers, killed by nature in a possible act of revenge, becomes much more than a simple news item in a regional paper. Thanks to its sylleptic dimension, this tragic event acquires a mythical dimension, becoming a part of an eternal present, the present of the book

It is worth mentioning that thanks to its capacity to bring together different temporalities, narrative syllepsis is the ideal device to suggest a symbiosis between the past and the present. Ramuz himself had underscored the importance of this kind of symbiosis in his works when commenting on his inability to apprehend temporal progression. “I see things very clearly, but I do not see the continuation of things. Everything appears discontinuous to me,” he writes in his *Journal*, continuing “I see the individual, or possibly a continuum of individuals” (1943:42, my translation). This seemingly perceptual inability is transformed into an aesthetics of continuity, and epitomized in Ramuz’s use of narrative syllepsis. Thanks to the temporal condensation accomplished by this device, the individual in Ramuz’s works sometimes appear, as Ramuz suggests it himself, as a continuum of several versions of him or herself, since the past is not severed from the present.

This way of conceiving individuals is frequent in modernist or postmodernist novels, as Genette pointed out (1980:254). The identity of such individuals is complex, not hermetically isolated either from other individuals and from the surrounding world or from the past. The possibility of communicating with the past in the paradoxical way suggested by the quotations from Ramuz is compatible with the holistic aim of some historians, such as Henri Corbin, mentioned above. Moreover, thanks to the annihilation of temporal limits, Ramuz’s example of

narrative syllepsis could be compared with the aesthetics of analytical cubism in painting, where the unicity of one point of view is abandoned in favor of a diversity of perspectives, all present at the same time. The result is the impression that time is just another dimension, and therefore can be represented in artistic form. Most importantly, the impression is that the past does not simply disappear, but exists, somewhere, accessible to those who know how to interpret the signs.

**FUSION WITH ONE'S REPRESSED PAST – *THREE STRONG WOMEN*
BY MARIE NDIAYE**

The second work to be studied is the novel *Three Strong Women*, written in 2009 by Marie NDiaye, and winner of the Goncourt prize that same year. Marie NDiaye was born in France, and considers herself to be a French author. Still, her father is from Senegal, something that might have marked NDiaye's sense of identity despite herself. It is not unthinkable that having an exiled father, who chose to move back to Senegal when NDiaye was only one year, has influenced her in her decision to leave France and to live as an exile in Berlin as an act of ideological protest against the way France was governed by President Nicolas Sarkozy (cf. Kaprielian 2009). The story I have chosen to analyze, the first out of three stories in the novel, might be considered to have an autobiographical dimension, since it is about the problematic relation that a second generation of immigrants can have with a past they want to repress.

This is how the story begins, first in the English translation, then in the French original:

And the man who was waiting for her at the entrance to his big concrete house - or **who happened by chance** to be standing in the doorway - was bathed in a light so suddenly intense that his whole body and pale clothing seemed to produce and project it: this short, thick-set man standing there, glowing as brightly as a neon tube, this man who had just emerged from his enormous house displayed no longer, **Norah straight away realized**, any of the stature, arrogance and youth that was once so mysteriously characteristic of him as to seem everlasting (NDiaye 2012:3, my

emphasis).

Et celui qui l'accueillit ou qui parut **comme fortuitement** sur le seuil de sa grande maison de béton, dans une intensité de lumière soudain si forte que son corps vêtu de clair paraissait la produire et la répandre lui-même, cet homme qui se tenait là, petit, alourdi, diffusant un éclat blanc comme une ampoule au néon, cet homme surgi au seuil de sa maison démesurée n'avait plus rien, **se dit aussitôt Norah**, de sa superbe, de sa stature, de sa jeunesse auparavant si mystérieusement constante qu'elle semblait impérissable (NDiaye 2009:11, my emphasis).

The voice in this extract pertains clearly to an extradiegetic narrator, speaking in the third person. The focalization is, on the other hand, more difficult to establish. Until the second emphasized part, which is “Norah straight away realized”, the focalization could be considered external, of the kind Genette compares to a camera recording the surface of things and people, without any human conscience being involved. However, there is a slight modulation in the original French version, achieved by the use of the word “comme”, meaning “as if”, which the English translator chose to ignore. This could be the trace of a human conscience trying to interpret what he or she is seeing, since the small untranslated comment alludes to alternative interpretations which are not simple observations. Could it be that the focalization changed temporarily from external to internal?

A much more clearly marked change of focalization occurs in the second highlighted part, when the narrator suddenly has access to Norah's thoughts. “Norah straight away realized” is indeed not an observation of superficial aspects, but could actually be interpreted as a case of “mind reading”, with the words used by cognitive scientist Simon Baron Cohen. In cognitive sciences, “mind reading” is a term used to describe the human ability to attribute states of minds such as thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions to other people (cf. Baron-Cohen 1995). More precisely, in this case there could be what Lisa Zunshine calls a “mental embedment” of the third level (2011:166). Indeed, the narrator, who is already at a second level – we as readers read his thoughts –, reads the mind of Norah and introduces thus an additional level. According to Zunshine, “this is the level at which much of our culture happens, for it seems that the interplay of three

subjectivities (however many physical bodies it may actually involve) is the staple of our philosophy, representational art, and fictional narratives” (2011:168).

However, the differences between the French and the English versions highlight another important aspect, which is lost in the English translation. In the French version, the terms translated as “Norah straight away realized” are “se dit aussitôt Norah”, literally meaning “Norah said to herself”. The use of the reporting verb “said” suggests that this is not only about focalization, but also about narrative voice. In that light, the extract could be seen as a case of free indirect discourse, where the narrative voice has a double source: it could be the extradiegetic narrator and Norah at the same time. The utterance would consequently be the product of an ambiguous act of enunciation. In that case, the representation of Norah’s thoughts might not be a case of mental embedment of the third level, but rather a residual trace of Norah’s voice in the narrator’s discourse.

There is, however, another possible explanation, which would entail that there actually only is one narrative instance after all in this extract. It could very well be that the narrator is Norah all along, even when the status is extradiegetic. This would mean that the narrator splits herself, into one extradiegetic narrator, the frame narrator so to speak, and one intradiegetic narrator, who appears almost unnoticeably. In the extract above, indeed, there is no threshold, no frame, at all in the English version which could help the reader notice when the intradiegetic narrator takes the floor. This would correspond to what William Nelles calls an “unmarked” case of shift in narrator (2002:350). It is not much easier in the French original, even if there is a reporting verb, since it is difficult to decide how much of the whole utterance is to be attributed to Norah as intradiegetic narrator.

At three points in the story, the shift of narrative voice is more clearly marked. The transition between the extradiegetic narrator and the intradiegetic narrator is accompanied by a change of grammatical person, from the third to the first person. It is as if the extradiegetic narrator forgets her status and starts talking in the first person, as if she suddenly had become not only “a narrating self” but an “experiencing self”, according Dorrit Cohn’s dichotomy (1978:143). But even if the shift can be explained in this way, the rather subtle way in which it appears gives a strange impression of a metaleptic fusion between the extradiegetic narrator and the intradiegetic narrator, who is a character in the diegesis.

A closer look at the three extract and at the way they were translated can clarify my point. I will therefore quote the French original first and the English translation afterwards.

Tout le monde sursauta, même Norah qui avait pourtant reconnu la sonnerie de son portable [...] le portant à son oreille avec gêne dans le silence de la chambre qui semblait avoir changé de nature et, de calme, lourd, léthargique, était devenu attentif, vaguement inamical. Comme dans l'attente de paroles définitives et claires qui leur feraient choisir de **me** tenir à l'écart ou de **m'**accepter parmi eux (NDiaye 2009:29-30, my emphasis).

Everyone jumped, even Norah who was familiar with the ringtone of her mobile [...] Embarrassed, she put the phone to her ear. The silence of the room seemed to have changed in nature. Instead of being calm, ponderous and lethargic, it had suddenly become attentive and vaguely hostile, as in the hope of hearing clear, definitive words that would enable them to choose between keeping **her** at arm's length or welcoming **her** into their midst (NDiaye 2012 :18-19, my emphasis).

What happens here is that the English translator chooses to disregard the fact that the narrative voice changes in the middle of the sentence. The two pronouns emphasized in the quotations are in the first person in French, something that seems illogical. This explains the translator's more logical choice, but at the same time, such a choice means that the metaleptic fusion between an extradiegetic / heterodiegetic narrator and an intradiegetic / homodiegetic narrator is eliminated. Indeed, there are not even two different narrative voices in the English version.

A similar mitigation of the metaleptic transgression happens in the English translation of the next extract:

Est-ce vraiment, se demandait Norah ébahie, hargneuse, ce qu'il pense à présent? Est-il parvenu à se persuader que c'est Sony et **notre** mère qui ont refusé de se rencontrer pendant toutes ces années? (NDiaye 2009:58, my emphasis).

Is that what he really thinks now?” Norah had wondered crossly, with astonishment. “Has he managed to convince himself that it was Sony and **our** mother who, throughout all those years, were the ones who refused to meet each other? (NDiaye 2012:42, my emphasis).

Here, the emphasized pronoun is in the first person in the English translation too. Still, the translator has chosen to avoid the metaleptic intrusion of the extradiegetic narrator in the diegesis by marking the fact that this is a case of direct speech with quotation marks. The utterance of Norah as an intradiegetic narrator becomes thus something as conventional and usual as the words of a character, clearly separated from the narrator. In the French original, the lack of quotations marks had the effect that the first person pronoun could make reference both to Norah and to the extradiegetic narrator at the same time.

The same thing happens in the third example:

Elle se devait maintenant, pour Sony comme pour elle, d'être forte et fine manœuvrière. L'insoupçonné n'aura plus raison de **moi** (NDiaye 2009: 88, my emphasis).

For Sony's sake, and her own, she had to be a strong, skilled tactician. “The unsuspected will never again get the better of **me**”, **she said to herself** (NDiaye 2012:66, my emphasis).

Not only does the translator add the quotation mark, to mark the difference between the narrative voices, but he even adds a reporting comment, “she said to herself”, which contributes to highlight the existence of a threshold. This threshold was overstepped in the French original in a metaleptic way, since the impression created by the ungrammaticality of the use of the pronoun – *elle* and *moi*, which are both the third and the first person, seem to make reference to the same narrative persona – suggest a fusion of two individuals. This metaleptic fusion is also reminiscent of the uncertain identity that Genette finds typical of characters in a certain kind of modernist and postmodernist fiction, as I mentioned in relation to Ramuz.

But what is especially interesting in relation to the metaleptic fusions between the different narrators in the examples above is that they seem to contribute to the story's main theme, which is Norah's acceptance of the fact that she actually had visited her father in Africa before, when she was a teenager. Indeed, it appears as if Norah has repressed the memory of that journey, and thus a part of her identity as an African. The awakening consciousness about this is a painful process for her. The metaleptic fusions between Norah as an extradiegetic narrator and Norah as a character can thus be interpreted as an illustration of Norah's reconciliation with her past.

This hypothesis is corroborated at the very end of the story, in a part called "Counterpoint", when the focalization suddenly changes very clearly to internal. The narrative is focalized on a new character, Norah's father, who had only been observed from outside previously. Norah's father, guilty of having kidnapped his son, Sony, and taken him with him when he left France for Africa, is one of the main reasons why Norah is repressing her African past:

COUNTERPOINT

He felt near him a breath other than his own, another presence in the branches. For some weeks now he had been aware that he was not alone in his hideout, and patiently, without irritation, he was waiting for the stranger to reveal herself even though he knew what it was all about since it could not be anyone else. He was not annoyed because in the tranquil darkness of the flame tree his heart was beating languidly and his mind was lethargic. No, he was not cross: his daughter Norah was there, close by, perched among the branches that now were bereft of flowers, surrounded by the bitter smell of the tiny leaves: she was there in the dark, in her lime-green dress, at a safe distance from her father's phosphorescence. Why would she come and alight on the flame tree if it was not to make peace, once and for all? His heart beat languidly, his mind was lethargic. He heard his daughter breathing and it did not make him angry. (NDiaye 2012:75-76).

This ending gives the impression of a fusion between the father and her daughter. Indeed, not only is she with him in the flame tree, his refuge and probably a symbol of Africa, but he becomes aware of her presence without even seeing her. He just feels her, as if she has become a part of him, and he also feels that she has finally found peace and reconciliation. The metaleptic fusion between the daughter and her father can thus be seen as a way of representing the fact Norah finally accepts her repressed past. Such an interpretation lifts the story from an individual level, transforming it into the drama of the African emigrants in general. Thus, Nora's past acquires the dimension of a common past, coming closer to history than it was the case in Ramuz's short story.

Another interesting aspect is that this final part is very clearly separated visually from the rest of the text. First of all there is the title and then an empty space, which could be seen as a frame which demarcates it. Frames in literature have been studied for instance by John Frow (2002) and William Nelles (2002), who followed Russian philologist's Boris Uspensky's studies of the relations between visual and verbal artefacts. Lately, however, it is from the fields of iconicity and intermediality that the most useful theories have originated in this respect. Thus, ekphrasis theorist Lilian Louvel analyzes framing effects under the heading of iconotextual relations (2001). Likewise, theorist Winfried Nöth considers cases where a bit of text seems to be framed visually as examples of "form miming form" over media borders (2001:18). According to Nöth, this is a kind of iconicity in language which is less studied than other iconicity classes, as the one when the form of a sign mimes the meaning of what it is representing – "form miming meaning". By establishing a clearly marked frame, especially by visual miming, the text alludes to the existence of thresholds between different narrative voices and between individuals, thresholds which sometimes are there only to be transgressed, as happens in NDiaye's story.

FUSION WITH THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY – *BIBLIQUE DES DERNIERS GESTES* BY PATRICK CHAMOISEAU

It is interesting to compare the metalepses in Ramuz's and NDiaye's works with similar devices used in a novel written by another francophone writer: *Biblique des derniers gestes*, from 2002, by Martinican author Patrick

Chamoiseau. A comparison with Ramuz could also be interesting since both authors are known for describing their local realities in rather folkloristic, or even exotic, ways. Moreover, like NDiaye, Chamoiseau is not only known for his successful career as a writer, having received the Goncourt prize in 1992, but also for his ideological standpoints. Together with Raphaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé, Chamoiseau is the leader of the Creolity movement, which is a form of criticism of the postcolonial departmentalization policy implemented by France towards Martinique. As in Ramuz's and NDiaye's cases, critics have been biased by Chamoiseau's geographical belonging and ideological standpoints, something which has led to a large insistence on a rather small number of motifs, common to postcolonial writers. As I previously argued (Lutas 2008), it is much more rewarding to consider Chamoiseau's oeuvre beyond its admittedly extraordinary ability to describe an exotic reality, and beyond its author's explicit ideological standpoints.

One of the details of Chamoiseau's novels worth special attention is his frequent use of all the four paradoxical narrative devices according to the typology of the Hamburg Narratology Centre. I will here concentrate on a couple of metalepses from *Bibliographie des derniers gestes*, especially those which have a special relation to Chamoiseau's ambitions to write about the Martinican past from a new, endogenous, perspective.

I will start with a case which is similar in some ways to the "Counterpoint" in NDiaye's novel studied above. This is just one of a large number of such cases, in which the main narrator, or the frame narrator, is replaced by another narrator, the main character himself, Balthazar Bodule-Jules, or BBJ. The words are supposedly an instance of direct speech, quoted by a certain Isomène Calypso:

Deux-trois autres compères, qui s'en vinrent avec leurs camarades. Celui-ci appela celui-là qui appela les autres qui appelèrent leur monde. La case fut envahie d'un remué de marché qui ne semblait provenir que de l'agonisant – lui, pourtant inébranlable (et pas présent) au fond de son fauteuil.

*

Oala, petit Cham, la vie du Morceau-de-fer c'est comme l'allée d'un vent: il a rêvé cette vie autant qu'il l'a vécue... et notre vie l'a rêvé autant qu'elle l'a forgé...

« Notre morceau de fer ».
Cantilènes d'Isomène Calypso,
conteur à voix pas claire de la commune de Saint-Joseph.

Reconstituer cette agonie est affaire difficile. Elle ouvre à toute une vie, invoque les ombres et les lumières de toute une destinée. De plus, l'agonisant n'ouvrit jamais la bouche, ou si peu, ne savourant que le viatique de son silence (Chamoiseau 2002:48).

It is of lesser importance to understand the semantic meaning of the words above. What is more important is that the short bit of text in the middle, the two lines supposedly uttered by the other narrator, BBJ, followed by the three lines in which the references are mentioned by a third narrator, is visually separated in different ways from the rest of the text. Typographically for instance, since the font size is smaller, but also in ways which are iconically imitating the frame of a painting even more clearly than in NDiaye's example: the margins are different, and there is an empty space before and after the text, demarcating it from what could be called the frame narrative.

As in NDiaye's example above, this is a case of a marked "vertical embedding", with Nelles's words (2002:344), functioning as a way of demarcating different narrative levels. But in this case, the demarcation is more clearly distinguishable in the narrative voice too, since indeed there is a transition from a heterodiegetic to a homodiegetic narrator, whereas in NDiaye's example it was between two different heterodiegetic narrators with internal focalization. One consequence is that there is no real fusion between these different voices in Chamoiseau. At least not in these cases.

There are on the other hand episodes in the novel where the voice of the frame narrator, who is a fictionalized version of Patrick Chamoiseau, melts together with the voice of the main character, BBJ. As in the works of Ramuz and NDiaye studied above, these episodes could be considered as narrative syllepses, since the limits between the narrative voices are effaced rather than transgressed. Syllepsis, according to Meyer-Minnemann and Schlickers (2010:93) and to Lang (2006:31), is a levelling device as opposed to metalepsis which is transgressive. However, as claimed elsewhere (Lutas 2012), such a differentiation is unstable,

since it is difficult not to see a transgressive dimension in the melting together of two different narrative voices.

Some of the fusions of narrative voices are accompanied by fusions of identities, as in the case of NDiaye's "Counterpoint". Such phenomena are sometimes explained with the argument that inhabitants from the French Indies have a different world view. Haitian author Emile Ollivier claims for instance that Antillean people do not make the same distinction as people from the Western world between reality and fiction, and that they can live at several levels of reality at the same time (1995:227). It must be mentioned that this vision is reminiscent of the kind of more complex personality which Genette found, as mentioned before, typical of modernist and postmodernist fiction, but also of the discontinuous perception of time which Ramuz used, as we have seen, to explain his games with the verb tenses. However, explaining formal aspects in literary works by a different way of perceiving reality could be quite reductionistic, especially since it involves a regionalist dimension which seems inadequate in the case of *Biblique des derniers gestes*.

The fusion of the narrator's voice with BBJ's voice has been discussed, among others, by Dominique Chancé, who finds it to be the expression of a poetics of homogeneity. After having underscored the polyphony of voices at the beginning of the novel, where there are three different characters who give their versions of the same events, Chancé is of the opinion that there is gradual fusion between the voices and the identities of the narrator and the main character (2003:887). I cannot but support Chancé's claim. Indeed, at several points in the novel, the narrator discovers some strange similarities and parallels between the character and himself. For instance, when he tells the story of BBJ's childhood, the narrator notices that he has gone through an analogue development: "I was growing too" (Chamoiseau 2002:303, my translation). Likewise, when reflecting on his own writing process, the narrator starts getting the feeling that he is writing about himself rather than about BBJ (2002:479). This feeling is confirmed at the end of the novel, when the narrator retrospectively realizes that he not only used the first person "je" as a formal device, but that he actually had become BBJ on several occasions (2002:764-765).

Another kind of symbiosis between the narrator's and BBJ's voices is illustrated by the episodes when BBJ's voice suddenly intrudes into the extradiegetic narrator's discourse. The best example of this practice is the episode

relating the period during which BBJ lived in Indochina, at Cao Bang, where he pretends to have met Hô Chi Minh: “Mister Balthazar Bodule-Jules told the captain of his section that he could keep an eye on Uncle Hô. I don’t know why I said so, but I felt I could tell him that” (2002:277, my translation). Obviously, what happens here is that BBJ’s voice takes over in an ungrammatical way. It is a case of what Genette (1988:38) calls free direct discourse, and which he exemplifies with the following sentence: “Marcel is looking for his mother. I really must marry Albertine”. The free direct discourse is the unmarked quotation of the words of somebody, in such way that no logical connection is to be found between the narrator’s words and the quoted words. The device is close to the more frequently used free indirect discourse, and has a similar effect: the confusion of voices. It is important though to underscore that the effect is only similar, not identical. Indeed, as Genette had noted when comparing free indirect discourse with immediate discourse, or what sometimes could be called interior monologue, in both cases there is a confusion of voices, but in the first one the narrator takes over the character’s words, while in the second one he takes his place (1980:194). This is what happens in an analogue manner in the extract from *Biblique des derniers gestes*, where the character takes the place of the narrator hardly perceptibly already in a phrase apparently uttered by the narrator. Indeed, the words “Uncle Hô” seem to have been pronounced by BBJ rather than by the narrator.

There is, however, an even more interesting example of dissolution of the limits between temporalities which could be classified as narrative syllepsis. It is the story of the alleged two births of BBJ. “According to himself, Mister Balthazar Bodule-Jules was born fifteen billion years ago” (2002:52), says the extradiegetic narrator about the first one of these births. This supernatural contact between BBJ and the origins of our galaxy can be interpreted as a way to establish a mythical temporality in order to compensate for the alleged lack of founding myths which many theorists see as characteristic of Antillean literature (cf. Chancé 2001:70). This mythical dimension does however not efface the sylleptic character of this fusion of temporalities. The syllepsis is confirmed later on, when BBJ himself links this mythical past to the present through his memory:

I am older than earth, he claimed too, which is not even five billion years old. I remember dust particles when they agglutinate in rocks,

I remember these rocks when they melt and form planets, I remember these solar winds when they start burning here and there, I remember those total energies when they collide, contradict each other, establish and construct themselves endlessly. I still see this alchemical horror which is nothing else than our planet Earth right at the moment of its birth (2002:53, my translation).

BBJ's second birth is not much less mythical than his first one:

But Mister Balthazar Bodule-Jules claimed, with the same emphasis, that he was the product of another Genesis, of an unexpected kind to say the least. This Genesis was associated to the first one and gave him the opportunity to pretend that he was only four centuries old (2002:56, my translation).

It is the period of the Slave Trade, which thus associated to the creation of our galaxy acquires the dimension of a founding myth. The association is corroborated explicitly by the narrator in the following words about BBJ: "I understood that his agony had transported him in a strange way into the hold of a slave ship. The Slave Trade over the Atlantic. The founding crime of the people of America" (2002:57, my translation). The description of this episode is more clearly sylleptic than in the case of his first birth. The account is focalized on BBJ who, in spite of his having been only a newborn baby, has memories of the slave ship as if he had been there as an adult. The mentioning of his perception in the following quotation intensifies the impression that BBJ really has witnessed the tragic event of his mother's death during the journey: "Mister Balthazar Bodule-Jules had perceived this scream, this fall of a woman's body, but extraordinarily enough, he did not feel the terrible attack of the sharks" (2002:63, my translation).

What is even more interesting is the corporeal manner in which this memory takes place in the present. Indeed, the narrator discovers the traces of slavery in BBJ's body, as if it were a "carnal memory":

He always claimed that he was tortured by the memory of the hold of the slave ship. But I was surprised to discover this story, **unreal and honest** at the same time, in the confessions of his body. The story

ran out from his immobile chest, as an obsessional chimaera. By way of a tireless repetition during almost five hundred years, it had left an inextinguishable emotion in his muscles and in his spirit. It was a **true dream**, an **imaginary truth**. It was an impossible whose traces subjugated reality. I could not help but receive him like this: the carnal memory belonged to another kind of reality (2002:65, my translation, my emphasis).

Obviously, BBJ's body appears here literally as a document on the past, a document in which the sensation created by the past is transmitted directly, without the mediation of printed words. The use of the three oxymorons in the quotation above (see the emphasized words) suggests that it is difficult to interpret the traces and to understand their paradoxical survival in the present.

CONCLUSION

Out of the three works studied above, Ramuz's and NDiaye's stories deal with the past on an individual level. Ndiaye's story can possibly function at a second level, since the main character's relation with her father could be seen as an allegory of France's postcolonial history. There is no doubt that Chamoiseau's novel is the only one dealing more directly with history. It could probably be classified as what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction", which are works of fiction trying to deal with history in a way which acknowledges the connection between history and fiction instead of denying it. "The formal linking of history and fiction through the common denominators of intertextuality and narrativity", writes Hutcheon when analyzing such works, "is usually offered not as a reduction, as a shrinking of the scope and value of fiction, but rather as an expansion of these" (1989:11). Indeed, Hutcheon argues, historiographic metafiction challenges the "naive realist concept of representation" (1989:6), showing that even literary devices which are usually not associated to realistic fiction can be used with the objective of writing about history. Or shall I say with the objective of not writing about history sometimes? Indeed, in some cases, the use of metafictional devices is self-reflexive, since it highlights how difficult it is to

write about the past.

As I showed in all three analyses above, paradoxical narrative devices, such as metalepsis and syllepsis, which are seen as signposts of fictionality by some theorists, appear in works dealing with the past and even with history. I cannot but agree with Hutcheon that such a kind of use of fictionality is beneficial even for historiography, since it highlights the fact that even history is a narrativized discourse.

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