Narrative Discourse

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Afterword

A Note on Implied Readers and Narratees

Mīrābā’ī’s “Even if you break off, beloved, I would not”

The first chapter concluded with the following schematic representation of the narrational component of discourse:

Real Author [Implied Author, guided by partially “autonomous” imagined agents [Nonpersonified Narrator {Personified Narrator {Focalizer {Topicalizer}} Personified Narratee} Nonpersonified Narratee] Implied Reader/Sahrdaya] Real Reader/Critic

Subsequent chapters have examined some of the nuances of implied authors, narrators, and the relations among implied authors and narrators, with some treatment of focalization as well. When undertaking this book initially, my plan was to treat all the constituents of narration (leaving aside the real author and real reader/critic, who are not technically part of the discourse). As the writing progressed, I eventually realized that it would not be possible to consider the “receptive” half of narration (narratees and implied readers). Indeed, the current discussion still leaves a great deal to discuss even with respect to implied authors and narrators, not to mention focalizers.

Books on any complex theoretical topic are perhaps necessarily incomplete. Thus, extending the present discussion to other elements of narrational discourse can—and, indeed, should—be put off for future work. However, before concluding, it is worth making a few, very pre-
liminary, comments on narratees and implied readers. When these receptive elements have been mentioned in the preceding pages, they have largely been treated as reflexes of their productive counterparts, narrators and implied authors. To a great extent, that makes sense. However, narratees and implied readers have their own complexities and nuances that merit separate examination.¹ These remaining few pages do not constitute even an introduction to the topic of narrational reception. They are intended simply to suggest some of these complexities and nuances. As a basis for this discussion, I take up a poem attributed to the great sixteenth-century Hindi poet Mīrābāī. With great help from Lalita Pandit Hogan and Philip Lutgendorf, I have translated the poem somewhat freely, trying to capture some of the dhvani or suggestiveness of the original, as follows:²

Even if you break off, beloved, I would not;
Broken off from your love, Kṛṣṇa, with whom could I be joined?

You are the tree, I am the birds.
You are the lake, I am the fish.
You are the mountain, I am the pasture.
You are the moon, I am the partridge thirsty for moonlight.

Even if you break off, beloved, I would not;
Broken off from your love, Kṛṣṇa, with whom could I be joined?

You Lord are a pearl, we are the ties that bind the necklace.
You are gold, we are what the jeweler adds to make a wedding band.
Lord of lady Mīrā [bāī Mīrā], who lives in Brij—
Listen here cowherd!
You are my idol, I am your girl in the temple.

Even if you break off, beloved, I would not;
Broken off from you, Kṛṣṇa, love, with whom could I be joined?

Due to constraints of space, it is not possible to discuss the poem at any length. However, it is probably clear, even on first reading, that the narratee and implied reader are complex and cannot be understood as mirror images of the narrator and implied author. The point is most obvious with the personified narrator and the personified narratee. The former is, roughly, Mīrābāī; the latter is Kṛṣṇa. It may seem initially that the
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The opening line of the poem represents a sort of paradox. Even if Kṛṣṇa separates himself from Mira, the two will remain joined because of Mira’s decision. At one level, this suggests simply that Mira will not recognize any ending of the relationship. But, in another way, it suggests that both lovers have control over their union. This relates to the mystical aspect of the poem, for this is not simply a love poem, but a poem of religious devotion as well. It speaks of Mira’s romantic love. But it also speaks about the spiritual relation between devotee and God. The line suggests that the devotee and God are not so distinct as the I/you division, the narrator/narratee separation, might initially suggest. The point becomes clearer as the poem develops.

To understand the second line of the poem, one needs to look ahead a bit to the suggestion of later lines that the speaker is a devadāsī, a girl or woman who has been married to a god in a temple and is not free to marry anyone else (see, for example, Srinivasan 1869). At the same time, such women often supported themselves through prostitution (the point is discussed by Srinivasan; see also Bhattacharji 50). In this context, then, the opening stanza comes to have two broad meanings. First, it continues to operate at the level of the romantic and spiritual narratives. At that level, Mira says to Kṛṣṇa that she will never love anyone else, as just noted. But the second meaning is very different. It hints at the speaker’s loss of support in the temple and the despairing question of what she could possibly do in response. Here, there are two further implications, derived from different answers to the question and different senses of the word “join.” The first sense is “marry,” and the answer to the question “with whom could I marry?” is, of course, “no one.” The second sense is “physically united.” There, the answer might be “anyone who will pay.”

The dhvani of these lines alters one’s sense of the narrational structure. First, it at least complicates a reader’s sense of the narrator as continuous with the implied author. On the one hand, Mira did leave her home to join a group of Kṛṣṇa devotees. However, she was literally married to a Rajput prince, not to a temple deity. Second, the narratee is not
precisely Kṛṣṇa, but the icon, the idol of the temple—for the devadāsī, deprived of the temple, would be separated, first of all, from the idol that is localized in space, not the God who is ubiquitous. Or, rather, it now appears that there are two personified narratees. One is the icon. The other is the God represented by the icon. Both are suggested by the culminating line of the poem. I have translated it in such a way as to stress the former meaning—“You are my idol, I am your girl in the temple.” But the line equally means “You are my God, I am your devotee.”

Indeed, one can go further still and posit yet a third narratee—almost nonpersonified and in effect encompassing the other two. Specifically, the interpretations just considered do not seem easy to reconcile. If the narratee is the beloved, then he is free to break off from the narrator. Thus he may be blamed for the breaking (or, translating differently, the tearing apart). But if the narratee is the idol, then he/it can hardly be responsible for the separation. Indeed, even the personification of God as a lover separating from his beloved is somewhat unclear. Here, it is necessary to make a distinction between the “saguṇa,” or “material” form of the deity—either as icon or as incarnation (avatāra)—and the ultimate “nirguṇa,” or immaterial and formless deity (see, for example, McDermott 176, 177). The latter is the ultimate source of all the causes or events of the world. As such, whatever happens in the world is the action of Kṛṣṇa. For example, when the devadāsī is separated from her icon, Kṛṣṇa is ultimately responsible. In this way, behind the beloved and the idol is the God. Whatever happens to the narrator—separation from her beloved or loss of her place in the temple—results from the action of God.

The following lines, concerning the tree/birds and the lake/fish, take up the divine quality of Kṛṣṇa, for it makes him into the support for life, as does the final line about the partridge, who, according to legend, survived by drinking moonlight (McGregor 297). The third line, in contrast, appears to make Mira and Kṛṣṇa into complementary aspects of nature. Specifically, Kṛṣṇa is the inanimate aspect of earth, while Mira is the food for animals. This is in keeping with some versions of Hindu mysticism, according to which the ultimate spiritual realization is the unity of the devotee and God, a unity in which they are two sides of one reality. This dualistic unity is sometimes represented as a divine androgyne, in keeping with the common emplotment of the devotee–God relation as driven by romantic love and the desire for physical union. Indeed, it is possible to discern a complementarity in the other lines as well. Mira is given life by Kṛṣṇa. But, in another sense, Kṛṣṇa becomes animate only in Mira. We
see this in a limited way in the relation of the tree and the birds. In the case of water/fish and moonlight/partridge, however, the point is striking, as Kṛṣṇa is mere matter that enters into life through Mira. There is a similar relation between the (lifeless) idol that represents Kṛṣṇa and the singing and dancing devotee.

These points complicate the narrator–narratee relation still further by ultimately identifying the two. It thereby makes sense out of Mira’s insistence that she would not be separated from Kṛṣṇa even if he separated from her. On the one hand, this means that, even if she loses her place in the temple, thus is separated from her icon, the devadāsī will not lose faith. But, at the same time, it suggests that, even if Kṛṣṇa and Mira appear to be separated, they will not be separated in fact, any more than the two halves of the divine androgyne. They are complementary aspects of a single unity, like the mountain and the pasture. Indeed, the point is extended by their mutual dependency. Mira relies on Kṛṣṇa to stay alive, but Kṛṣṇa depends on Mira to become life. More generally, the relation of Kṛṣṇa and Mira reflects—indeed, is an instance of—the relation between the abstract, nirguṇa deity and the manifestation of that deity, a manifestation that occurs not only in the incarnation of Kṛṣṇa, but in the world generally.

The complications on the side of the narrator are extended further by the fact that the narrator identifies herself not as a single bird or fish, but as birds and multiple fish. This indicates that the narrator is in some sense a collective. Most obviously, she is a group of devadāsīs. But, more broadly, the suggestion is that she is everyone. The cross-textual implied author of Mīrābāī’s poems indicates that people all share life in Kṛṣṇa. Of course, not everyone realizes this—and that difference begins to bring in the implied audience for the poem. The implied reader is able to recognize that, in Mīrābāī’s understanding, he or she too is birds sheltered by Kṛṣṇa, fish sustained by him. Moreover, the implied reader is implicitly asked to understand himself or herself in relation to the narrator’s perseverance in the face of Kṛṣṇa’s apparent abandonment. Of course, the understanding and experience of abandonment are not the same for everyone. In connection with this, there are at least two distinct, if related implied audiences for this poem. One is general. The other is specific to devadāsīs.

The fourth stanza intensifies these interrelations. The first and second lines actually shift from “I” to “we.” Thus some larger group is again included in Mira’s account of her relation to Kṛṣṇa. This extends the plurality of the second stanza. It may or may not count as collective
narration. (The narrator may simply be speaking about a larger group to which she belongs, rather than speaking for that group.) But, either way, the point is that both implied audiences are tacitly included in the scope of the pronoun “we.”

Even more significantly, the images once again reverse the usual relation between God and the devotee. Here, God becomes useless without his devotee. A pearl gives the necklace its value. But without the string that binds it into a necklace, the beauty of the pearl would never be seen. Gold is what gives jewelry its worth. But without the chemicals used to form the gold into ornaments, it would never be worn.

The poem began as an apparently pathetic appeal from a lonely and dejected lover, abandoned by her beloved, or by a devadāsī perhaps losing the support of her temple. Over the course of a few lines, it has reversed the relationship. Now the narratee is characterized as dependent on the narrator. Indeed, the narratee is dependent, not only on the narrator, but on the implied reader as well—for the implied reader is part of the “we,” without whom the pearls and gold would be invisible. This change in the relation is never arrogant. Mira’s tone is familiar when she orders him to listen, but there is still a suggestion of respect. The original here is “Gopāl,” a given name that means not only “cow-herd,” but also “protector of the world” (see Monier-Williams 365). The final line of the fourth stanza reveals the many implications of the narrational discourse presupposed in the preceding analysis. A reader may not think of devadāsīs until this line in the poem—at which point, all the preceding lines alter for the implied reader (in the manner suggested in chapter 3). But, on a second reading, the line can almost become a sort of reassurance to the deity. It is almost as if she were saying—don’t worry, though driven away, I will still remain faithful. The final repetition of the refrain may be read in the same way.

Here too there are possible further resonances for the implied audience. Specifically, the early sixteenth century saw the “dawn of the Mughal Empire” (Wolpert 122), “shattering” the Rajput “attempt to stem the tide of Mughal might” (124; Mīrābāī was Rajput). In a period marked by the rise of Islam, the poem appears to orient the implied readership in relation to the then-current politics of religion. Specifically, the poem may be seen as urging loyalty to Kṛṣṇa in the face of temptations to abandon him through conversion. In connection with this, one might even infer a sort of response to Islam in the poem’s combination of saguna and nirguna divinity—including the suggestion of idols—and in its close interrelating of the devotee and the deity. The narrator’s attitude toward
God has very little to do with submission (central to the meaning of the word *Islam* [see Waines 3]), and her view of temple worship (thus idolatry) does not appear at all negative (in contradiction with Islamic iconoclasm).

If these interpretive points are valid, they are, of course, a matter of the implied author. However, the implied audience is differentiated in terms of its relation to icon worship, its view of Islam, and so on. (Even within Islam, the differentiation may operate by reference to such open and syncretistic developments as Sufism.) Various audiences are situated somewhat differently with respect to the norms of the work. It is important to stress that these are implied audiences and not simply real audiences. A real audience may entirely miss the point of the poem. The implied audience recognizes the point—and relates that point to itself. For instance, devadāsīs would relate the point of the poem to themselves differently from other Kṛṣṇa devotees, who would in turn relate to the norms of the poem differently from recent converts to Islam. Another way of putting this idea is to say that there is a sort of indexical element in the implied authorial meaning of the text. The implied author establishes a norm and in effect asks the reader to take up that norm to reflect, not only on the narrator and narratee, but on himself or herself as well. Of course, it is the real reader who takes up the particular reflection, but the norm of the reflection is defined by the implied author for the implied reader, or at least for the sahṛdaya.

The model for this reflection is not religious per se. Rather, marital relations are the means used by Mīrābāī to represent spiritual relations. Indeed, to a great extent, the emotional impact of the poem is bound up with its romantic and marital associations. The poem continually recurs to the loyalty of a wife to her husband, using that as a model for the loyalty of the devotee. Indeed, this model is developed in a much more complex and subtle way than might at first be apparent—which leads to the sahṛdaya.

The first chapter stressed the emotional attunement of the sahṛdaya. But that attunement is not simply a matter of emotional sensitivity. It is bound up with sensitivity to dhvani, or suggestiveness, as well. Indeed, the Sanskrit theorists emphasized the intertwining of dhvani and rasa.7 (Rasa is aesthetic and empathic emotion.) For the most part, the marriage relation in the poem is suggested rather than made explicit. Mīrābāī of course did not live in a dating culture. In her social context, the idea of separation from a beloved much more readily brought to mind marriage, making the split more serious. Moreover, as already noted,
devadāsīs were married to their deity. These are suggestions that would have been widely available to readers or audience members. Two more subtle hints come in the opening lines of the fourth stanza. The word “dhāgā” means “thread,” but in the plural it may refer to “bonds . . . of love” (McGregor 527). I have tried to incorporate that hint in the translation “the ties that bind the necklace.” This is the sort of suggestiveness to which a sahṛdaya should be both semantically and emotionally sensitive. A similar point holds for the next line. The word “suhāgā” refers to borax (McGregor 1033), “a superior flux” used “in the refining and soldering of precious metals, especially gold” (Beer 164). However, the closely similar word “suhāga” refers to “the auspicious state of wifehood (as opposed to widowhood)” (McGregor 1033). The wife/widow distinction is marked in part by the presence or absence of jewelry. Thus I translated the word as “what the jeweler adds to make a wedding band” (in this case a necklace, rather than a ring). Here, too, the translation is an attempt to capture the dhvani of the line. Note that, in both cases, the dhvani points toward a marital relation between the narrator and the narratee—and thus, given the preceding analysis, a marital relation between the implied reader and the narratee as well. The point suggests the importance of the implied reader’s “wifely” loyalty to Kṛṣṇa, a loyalty that will manifest itself differently for different readers.

Clearly, there is much more to say—not only about receptive discourse in general, but even about narratees and implied readers in this particular poem. However, the preceding comments should be enough to show that the receptive part of narrational discourse is not simply a mirror image of the productive part. It is, rather, a complex, vital, and autonomous component of discourse, a component that requires analysis and appreciation beyond that given to the far more widely discussed productive component.