THE QUEST FOR AN AUTHENTIC LITERARY MODE: RUSKIN BOND’S “THE EYES ARE NOT HERE”*

ABSTRACT: Two versions are here compared of a story that Ruskin Bond wrote for young-adults in 1955. Intertextual reading of the two versions and a psychoanalytic interpretation of the adolescent authorial psyche embedded in the story have brought into focus the metafiction inherent in representation. The restoration of the original version which, due to its unavailability, has been forgotten, is argued for.

KEYWORDS: metafiction, textual history, young-adult fiction, fantasy, psychoanalytic interpretation, Ruskin Bond

0. INTRODUCTION

The task of tracing the intricate dynamics of correspondences between the subject and the object in the making of the authorial self is not only difficult, but has become problematic since psychoanalytic interpreters of the self have argued against the existence of such a subject/object dyad. If the cognitive process is influenced by the pre-existent unconscious, the external world loses its independence and becomes a function of the subject's unconscious.

I shall however take a cue from Leo Bersani (2006:163-174) and trace how the unconscious in the Anglo-Indian author Ruskin Bond (1934 - ) has been formed through his everyday encounters with the world before it can objectify the world of his fictions. Freud's notion of the “feminine” and Lacan’s idea of how the “gaze” formulates the self and the other are filtered through Bersani in this reading. This theoretical premise, explained in the context of the analysis, is particularly relevant to the story I have set out to read, which involves blindness as the principal

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trope in a psychologically playful relationship between a man and a woman. In the reading, I will explore that phase in Bond’s early career when he was searching for a suitable idiom for self-expression. I will analyse two versions of a fantasy story taken from this stage. The first version appeared in the Sunday supplement of a newspaper; the second is a revised version included in an anthology.

The significance of the story is that it is an allegorical reflection upon the metafictional crises that engender the transference of the romantic desires of a young man into inscribed fantasies. A comparison of the two versions of the story will lead us to understand how contingencies of the zeitgeist sometimes intervene to confuse an author at an experimental stage about the authenticity of the literary idiom that should represent him best. The version that least represents him might get circulated as it has been anthologized, and the better version is soon forgotten. It is the task of critical scholarship to rescue the most representative version from obscurity.

The title given by the author to both versions of the story is “The Eyes Are Not Here.” To acquaint readers with the slender plot of the story I will depend on the popular version included in the Sahitya Akademi compilation (Kumar 1991: 36-39) (hereafter referred to as the SA version).

A blind man, the narrator, is travelling by train in the foothills of the Himalayas, going to Dehra Dun and on to Mussoorie. He has the compartment to himself till a girl gets in. He overhears her in conversation with her parents who have come to see her off. From her enchanting voice and the sound of her slippers slapping against her heels the man imagines how she looks.

The girl is startled when the man tries to pick up a conversation with her. The man speaks and behaves in a manner so as to hide his blindness from the girl. He moves to the window and pretends to look out of it, describing all that a person from a moving train can presume to observe in the forested foothills of Garhwal. Romantic feelings for his companion stir within him. He pretends to stare at her and describes her eyes as “interesting.” The girl laughs: “a clear, ringing laugh” that sounds like “the clear sparkle of a mountain stream.”
The girl gets off the train at Saharanpur. There is a commotion at the gate; while getting off the girl appears to have collided with a man getting on. The narrator asks the new entrant what the girl looks like and receives the answer: “She had beautiful eyes but they were of no use to her. She was completely blind. Didn’t you notice?”

The first version of this story appeared in The Sunday Statesman Magazine, published from Calcutta, on 29 May 1955. This version is different from the SA version in several respects, the most significant of which is the absence of the end-twist.

Born in the Garhwal Himalayas and brought up in Dehra Dun and Shimla, Ruskin Bond sailed to England at the age of seventeen in October 1951 to realize his dream of being a published author in English. Unable to suffer the alienation and loneliness of the English atmosphere, he returned to the familiar life of Dehra Dun in 1955. This is one of the first stories that he wrote after his return. The girl on the train is referred to as Punjabi, and unlike the blind girl of indeterminate cultural origin of the SA version, she has normal vision. The authorial narrator alone is portrayed as blind; and that too, implicitly. The confession, “As I was totally blind at the time …” at the beginning of the second paragraph in the SA version is a result of a revision by the author. Bond made the girl in the train blind on the suggestion of a friend, thereby adding not only an unwonted twist to the story, but also a new dimension to its interpretative possibilities. I call the end-twist “unwonted” because that is not what Bond’s stories usually have. In the first version, the girl getting down at an unnamed station (not Saharanpur, as in the SA version), and the blind man resuming his journey in the empty compartment all alone, highlight the pathos inherent in the authorial narrator’s sensibilities that engender the story’s original composition. Let me briefly take up the latter aspect before venturing into a comparative study of the two versions.
1. EXPERIENCE AND THE AUTHORIAL UNCONSCIOUS: GENESIS OF “THE EYES”

Ruskin Bond reminisces over the kind of personality he possessed in 1951:

I was very much my own person … ready to discover things about myself and come to terms with a wayward, sensual nature; above all, eager to express myself in the language I’d learnt to love; ambitious enough to want to see my name in print (if not in lights!). To love and be loved; to be free.

(Bond 1997:78-79)

The sensuality of the author on the verge of his twenties finds representation in his fictionalized longing for dark beauties like Kamala and Binya in his short stories “Time Stops at Shamli” and “Binya Passes By.” These fictitious women are modelled on the author’s experiences in real life. In 1950-51 in Dehra Dun, Bond befriended a Punjabi boy, Ranbir, and his sister, Raj, who lived with their mother in the neighbourhood. Bond was enamoured of Raj’s lithe, athletic figure and was bowled over by “one sidelong look from her dark, friendly but fiery eyes” (Bond 1997:84). In what appeared to be a benign occasion for Bond, Raj had to lie in bed with her foot operated upon and bandaged after a sewing needle accidentally pierced and got into it. Bond sat by the bedside watching her “one bandaged foot on a pillow, and the other elegant bare foot tracing patterns on the wall” (Bond 1997:85). In his desire to touch her, he pretended to be a good masseur and offered to massage her foot (not the injured one) on the pretext that it would be good for the blood circulation and bring about quick healing of the injury. When she was all right and could walk again, he was invited to play badminton with her. Unlike Raj, who was a champion of the game at school, Bond did not even know how to play it. But he acceded to Raj’s wish only to be with her and be able to continue to satisfy his desire for her company. This is how Bond describes his feelings in the Memoir:
She played barefoot on the dew-drenched early morning grass, and I shall always remember her that way as she darted about the badminton court, lissome, gazelle-like, sparkling in the sunrise. Sometimes I stood still in order to admire her and she would call out, “What are you staring at?”

(Bond 1997:86)

The sensibilities of the blind man in the train stem from what can be called Bond’s pining for Raj, whom he missed on his return to Dehra Dun from his four-year-long sojourn in England:

It would have been nice to see Raj again, The Punjabi girl with whom I used to play badminton the year before I left for England. A fine, athletic girl, she used to beat me 15-0, 15-1 (the last point in my favour being an act of mercy on her part), and I used to put up with these walkovers just so that I could be with her. The things we do for love! But now her father, like my stepfather, had lost his money in ill-conceived business ventures and had left Dehra Dun with his family. In the 1950s, Dehra Dun was going through a slump; it would recover a decade or so later.

(Bond 1998:5)

In England Bond had fallen in love with a Vietnamese girl, Vu Phuong, who left for her country in the wake of the US-Vietnam war and went out of the world of the author. The frustration he suffered due to this could have possibly been compensated for had he on his return to India found his youthful emotions redeemed in the company of Raj, especially when Dehra Dun and its surroundings were redolent with the nostalgic memory of his tender escapades with the girl. The disappointments suffered in succession, however, inspired the authorial self in Bond to transfigure his personal experiences into an objective metaphor in keeping with his foremost desire to “express myself in language” and “see my name in print.” The result is the allegory of the journey, the psychological trope of blindness and the transience of the scene, which acts as a hyperreal marker of temporal distance in the story.
The genesis of the journey metaphor in the story can be traced to the expressionistic telescoping of time that seems to separate Bond’s impressions of his journey out of Dehra in 1951 and that of his homecoming in 1955. His friends saw him off at the Dehra Dun station on 14 October 1951. The author’s Journal entry of that date records his feelings:

The engine shrieked, drowning his [Somi’s] voice. The platform, fruit stalls, advertisement boards, all slipped away; the darkness came on, the station lights twinkled, fell away, grew fainter till they were flickering pinpoints in the distance. The stars came out. And the forest moved in around us.

(Bond 1997:130)

The description is real as well as metaphoric: real, because in the 1950s the outskirts of Dehra Dun were densely forested; metaphoric, because the leave-taking had an immediately sad effect on the traveller who was leaving behind a world of love and longing to enter into an unknown ("dark" and "forested") world of mystery and adventure. Four years later when the author returned to Dehra Dun for good the journey was reversed, although engendered by a sense of sadness at the loss of Raj. In the story the girl (modelled on Raj) appears in the narrator’s journey (a metaphor for his life) for a short while (an hour between Rohana and Saharanpur in the SA version), only to disappear again. The feelings of the blind man following the girl’s exit from the scene in the Statesman version are inscribed in the following lines: “The train gathered speed, and the wheels took up their song, and the carriage groaned and rattled. I found the window and sat in front of it, staring into the darkness” (Bond 1955:10).

The description is remarkably similar to the author’s 1951 feelings of leave-taking. What the girl leaves behind is the perfume of her hair. It works like a metonymic absence in sustaining the desires of the man and fills the place where the object was with memories of happiness. In the SA version the author quotes (with some deliberate or forgetful changes) the last lines of Thomas Moore’s Irish melody, “Farewell! But whenever you welcome the hour”: “You may break, you may shatter, the vase if you will/ But the scent of the roses will linger there still…” (Moore 2007).
In Moore’s original version of the song, the words “ruin” and “hang” occur in place of “shatter” and “linger” respectively, and the phrase “round it” occurs instead of “there”. Interestingly the song has undergone changes in its renditions by different singers: one of them is by Mary O’Hara, who changed “ruin” to “shatter.” Bond may have heard the song in its varied forms available in different albums, and conveniently depended on the version that suited his feelings; and/or interpolated words and phrases for those he had forgotten. Such linguistic changes are indicative of the changes that occur between the author’s experiences and his fictional representations of them. The adaptability of Moore’s lines for symbolic purposes in the realm of signs and signifiers is similar to the process of transference of desire through synesthesia into iconic gestalts. The “tantalising” perfume of the girl’s hair leaves behind a trace in the realm of desire that subsequently constitutes and alienates the subject in one of the semiotic versions of Moore’s song. The “rose” and the “vase” are lyrical symbols for the subject’s sensual pleasures.

Ruskin Bond’s feelings for Raj at the time of leave-taking are also entered against the same date (14 October 1951) in the Journal. Before leaving for the station, he goes up to Raj’s place to bid her goodbye: “Raj looked up from the mirror she held in her hand. She was combing her hair and it hung down to its full length, filling the air with perfume, reminding me of the actress Nimmi” (Bond 1997:128). The appearance of Raj with her hair hanging loose, supplemented by the sensation of the perfume that emanated from it, works through synesthesia in the narrator to create an iconic object (the actress “Nimmi”) to fill the subjective vacuum.

In his Memoir, Bond lays emphasis upon his sensual urges which were hinged on Raj’s gaze, figure and especially her feet. His interests in the “bandaged foot,” the “other elegant bare foot” and her bare feet on “the dew-drenched morning grass,” coalesce into the transformed sensibility of the blind man’s pleasure in hearing the girl in the train compartment slap her slippers against her heels. In the absence of normal vision, the man depends upon the sound of the girl’s slippers to fantasize about her looks. In his Memoir Bond also describes how he lingered beside her courtyard to enjoy “the warmth of her frank appraising gaze.” Raj’s eyes and their gaze on him were so memorable that the author makes
eyes and gazes leitmotifs of expressive passion in the story. Her athletic figure with “a few male chromosomes” in it did not create for her the typical feminine look that men would call beautiful. This aspect of her, however, is the cause of Bond’s attraction; enough reason to inspire the blind man in the story to imagine the girl in the train to have an “interesting” face rather than a pretty one. The game of badminton changes into a game of masquerade in the story and Bond pretending to play badminton when he actually used the occasion to feast his eyes (and thereby his passion) on Raj transforms into the narrator’s disguise of a normal seeing person when he is actually blind. The one-to-one correspondence between these two gaming conditions is evident in the fact that physical gaze is the motif around which the relevance of the game is actualized, both for the narrator of the Memoir and the blind man in the train. The psychoanalytical role of the “gaze” in establishing the identity of the narrator and the (non)rapport between the blind man and the girl in the two versions of the story is discussed/analyzed later. Now it suffices to say that Bond’s pretences of playing badminton and the blind man’s simulated gaze on the girl are both intended to represent the deceiver’s desire to arouse the other’s desire for him. In terms of the gaze and its (non)availability to either the man or the girl the two versions of the story have two different meanings. I will try to trace this difference by considering the gaze motif in the two versions, implicit in the use of a common title for both.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

In Joseph Conrad’s Heart of darkness, self-realisation was promised to Kurtz who died with a fixed gaze at the forest, crying “Horror! Horror!” (Conrad 1978:147). This provided the model for T. S. Eliot’s “Those who have crossed/ With direct eyes, to death’s other kingdom” in “The Hollow Men” (Eliot 1961:77-80). The hollow men, on the other hand, who were denied those “direct eyes,” lived in “death’s dream kingdom” with their wills unfulfilled and hanging like shadows between conception and reality, between “essence and descent.” The blind man in the SA version of Bond’s story appears to come very close to fulfilling
his desire when he presumes to touch the girl’s hair, but in reality the story ends with the promise remaining unsatisfied and the girl impalpable. The shadow intervenes dramatically between dream and reality. Interestingly, Bond coins the title of his story from the poem “The Hollow Men”:

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms.

(Eliot 1961:79)

The “hollow valley” is the “excavated valley, full of derelict objects and hopeless native labourers that [Conrad’s] Marlow comes to on his way to the interior of the Congo” (Southam 1977:107). Marlow compares the place to Dante’s portrayal of the Inferno. In fact, Eliot’s models for “The Hollow Men” were Dante, Conrad and the Gunpowder plotters in James I’s London. The plotters died with their desires unfulfilled, exhibiting their hollowness; Kurtz dies with a revelation of his hollowness and Marlow comes back affected by the darkness and therefore unable to face the direct gaze of Kurtz’s fiancée; Dante in his peregrinations in the Divina Commedia moves from the Hell of punishment and lost souls (in Inferno) to the Purgatory of suffering towards redemption (Purgatorio) to come close in sight of Paradise, the higher world of beauty, light and music. In the last world of light (“death’s other kingdom,” according to Eliot) he visualizes Beatrice’s ideal beauty. The kind of self-scrutiny and purgation of desires he had to suffer in the dark and sightless hovels of Hell and Purgatory, which are likened to “death’s dream kingdom” by Eliot, prepared him for transcendence from darkness to light. In the “dream kingdom” the eyes are but a memory. By their absence from the real world they signify their presence in the shadowy world of the past, in the recesses of the subject’s psychic history. The psychical insistences of desire have to be overcome to come to the pure light of vision. The trace of desire inherent in the ego’s formulation of the Other does not allow for that vision. Vision is deferred and compensated by the imaginary objectification of the self. Here I would add, in conformity with Leo
Bersani, that the refashioning of the world with the non-phenomenological, psychic colours of the memory is actuated through the powers of the aesthetic subject in so far as “The past’s disappearance as events is the condition of a new permanence, the permanent persistence of possibility” (Bersani 2006:169). By tracing the autobiographical elements that cohere in the fantasy we have implicitly acknowledged that the objective world, in which Raj was the aesthetic correlative, was originally instrumental in creating the psychical patterns of the subject’s desire which has now taken its turn in contaminating the world. Suppose the incident in the train was real, and the author with his normal vision had enjoyed the company of a girl. Then, this girl could well have been the site where the different strands of the author’s desire for Raj intersected. “There is,” in fact, “no specified unconscious prior to the material from the external world in which it at once recognizes and constitutes itself” (Bersani 2006:169). For the author this aesthetic objectification takes place in the realms of art, in the creation of the shadow between the word and the deed. Eliot refers to this self-reflexive pursuit of the artist to explain the complementarity of the relationship between sensual desires and the desire for aesthetic qualification in the artist. In *The use of poetry and the use of criticism* Eliot cites James Thomson’s line from “Art” to illustrate the process that makes the artist’s self: “Lips only sing when they cannot kiss” (Eliot 1933:156).

Ruskin Bond’s borrowing of Eliot’s line for the title of the story throws light upon the self-reflexive concerns of the authorial narrator hidden in the blind man. These psychological concerns are patterned against the alienating norms of signification – the desire of the authorial self for that aspect of himself which is detached from him and placed in the whirlpool of language. The man’s desire to possess his other by masquerading as a self – the man’s imaginary other is a normal seeing self – remains unsatisfied because the girl, whose eyes were his imagined mirror, turns out to be blind. The ego’s role in misrecognising the counterfeit as real fails. The self is cast once again in the shadow between desire and fulfillment. It is an irresolvable “endgame” where the identity-seeking concerns of the authorial self travel in the realm of fantasy for the realization of its dreams.
In the *Statesman* version of the story, after the girl gets down at her destination, the man once more has the compartment to himself. He sits beside the window and continues to guess at the probable happenings outside. In the absence of the girl, his other, he becomes tired of the game and feels a psychological necessity to move beyond the self-deception of seeming to a fantasized world of perceiving. The restricted game of self-delusion will find release in the game of recognition of the authorial potential for an epiphanic transcendence. No sooner had the promise been shown than it is blighted by the recursive memory game. The only release in fantasy, however, is the collapse of space and time in a psychical order. The partial domain of vision is extended to the blind man’s hypothetical angle of vision: “It was a fascinating game wondering what could be outside, but I knew I would soon tire of it. The window was a limited field of vision. I had all the world to roam. And to roam the world was a game that need never end” (Bond 1955:11). In this version, since the girl has normal vision, the man appears to have won his game of masquerade, winning a victory for his ego’s role. But the recognition of the self-deception is dramatized all the same when the authorial narrator tells the story to his readers. His pretended gaze on the girl, reminiscent of young Bond’s actual behaviour with Raj during the badminton games, elicits a satisfactory response from her: “‘Don’t stare at me like that,’ she said. She didn’t sound annoyed, but no doubt she was uncomfortable with my immobile gaze fixed on her” (Bond 1955:10).

In his essay “Creative writers and day-dreaming” Freud explicitly connects different types of fantasy indulged in at different phases of development. “The creative writer does the same as the child at play,” says Freud (1908[1985]:132). The writer’s fantasy is comparable to the child’s wish-fulfillment at play. If Bond the badminton player is creating a story in his autobiography, then Bond the writer of “The Eyes Are Not Here” is fantasizing the ghost of the event to fill the absence (“lack”) of the thing that he yearns for in his past.

The girl’s response is “satisfactory” both to herself and to the man; satisfactory to herself in the sense that it fulfills her desire to be gazed at and to the man in terms of fulfilling his more active desire to objectify the girl. In his lecture on “Femininity,” Freud (1983:160-168) explains
the effect of the male gaze on women. The trace of the Oedipal complex in women makes them vulnerable to a sense of “genital deficiency.” The fear of the lack of the phallus makes them very sensitive to their “charms” as “a late compensation for their original sexual inferiority.” Her “sexual frigidity” and characteristic “shame,” which according to Freud is ascribed to the wish for concealment of the deficiency, cause the girl to feel “uncomfortable” in full view of the man’s “immobile gaze.” The man’s satisfaction, however, is understandable when the girl reacts with a “pleasant, clear, ringing laugh” (same in both the versions) at being addressed as having “an interesting face.” The man is assured of the approval of his gaze and therefore of an implied approval of himself in the girl’s eyes.

3. GAZE AND THE GAME METAPHOR

“We are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world,” says Lacan (1973[1981]:75) in the *Four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis* and goes on to theorize subjectivity in terms of the subject’s desire as formulated by the “gaze.” According to Lacan, the subject’s desire for the other is called *objet petit a* (“little other”) while the subject’s desire for the other’s desire for him is called “the big other.” The latter is situated in language and together they constitute the subject’s identity. The blind man’s desire for the girl’s voice (“Her voice had the sparkle of a mountain stream”) and gaze is his Lacanian *objet petit a* which resides in the realms of both cause and reason (logic), while the signifying expression that he “gallantly” vouchsafes to utter – “interesting face” – is his “big other,” residing in the realm of alienating logic alone. Perhaps, he wanted to describe the girl as pretty to ensure the arousal of desire for him in the image of his “little other,” but being unable to see her visage he stops short, calling her face an indeterminate “interesting.” This is a dramatization of the alienation effect that the subject suffers in his symbolic (linguistic) “big other.” Although the blind man’s response in the SA version and that of the seeing girl in the *Statesman* version are the same, in the former case it is not unusual for readers to presume in the girl’s “clear, ringing laugh” a sense of relief at finally being recognized
(accepted) for what she is. She is tired of being called “pretty,” because the epithet implicitly emphasizes in her mind a sense of crippledness that had hitherto turned her into an object of pity to visual scrutiny.

The girl’s speech and actions from her getting into the compartment to this point in the scene have a delicate air of caution about them, lest she be detected as “gazeless” and denied an identity by being pitied once more by her companion. When the man wants to know “What is it like [outside]?” she simply says: “Why don’t you look out of the window?” And when the man says “Have you noticed that the trees seemed to be moving while we seem to be standing still?” she retorts ingenuously: “That always happens.” The girl does not say anything that might reveal her inability to see despite the fact that she realizes she is mistaken as possessing a normal gaze. So, in the SA version, the girl, too, masquerades and successfully objectifies the man as her “little other” on the assumption that either he is blind like she is in not discovering her blindness or in the imagined sense of relief that she has been desired by the man for what she actually is. The objectification is reciprocal and the readers can well guess the man’s mental condition when he comes to know from the man who boards the train at Sahahranpur that she had beautiful eyes which were blind. The blind man realizes that he has been defeated at his own game. While he imagined that he had objectified the girl, he, too, has been objectified by her. Like “hollow men” and “hollow women” their subjectivities are denied in a world where the sensory eyes cannot see. The authorial narrator has the occasion to repeat the game now with the new entrant in the compartment, especially when the latter shows signs of failure at detecting his blindness. “Didn’t you notice,” asks the man, “that the girl was blind?” The curious ending of the story in the SA version intensifies the effect of the game metaphor and inspires the reader to make obvious speculations about the narrator.

Although the girl in the Statesman version enjoys normal eyesight, she is blind, all the same, to the blind man’s subterfuge. Her satisfaction and discomfort when she takes the blind man’s fixed gaze on her to be real, deliver a sense of pleasure to the blind man who becomes successful in his game of objectifying the girl. The “little other” and the “big other” of the man supplement each other to create a feeling of self-gratification.
This is the gratification of the ego that makes a false connection between his desire for his “little other” and the superego which is engendered by the notion of conventional normalcy as the desirable object of the female gaze. The man’s superego is constituted by the idea of the normal male gaze as the desirable object of the female gaze. The false connection or lie is comparable to Marlow’s perforce lying to Kurtz’s fiancée that Kurtz died with her name on his lips. Marlow did not have the courage to bludgeon the woman’s trust in Kurtz’s goodness. With this compulsive lying Marlow enters the heart of darkness. The blind man in “The Eyes Are Not Here” in telling the story reveals that the ego’s mediation has created in him an imagined sense of rapport with the girl when in reality a feeling of distance and non-rapport intensified. When the girl becomes happy at the assurance of the male gaze calling her looks “interesting,” the man feels “more troubled and lonely.” In the SA version the man’s discovery at the end that the girl, too, was blind allows the reader to speculate how his anguish might have deepened with the recognition of failed desire. The recognition of mutual objectification, where none of the players win the game of simulation, becomes cause for a self-directed humour to the author. But it might also inspire a sense of alleviation in the blind man. Marlow’s anxieties in lying to a truthful woman are suddenly overcome at the discovery that the woman too is “hollow.” The man’s desire for what he lacked, the “other’s” eyes, and to touch the girl’s hair remaining unsatisfied, he is likely to suffer a deeper sense of frustration. But imagine if Dante had met Beatrice in the “death’s dream kingdom,” he would have been denied the revelation, and the requirements of courage and self-scrutiny would have turned superfluous. Perhaps, the blind man in the train is spared the psychological anguish of self-scrutiny as he and his companion in their hollowness meet in “death’s dream kingdom,” coming nowhere near the sight of the ideal.

The idea of revelation confers ontological status on human beings, who in psychoanalytically defined relationality are considered products of their unconscious. Revelation presupposes the existence of the aesthetic subject independent of the mappings of the human unconscious. But as Leo Bersani explains, the ontological presence is a function of the dynamic correspondence between the conscious and unconscious processes of the human mind. Part of all that the consciousness registers of the
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Aesthetic subject transforms into the unconscious. The memory of Raj turns into Bond’s unconscious before informing the author’s fantasy of the girl on the train. The conscious and the unconscious work in tandem to conceptualize the ontological presence of the subject who is the blind man in the story.

4. THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE OTHER: FANTASY’S UNDOING

Looked at from the Lacanian point of view misrecognition of the other as self is constitutive of the human. According to Lacan, the trajectory of growth that the human unconscious takes from infancy to adulthood is divided into two phases. In the first phase known as the Imaginary or the Mirror stage, the infant misrecognizes its image as self. Unable to connect between its Imaginary completeness and its real state of fragmentation, it identifies with the mother(er) or anything in the external world that aids its completeness. The perception that the external world is independent of the self grows in the infant’s conscious recognition at the subsequent Symbolic stage when the growing child is initiated into the domain of language. The trauma suffered due to this separation from the mother(er) influences the unconscious so that its desire to repair the alienation turns to sublimational means for satisfaction. Fantasy is one such idiom for our author. If Lacan is filtered through Bersani’s idea of the conscious subordination of the unconscious, misrecognition becomes analogous to the inherent human inability to acknowledge the world’s independence. In the SA version the blind man’s unconscious desire (fantasy) to succeed in the game is thwarted at the discovery that the girl has reversed the game on him. The discovery is the recognition of the misrecognized other or, other that is independent of the blind man’s fantasies. In that case the twist at the end of the story debunks the validity of simulation and appears, by inference, to restore the author’s faith in reality by criticizing the impotence of fantasizing. This sort of ending goes against the literary convictions of Ruskin Bond. He cannot but think of himself as the author of fantasy tales.
In the Statesman version the act of storytelling attaches more self-reflexive value to it. What the blind man succeeds in claiming from the girl is her choice of the hyperreal. In the absence of any chance recognition of the real the author is simply vindicating his right of simulation. In the alienating world of language we always act as simulators in restoring an “affective” (Bhaskar 1993:2) value of the self in establishing that we are not alienated at all. Significantly, in this version, the girl has been ascribed a cultural identity – she is Punjabi, a discovery the blind man might have made from the conversation between the girl and her mother at Rohana – which qualifies the man’s desire for an affective identity. The vision of the paradisal beauty, which was Dante’s prerogative, is never to be obtained in the world of shadows. The blind man in both the versions confesses that he is unable to tell what the girl looked like. The gaps between the subject and the object, the text and the world are unbridgeable. In a world where the copy precedes the original and the simulacrum cannot be distinguished from the real – the girl with her truthful satisfactions in the Statesman version is a projection of the blind man’s game like the blind man’s game in the train. The reality of the aesthetic subject gets invariably diffused in an imaginatively affected duplication.

It is true that the play between the self and other assumes the status of a game only in the recognition of the separation of the subject and the object. Fantasy is a play space in which the subject inscribes the object in conscious recognition of its otherness. An infant in his state of inseparability with the mirror image is not aware of the otherness of the image so that he can call his relationship with it playful. Only when he grows up to recognize the separation can he “play” with his other. But, if the other of the fantasy assumes a subjectivity of itself instead of remaining a passive recipient of the self’s imagination, the play metaphor loses its significance. The fantasy author’s relation with his literary material becomes frayed.

In “The Eyes,” the author through the transference exchange with his reader is yielding to the therapeutic process of his gaming desires. He has disclosed to the reader the subterfuge he has adopted to fulfill his desires; if he had recognized the absurdity of the ploy itself, there would
have been no requirement for the reader. The reader takes the position of both the psychoanalyst and the patient. Such an ending, therefore, is normal for Ruskin Bond and reconfirms his belief in the vocation of the author. Why then did he bring in the “unwonted” twist at the end of the SA version of the story? It was not a spontaneous change that he made but one that resulted from the temptation of a friend’s suggestion that he could not resist, on the anticipation that it would increase the market price of the story. True, the Statesman version could have accommodated some of the changes, like the inclusion of Moore’s lines that we find in the SA version, but certainly not the end-twist which contradicts the purpose of the story.

REFERENCES


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