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LETTERATURA

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Sommario

LETTERATURA

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Fictionality/Non Fictionality. The Narrative Pact in Bruce Chatwin's "A Coup—A Story".

'A Coup' is included in Bruce Chatwin's collection of writings posthumously published as *What Am I Doing Here*. It is one of five pieces subtitled 'A Story', a term which, as the writer warns in his brief introduction "is intended to alert the reader to the fact that, however closely the narrative may fit the facts, the fictional process has been at work"[1]. The facts behind the story have their origin in Chatwin's second trip to Dahomey in 1978 while he was collecting material for his novel *The Viceroy of Ouidah*:

> All went well with my research until, one Sunday morning, my taxi happened to be travelling in the opposite direction to a plane-load of mercenaries who had landed at Cotonou airport and were shooting their way towards the Presidential Palace. The driver exclaimed *'C'est la guerre!'* and turned the car round, only to fall in with a unit of the Benin Army. I was arrested as a mercenary: the real mercenaries retreated back to the airport and flew off[2].

These autobiographical elements appear again in the story where the narrator is also in a taxi when the trouble begins with the taxi driver crying "C'est la guerre" as soon as he realises the portent of what is happening, before the narrator is suddenly

[1] Bruce Chatwin, *What Am I Doing Here*, London, Picador, 1989, p. xi.
[2] Bruce Chatwin, *The Viceroy of Ouidah*, London, Cape, 1980, p. 2.

seized by the gendarmes and taken away in a jeep. Besides this, there are also explicit references, both at the beginning and at the end, to the previously mentioned novel Chatwin was planning on writing at the time as if to further reinforce the factual nature of the account[3]. Yet the sub-title is there to keep the reader on guard, as well as to put him in a teasingly provocative dilemma, typical of so many of Chatwin's productions, that questions the borderlines between fact and fiction where "facts shimmer on the edge of fiction and fiction reads like fact"[4]. Chatwin's warning seems to be on the lines of an ironic confession that what appears as fact is really an attempt at creating a fiction with a heightened verisimilitude through the insertion of selected autobiographical sources with the use of a first person, autodiegetic narration to lend credence to its autobiographical authenticity[5], and thus blurr the distinction between the narrator and the author. However, the question of the story's truth is not only undermined by Chatwin's own statement, but also by the way the story deliberately calls attention to itself as a literary text, particularly to the extent in which it subverts the conventional notion of a short story by juggling with elements of fact and fiction as well as exploiting the communicative implications of the narrative relationship between the author and the reader.

[3] Fernando Galván, "Bruce Chatwin's travel books/travel novels: a troublesome reading of *The Songlines*", *Merope*, N. 2 (Giugno, 1990), p. 103: "autobiography (the author's personal experience) and fiction combine in the creation of "new" beings that do not exist (in such a way at least) in reality". What Galván says about *The Songlines* can be also applicable to this story.

[4] Colin Thubron, "Bruce Chatwin: In love with fantastical tales", *The Sunday Times*, 22 January, 1989, p. 9.

[5] Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions, 1880-1980*, London, Macmillan, 1985, notes how the establishing of a first person narrator is essential for verisimilitude in the short story genre. "A first person narrator guarantees the truth of the action, creating an illusion which it is particularly important to establish quickly in the short story form" (p. 52).

The incipit

Apart from two flashbacks in which the narrator reminisces over his previous travels, (and which will be dealt with further on), the text follows a strictly chronological order with descriptions mainly concentrated on external factors with an emphasis on causality. The story is centred around action and thus belongs to that category of stories with an anecdotal core[6], characterised by "sentences whose subject is enacted by verbs"[7]. In this re-elaboration of his real-life experience Chatwin uses expedients that are typical of narrative fiction. The dynamic movement of the narrative, for example, is immediately established in the incipit in *medias res*. A characteristic of many modern short stories, this device, which Sean O'Faolain calls the "hieroglyphics of technique"[8], is a convention modern readers now take for granted. But it is still a convention, and one linked to the short story's exigencies of economy of expression:

> The coup began at seven on Sunday morning. It was a grey and windless dawn and the grey Atlantic rollers broke in long even lines along the beach. The palms above the tidemark shivered in a current of cooler air that blew in off the breakers. Out at sea — beyond the surf — there were several black fishing canoes. Buzzards were circling above the market, swooping now and then to snatch up scraps of offal. The butchers were working, even on a Sunday[9].

[6] Several critics have praised Chatwin's story-telling abilities, among them Sean French, "Walking is virtue", *New Statesman and Society*, 19 May: "he also embodies something that has almost vanished from English literature, the spirit of telling tales. Chatwin, at his best, is like those characters in Conrad and Kipling, encountered in a bar, in an army mess, on a ship, in some colonial outpost, each of whom has a spellbinding yarn to unfold" (p. 22).

[7] Ian Reid, *The Short Story*, London, Methuen, 1977, p. 30.

[8] Sean O'Faolain, *The Short Story*, Cork, The Mercier Press, 1948, p. 176.

[9] Bruce Chatwin, 'A Coup-A Story', *What Am I Doing Here*, London, Picador, 1989, pp. 15-35. Subsequent references refer to his edition. Page numbers will be given in brackets in the text.

The abruptness of the opening sentence, and its rather ominous attempt at specifying the moment in which it occured (note the vagueness of "at seven on Sunday morning" — which Sunday?), gives an air of casualness about the coup. This casualness anticipates the sense of enigma and ludicrousness of the events surrounding it. The descriptive sentences that follow then decelerate the narrative with their lyrically rhythmic cadence and density of sound patterning, particularly through the deliberate use of alliteration and consonance ("Long even Lines aLong the beach... Current of Cool air that Blew off the BreaKers... Out at Sea — beyond the Surf — there were Several Black fishing Canoes. Buzzards were Circling above the marKet, Swooping now and then to Snatch up Scraps of offal" - capitals mine). On a syntagmatic level the incipit reveals a temporal inversion in that the opening sentence immediately introduces the reader to the coup, and thus to the temporal dimension of the story, whilst the following sentences with their description of the calm, almost monotonous seascape, allude to its spatial dimension. The sequential shifting (BA) creates an analepsis which diverts the reader's attention away from the central issue of the coup after having just been introduced to it. This is representative of the dynamics of the reading process throughout the story, characterised by an alternation of tension and relaxation[10]. However, the naturalistic description of the incipit can also be seen as containing a paradigm of features, expressed by verbs designating NON-MOVEMENT and MOVEMENT, that constitute a symbolic *mise on abyme*[11] of the text. In the gradual

[10] Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1968, p. 68. For a perseptive analysis of the processes of tension and relaxation in the activity of reading in terms of the "willing suspension of disbelief", which is a central problematic in Chatwin's writings in general.

[11] Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, Aldershot, Scolar Press, 1991. Defines the term in the following way: "A miniature replica of a text embedded within that text; a textual part reduplicating, reflecting, or mirroring (one or more than one aspect) of the textual whole" (p. 53).

build up from the "grey and windless dawn" and the "long even lines" (non-movement) to the palms shivering "in a current of cooler air that blew off the breakers" (note also the connotation with fear) and the buzzards "circling above" and "swooping now and then to snatch up scraps of offal" (movement), can be traced an implicit parallel movement from apparent calm to the social agitation and violence provoked by the coup (a violence symbolised by the buzzards and the butchers) and which may be outlined as follows:

It was a grey and windless dawn	
	STABILITY
[...] long even lines	
	↓
The palms shivered in a current of	
	AGITATION
cool, air that blew off the breakers	
Buzzards were circling above the market	↓
[...] swooping now and then to snatch [...]	VIOLENCE
The butchers were working	

This ability to make a micro-textual space refer to a macro-textual dimension reveals an economy and density of expression that is not only typical of much of Chatwin's writing but also characteristic of all good short story writing. The opening description functions both naturalistically and symbolically, on the one hand, on a heuristic level, setting the scene and creating an atmosphere of apparent calm and lifelessness, and on the other, on a hermeneutic level, anticipating the outburst of violence that follows the coup.

Plot typology and structure

'A Coup' is made up of 16 story units - subdivisible into 12 sections within the space of barely 20 pages. The narration is essentially singulative and sustained by an accelerated prose rhythm characterised by short paratactic sentence constructions, that are particularly effective in dynamically rendering scenes of action:

> We ran, bumped into the other running figures, and ran on. A man shouted, 'Mercenary!' and lunged for my shoulder. I ducked and we dogded down a side-street. A boy in a red shirt beckoned me into a bar. It was dark inside. People were clustered round a radio (p. 16).

By story units is meant all the significant sequences that generate a development in the narrative. These units can be further subdivided as follows in terms of two semantic categories representing the opposing states around which the story revolves; one of liberty and the other of captivity:

1	Narrator is travelling in a taxi Sees commotion and tries to a run away		LIBERTY
2	Narrator is:	arrested	↓
		taken to barracks	
		taken to guardroom	
		taken out for a mock trial	CAPTIVITY
		dragged back to the guardroom	
		stripped and questioned	
		kept in a cell overnight	
		taken to a tribunal	

3	Narrator is: set free goes to his hotel	LIBERTY
4	Narrator is: forced to stay in his room intruded on by a young soldier	↓ CAPTIVITY
5	Narrator: changes hotels has dinner with a Norwegian oil-man has a celebratory dinner with Jacques	↓ LIBERTY

Each unit is preceded by a kernal event. The first, between units 1 and 2, with the narrator/protagonist running away, opens up the options of escape or captivity (-L) before the outcome of his arrest. The second, between units 2 and 3, is represented by the farcical limbo-like situation in which he is taken to a tribunal under the vigilant eyes of the German Counsellor, who assures him of an eventual release (-C). The whole series of units may be summarised in the following semiotic sequence L → (-L) → C → (-C) → L which reveals an essentially circular structure. There may be added, as a sort of appendix, between 4 and 5 another moment of captivity (-C) which, strictly speaking, is really only an apparent one since it is for the narrator's own safety that he is told to remain in his room until the shooting is over. From the moment in which he is arrested under the suspicion of being a mercenary to his eventual release, the narrator takes on an essentially passive role. The summaries, it will be noticed, are all characterised by passive verbs underlying the fact that he suffers the actions of the other agents, he himself having lost all independence of action. The units in this sequence, are all centred around this plot type characterised by SUBJECTION and HUMILIATION. The narrator, nevertheless, has his own defence mechanism against this negative situation in the form of self-irony on the one hand, and power of memory on the other.

His self-irony comes to the forefront at a particularly tense moment. When he is put against the wall before a firing squad and told to strip to his underpants he suddenly hesitates not at all sure that he is wearing underpants!:

> But a barrel in the small of my back convinced me, underpants or no, that my trousers would have to come down — only to find that I did, after all, have on a pair of pink and white boxer shorts from Brooks Brothers (p. 23)[12].

Memory, more importantly, becomes both the temporal and spatial means through which the narrator affirms his own sense of liberty and consequently his sanity in a situation that is as absurd as it is grotesque. These memories function through association and are coloured by their contrasting with his actual state of captivity. For they are all memories concerning his travels. These recollections have a strong autobiographical tint to them, recalling the story's real author, Bruce Chatwin, the traveller who travelled "with a genuine passion to enquire"[13] and constituting an internal plot characterised by a psychological dimension, that goes beyond the boundaries of the fictional universe of the story itself. In this respect the story is a dramatic realisation of a threat and fear that may have constantly lurked behind the subconsciousness of Chatwin the traveller. However, in spite of their extra-textual/autobiographical origin, the narrator's recollections have a specific function within the text. For they are not merely randomly selected but are 'relived' in the narrator's mind with all the power of a nostalgia that has as much relish as it has pain behind it, the common element linking these associations being that of food. Indeed, it is the absence of food that triggers them off in the first place and food can be seen to play

[12] Christopher Hope, "Rough Tours, Inc", *The New Republic*, October 16, 1989. In his review of Chatwin's collection comments: "Now pink and white in the matter of boxer shorts might have been enough, but when we get as well the clinching fact of their provenance: they are not just any shorts, you understand. And this is what is so impressive and cheering about Chatwin at his generous best. However tight the corner or bleak the event, Chatwin contrives to create space around himself" (p. 44). An observation that shows the importance of humour as an expedient in maintaining a sense of space.

[13] Nicholas Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

such an important part in the story as to be an autonomous theme in itself, and one that anticipates the euphoric moment of his release.

The first example of these culinary memories comes in a delightful description which sees literature being exchanged for food. While the narrator tosses various literary works out of the train at a group of astonished native girls ("the ultimate products of the lycée system" p. 24) they joyfully throw into his carriage "the Fruits of the Earth — the real ones — pawpaws, guavas, more pineapples, a raunch of grilled swamp-rat, and a palm-leaf hat" (p. 24), the mere list revealing the narrator's delight for the exotic. Also, after he is put up for a mock trial, the narrator cannot help but remark that every piece of chaff on the wall brings him back "some clear specific memory of food or drink" (p. 25). In the same way he remembers going cray-fishing in Sweden and drinking akvavit and ending a meal "with a tart made of cloudberries" (p. 25). At the memory of them he can still taste the grilled sardines he ate on the quay at Douarnenez, as well as the elvers fried in oil and garlic in Madrid served with half a red pepper. These detailed descriptions reinforce the discomfort of his present situation and are therefore more vividly evoked through their absence. Food finally arrives in concrete form when, after being told by the French Vice-consul that for the moment he cannot discuss the question of their release but 'only' the question of food, Jacques procedes to order delicasies for everyone which arrive in the form of ham sandwiches, paté, sausages, croissants and "three petits pains au chocolat". It is thus appropriate that the story should also end with a celebratory meal between the narrator and Jacques complete with champagne. Food, thus, becomes synonymous of liberty. The variety and goodness of the food evoked also parallels a boundless freedom as well as revealing the narrator's open mindedness — his cultural eclecticism. For food is emblematic. Every country can be represented in terms of the food it eats, so that here the total

acceptance of widely different dishes on the narrator's part corresponds to an unprejudiced acceptance of other cultural realities. It is therefore no accident that in the very moment of captivation these images of freedom associated with food should come so obsessively to the foreground.

The narrator — A construct of the text

As a result of his attempts to remain outside this perilous situation, the narrator presents himself as one who has the attitude of a dry and detached observer, an attitude that blatantly contrasts with the hysteria of those around him (of which the Belgian ornothologist is the most pathetic example). In this respect the character of Jacques has a particular significance. Like the figure of Arkady in *The Songlines* he seems to function as the narrator's alter-ego, outwardly expressing all those qualities implicity inherent in the narrator himself, being as he is cultured, self-ironic, dismissive and contemptuous of all those around him and in complete self-control. That there is an immediate sympathy and understanding between them can be seen in the brevity and wit of their exchanges:

> 'And us?'
> 'They might need a corspe or two. As proof!'
> 'Thank you', I said.
> 'I was joking'.
> 'Thanks all the same'.
> ...
> 'What do you think of my costume?' he asked.
> 'Suitable', I said.
> 'Thank you' (p. 21)

The narrator's immediate sympathy with Jacques reveals the

latter as a mirror-image to the narrator himself, in this sense exposing the intentions of the real author who, with the "camera-coolness of his eye"[14] transforms a real-life incident to a form of anecdote that borders on myth. The narrator becomes likewise elevated to a quasi-mythical figure, a sort of 'silent hero' who never loses his dignity or presence of mind. Thus, it is significant that at the most perilous moments the narrator only describes the fear of those around him, nonchalantly claiming a complete lack of fear: *"I was not frightened. I was tired and hot [...] It was too like a B-movie to be frightening"* (p. 23). This process of mythologising also occurs in the narrator's distinction between two Africas, the Africa of "rotten fruit... blood and slaughter" and the Africa of "the long undulating savannah country to the north" which makes paradise seem "a waste of white thorns" (p. 25). If anything, this shows the real author's ability of going "straight to the heart of what is foreign"[15]. At the same time, there is also the theme of border lives, which is a recurrent Chatwin motif. The attraction to people living at the margins, "out of the apparent mainstream"[16] is presented here in a context uniting Africans and Europeans, from the Frenchman Jacques, the Belgian ornothologists, the French Vice-consul, the Counsellor of the German Embassy and the Norwegian oil-man to the mulato Domingo, and the Algerians and Guineans at the narrator's hotel[17].

[14] Colin Thubron, "Chatwin and the Hippopotamus", *London Review of Books*, 22 June, 1989, p. 18.

[15] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Much Left Unsaid", *Times Literary Supplement*, June 16-22, 1989.

[16] Nicholas Murray, *Bruce Chatwin*, Bridgend, Seren Books, 1993, p. 14.

[17] Valerie Shaw, *The Short Story - A Critical Introduction*, London, Longman, 1983, makes some acute observations about the concept of frontiers that can be directly applied to Chatwin's vision in the story: "It [a frontier] is a notion which we understand by seeing the relationship between two areas, though the frontier itself is a borderland, a third entity. Applying this to the aesthetic of the short story, it can

Narrative levels. The sub-plot and the narrator-reader relationship

The narrator's recollections constitute the internal plot of the story. But there is also a third narrative level, a sub-plot, that concerns the story of the coup itself and the narrator's thwarted attempts to get to the truth behind it. The story can thus finally be seen as containing a triad of narrative layers:

FIRST NARRATIVE	-	Main plot. Diegetic level
SECOND NARRATIVE	-	Internal plot. N's recollections
THIRD NARRATIVE	-	Sub-plot. The coup

At the beginning of the story the political context is presented metonymically in the political message and the three posters the narrator sees from the taxi:

> [...] We drove under a limply-flying banner which said, in red letters, that Marxist-Leninism was the one and only guide [...]
> Outside the Presidential Palace hung an outsize poster of the Head of State, and two much smaller posters of Lenin and Kim II Sung (pp. 15-16).

Later, when he is taken to the barracks and interrogated, there is a significant contrast between the way in which he is treated by

be proposed that the combination of chiselled definiteness and tantalyzing suggestiveness inherent in the form, makes it ideally suited to exploring that third entity [...] If it were not for the human institutions which make the concept 'national frontier' physically real, the traveller would constantly be crossing invisible lines, finding himself without warning in unfamiliar circumstances; it is the position in which many short-story writers want to put their readers, imaginatively at least" (pp. 92-93). Part of the reader's disorientation derives from an unfamiliar geographical setting together with the absence of a dominant cultural entity.

the corporal and the colonel respectively. The first insults him by calling him a mercenary, slaps him in the face and insists that his fountain pen is really a gun, whilst the second treats him most civily, regretting his badly timed visit to the country and complimenting him on his Parisian accent. But the surface level of the diegesis filtered through the narrator's limited viewpoint offers telling clues through which the reader is able to fill in certain hermeneutic gaps. Firstly, at the colonel's entrance the corporal snaps to attention and calls him 'comrade', at which the colonel replies: "'From today [...] there are no more comrades in our country'" (p. 18) and this suggests that he is secretly on the side of those who have organised the coup, the country being under a communist regime. This is further confirmed by the fact that after unlocking the narrator's handcuffs he says: "'Calm yourself, monsieur... we are having another little change of politics. Nothing more!'" (p. 19) as if he knows everything that is going on behind the scenes. Furthermore, the narrator notices the fact that the Head of State and the colonel belong to two antagonistic tribes, the former being a Somba and the latter being a Fon. The colonel's bafflement at the contradictory reports on the radio later are thus understandable:

> Certainly, as the morning wore on, the colonel understood less and less. He did not, for example, understand why, on the nine o'clock communiqué, the mercenaries had landed in a DC-8 jet, while at ten the plane had changed to a DC-7 turboprop (p. 20)

The latter is explained by Jacques at the end of the story of his versions of the coup: "at Libreville, the plot of the chartered DC-8 refused to go on, and the mercenaries had to switch to a DC-7" (p. 33-34). Finally, on learning of the suppression of the coup the colonel leaves the barracks looking very shaken and muttering "There has been a mistake". Ten minutes later the arrogant corporal returns and takes the narrator away to the guardroom

where, through a chink in the doorway the narrator and Jacques see:

> a group of soldiers treating their *ex-colonel* in a most shabby fashion. We wondered how he could still be alive as they dragged him out and bundled him into the back of a jeep (p. 22).

The description which follows of the corporal craddling the colonel's radio, of which he has taken possession, on his knee with the Head of State 'baying for blood' emblemises the absurdity of this surreal switching of authoritative roles all in the space of a couple of hours.

There are also other hypotheses offered as to the truth behind the coup. When the Narrator asks Jacques what is going on the first time he meets him the latter replies:

> *'Coup monté'*
> 'Which means?'
> 'You hire a plane-load of mercenaries to shoot up the town. See who your friends are and who are your enemies. Shoot the enemies. Simple!' (p. 21).

There is no such transparency in the Councellor of the German Embassy who, to the narrator's further probing diplomatically warns: "Better leave it alone" (p. 30). Another hypothesis is confidently affirmed by the indignant Norwegian oil-man:

> 'All of it I saw', he said, his neck reddening with indignation. The palace had been deserted. The army had been in the barracks. The mercenaries had shot innocent people. Then they all went back to the airport and flew away.
> 'All of it', he said, 'was a fake' (p. 32).

Finally, when the narrator meets up again with Jacques at the end of the story the latter lays out in a little more detail, though still not satisfactorily, the two versions behind the coup:

> 'in the official version', Jacques said, 'the mercenaries were recruited by Dahomean émigrés in Paris. The plane took off from a military airfield in Marocco, refuelled in Abidjan [...] The plan flew to Gabon to pick up the commander [...] who is supposed to be an adviser to President Bongo' [...] He then explained how, at Libreville, the pilot of the chartered DC-8 refused to go on, and the mercenaries had to switch to a DC-7.
> "The second scenario [...] calls for Czech and East German mercenaries. The plane, a DC-7, takes off from a military airfield in Algeria, refuels at Conakry [...] you understand?' (pp. 33-34).

The narrator's reply, a reply one would normally make about a mathematical problem or a joke is 'I think I get it'. The expression is significant because the whole event seems reduced to the seriousness of a mathematical problem on the one hand, and the absurdity of a joke on the other. Such that when the narrator asks Jacques which version he believes and the latter replies "both" the paradox is felt to be appropriate.

The fact and fiction behind the coup reflects the fact and fiction behind the story and its elliptic presentation, therefore, opens up a series of considerations regarding the function of hermeneutic gaps upon which the efficacy of the story depends. The central problem that lies at the heart of the narrative relationship between narrator and reader depends also on the extent to which the narrator himself is aware finally of what is going on. The evidence in the text's surface level is that he is rather bemused by the events and in fact the initial sense is that the reader in sharing the narrator's limited viewpoint consequently shares his own ignorance. But there are also graphological features in the form of dots at crucial moments in the dialogue whenever the coup is

being alluded to, that may lead the reader away from this initial impression:

> 'A recorded message', said the colonel, and turned the volume down. 'It was recorded yesterday' 'You mean [...]'Calm yourself monsieur. You do not understand. In this country one understands nothing' (p. 20).

> 'The plane, a DC-7, takes off from a military airfield in Algeria, refuels at Conakry [...] you understand?' (p. 34).

The reader may quite legitimately query the narrator's attitude here. For on the one hand, this device implies one of two things: either the narrator is only pretending to understand so as not to expose his ignorance, or that he not only understands but leaves it to the reader to, as it were, fill in the missing words and so infer exactly what he does understand.

However, given the enigmatic and paradoxical nature of the events surrounding the coup, one feels it unlikely that the narrator's intention is to offer simple and definite solutions or explanations of the event. Besides, the text itself depends very much on the reader for its completion, and the fact that the reader's apprehension of the events is inevitably fragmentary on a heuristic level, and still more so on a hermeneutic level, depends on the fact that the narrator himself is only afforded a fragmentary view of things. As David Lodge has put it: "[Writing] also teaches the kind of reading it requires"[18]. Within the story is a separate story the narrator himself seeks to apprehend, and one which escapes his comprehension. Thus, the narrator and reader are mutually involved in a quest in which the events surrounding the coup assume the nature of a fiction and remain finally incomprehensible and illusive.

[18] David Lodge, *The Modes Of Modern Literature, Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*, London, Edward Arnold, 1977, p. 9.