

B E D E S C O T T

Reading the Uninteresting: Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story*

The only obligation to which in advance we may hold a novel . . . is that it be interesting.

Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," 1884

What seems beautiful to me, what I should like to write, is a book about nothing.

Gustave Flaubert, Letter to Louise Colet, January 1852

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At the beginning of Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, the novel's protagonist, Frédéric Moreau, takes a leisurely boat trip up the Seine. "At every bend of the river," we are told, "the same curtain of pale poplars came into view. The countryside was deserted. Some little white clouds hung motionless in the sky, and a vague sense of boredom seemed to make the boat move more slowly and the passengers look even more insignificant than before" (17). As Peter Brooks has observed, this is hardly the most auspicious of opening sequences, for "we as readers expect that voyages will lead somewhere, and that the voyagers who fare forth on them will make not only their goal but their experience along the way the source of significance." Indeed, "[t]o be told that we are scarcely advancing, in the company of the insignificant, makes us wonder why we are to bother at all with a five-hundred-page novel" (*Reading for the Plot* 178). At certain junctures,

readers of Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) may be inclined to ask themselves the same thing. Insofar as it could be said to "do" anything at all, the novel chronicles the experiences of a young civil servant, Agastya Sen, who has been posted to the provincial town of Madna for a year's administrative training. But if the reader is expecting anything to *happen* during this purgatorial year in the provinces, if they are anticipating the usual pleasures of an unfolding narrative, they are likely to be sorely disappointed. Right from the outset we are informed that "[t]he district life that [Agastya] lived and saw was the official life, common to all districts, deadly dull" (28). In the words of another civil service employee, "It's sick [here], there's no one to talk to, no place to go, nothing to do, just come back to your room after office, get drunk, feel lonely, and jerk off" (88–89). And this is precisely what our hero does for one calendar year and 322 pages: masturbate, smoke marijuana, read Marcus Aurelius, and lie in bed "staring blankly up at the ceiling" (77). Granted, he completes his training, too, but these bureaucratic duties also turn out to be "ineffably dull" (63) and inconsequential—stifling whatever proairetic possibilities the narrative may inadvertently generate as it inches toward its conclusion.

So where does all this leave us as readers? What are we supposed to make of a novel with such pronounced "anti-proairetic" tendencies, one that gives absolute precedence to the boredom and banality of the nonoccurrence? Where do these tendencies originate, and what impact do they ultimately have on the narrative's production of meaning? These are some of the questions I will seek to address in the following pages. I shall begin by arguing that the bureaucratic procedures of the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) are primarily responsible for generating the novel's entropic tendencies. This entropy, I would like to suggest, eventually leaks into the structure of the narrative itself, provoking a crisis of meaning and disruption of desire that very nearly brings it to the point of total collapse. Typically, realism is supposed to do everything it can to achieve a "commanding structure of significance," as Leo Bersani writes (53), and a full and final predication of meaning, but the leakage of negative

affect in this case threatens to undermine both of these traditional generic imperatives. As the energy that drives the narrative forward dissipates, Agastya enters into a “purely iterative existence . . . where the direction and movement of plot appear to be finished” (Brooks, *Reading* 122). Under these circumstances, to narrate one day is to narrate every day, and to narrate every day is to narrate the same day innumerable times—thus giving rise to the threat of interminability and the infinite deferral of meaning. In other words, by replicating the dilatory drag of bureaucratic procedure, the narrative itself internalizes many of the qualities we tend to associate with the IAS: inefficiency, repetition, redundancy, interminability, and above all, a uniquely bureaucratic combination of the “bewildering and [the] boring” (Chatterjee 35).

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At the time of Independence in 1947, there was considerable debate in India as to whether the colonial bureaucratic apparatus, known as the Indian Civil Service (ICS), should be replaced by a central or provincial civil service. Many political representatives from the provinces favored a decentralized bureaucracy that would allow for greater regional autonomy.¹ However, Vallabhbhai Patel, the country’s first Deputy Prime Minister, was convinced that a uniform administrative structure would discourage “provincial susceptibilities” and provide a necessary counterbalance to the centrifugal forces that were believed to be threatening national unity. He thus argued for the creation of an “All-India Administrative Service” which could be “efficient, impartial, and free from local or communal bias, party allegiance or political influence” (qtd. in Tummala 36). And so in 1949, having been ratified in Article 312 of the Indian Constitution, the Indian Administrative Service officially came into being.

1. In 1946, for instance, Sir Khizar Hayat Khan, premier of Punjab, declared, “Punjab is one of those provinces which would prefer to have a superior service of their own instead of an all-India administrative service” (qtd. in Maheshwari 298).

Despite Patel's promises, the IAS would soon become notorious for its petty corruption, inefficiency, and "rule-bound incompetence" (Nandy 68)—a reputation it carries, with some justice, to this day. As one Indian government report issued in 2008 observes:

For the common man [in India], bureaucracy denotes routine and repetitive procedures, paper work and delays. This, despite the fact that the Government and bureaucracy exist to facilitate the citizens in the rightful pursuit of their legal activities. Rigidities of the system, over-centralization of powers, highly hierarchical . . . functioning with a large number of intermediary levels delaying [the] finalization of any decision, divorce of authority from accountability and the tendency towards micromanagement, have led to a structure in which form is more important than substance and procedures are valued over end results and outcomes.

(Government of India 365)

The key sentence here, for our purposes, is the first one, which could also serve as a useful summary of Chatterjee's novel. Routine, repetitive procedures and delays—these are the bureaucratic features around which *English, August* is structured and out of which the narrative's organizing quality of feeling emerges. For a start, everybody in the novel seems to be waiting for something. Whenever Agastya enters a government building, his eyes are drawn to the lines of people waiting patiently outside: "On the left, [he could see] the old and shabby office buildings that had ignored all the decades of an undramatic history. The flags, patient in the heat. . . . The people who waited for Government to be kind to them, in white dhoti, kurta and nappkin" (54). Then there are the government employees themselves, many of whom, "if posted away from home," are simply biding their time until they are "transferred to a [more] congenial place" (28). And of course, like everybody else, Agastya is waiting: sitting through interminable meetings, staring blankly up at the ceiling, reading his Marcus Aurelius, and killing time until his year of training is complete.

As the days drift by, Agastya gradually lapses into a state of debilitating apathy and indifference: "When he woke up he hardly heard the sounds of the morning. On some afternoons he couldn't leave the bed even to roll a smoke" (152). "He wanted

nothing," we are told, "only a peace, but that was too pompous a word" (155). Sometimes he lies in bed contemplating suicide, yet even "looking for that kind of cessation," he decides, would require "too much effort" (153). For Agastya, in this lethargic state, nothing seems capable of carrying meaning or sustaining significance, and as a consequence, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to take an interest in anything at all. The world, as Reinhard Kuhn writes in his study of ennui, is "emptied of its significance. Everything is seen as if filtered through a screen; what is filtered out and lost is precisely the element that gives meaning to existence" (12). In a word, Agastya is bored, terribly bored, and this affective quality comes to have a profound influence over the narrative he occupies, draining it, too, of its meaning, its energy, and its desire.

According to Brooks, an internal energy drives all narratives forward, "connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force" (*Reading* 47). This energy, he argues, is ultimately generated by a "dynamic of desire" (38), namely, "the desire to wrest beginnings and ends from the uninterrupted flow of middles, from temporality itself; the search for that significant closure that would illuminate the sense of an existence, the meaning of life" (140). In *English, August*, however, as Brooks notes of *Sentimental Education*, "there seems to be a problem of will and desire, an inability of the hero to invest the world and his career with coherent and sustained desire" (175). Eventually this absence of desire enters the narrative itself, inhibiting its progress, making of its middle not a field of force but a field of entropy and "underdevelopment." Or to put it another way, if we agree with Arthur Schopenhauer that boredom is the absence of desire (314), then *English, August* could be described not as a boring novel so much as a *bored* one—lacking the desire to move toward its own conclusion, to engineer its own closure and thus achieve a final discharge of meaning. Indeed, at various junctures the narrative almost comes to a standstill. Take the following passage, for instance. Agastya has just arrived back in Madna after a brief trip to Delhi:

[H]e unpacked slowly. He put back on the shelf the *Gita*, Marcus Aurelius, and his diary. He had hardly remembered them on his holiday. . . . He trimmed his beard slowly, with care. The lizards seemed to have multiplied greatly in his absence. The late-afternoon sun touched the cassettes on the table. He browsed through his diary. Now he had nothing to record. He picked up the *Madna District Gazetteer* from beside his canvas shoes on the bottom shelf. He read a paragraph or two, but the words didn't register. He then lay down to watch the ceiling.

(200)

Agastya has nothing to record here; nor, it would seem, does the novel's narrator. The narrative has stalled, lapsing into a series of insignificant micro-occurrences ("He trimmed his beard. . . . He browsed through his diary. . . . He picked up the *Madna District Gazetteer*"), occurrences that generate just enough energy to reach the end of the sentence in which they are contained before it dissipates—occurrences that do almost nothing to move the narrative beyond the self-enclosed, self-foreclosing parameters of the paratactic utterance.²

In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes uses the term "proairetic" to describe the logical sequences of action and behavior that structure literary narratives (18–20). According to Barthes, the proairetic code is responsible (along with the hermeneutic code) for sustaining our interest in narrative—for creating a kind of epistemophilia, a desire to know what the outcome of any narrative sequence will be. If a character does something (writes a love letter, say, or goes on a journey), the proairetic code determines that this action will have consequences of some kind, and one of the reasons we continue reading is to find out what these consequences might be, to find out just how the narrative sequence initiated by this action will ultimately be resolved. Needless to say, things do happen in *English, August*, narrative sequences are

2. One may be reminded here of Jean-Paul Sartre's stylistic analysis of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*, in which he argues: "Each sentence refuses to exploit the momentum accumulated by preceding ones. Each is a new beginning. Each is like a snapshot of a gesture or object. For each new gesture and word there is a new and corresponding sentence" (35). In other words, Sartre writes, "the sentence has frozen. . . . Instead of acting as a bridge between past and future, it is merely a small, isolated, self-sufficient substance" (39).

initiated, but these actions and the consequences they produce rarely coalesce into anything resembling a “plot.” Thus like the remote locality to which Agastya has been posted, the narrative itself eventually assumes the “enduring contours of underdevelopment” (278). In the passage cited above, for example, Agastya initiates a proairetic sequence we might label “unpacking,” and in due course this sequence reaches its conclusion, but it does so almost imperceptibly, generating very little interest or narrative “desire” in the reader and discharging a minimal degree of meaning or significance within the narrative. We simply don’t care about the outcome of such sequences, and in this respect, one could argue, the proairetic code has failed in its plot-making duties, or more precisely, perhaps, it has been subject to a process of attenuation that severely impedes the novel’s forward trajectory, its teleological progress toward a revelatory and “desirable” ending.

Over the course of the novel, Agastya’s life becomes increasingly dominated by routine, further disrupting the narrative’s forward trajectory. Everything he does, he does repeatedly, ritually, day in and day out, until it is not just the narrative’s energy that comes under threat but its very *narratability*—for as Barthes observes, “to repeat excessively is to enter into loss, into the zero of the signified” (*Pleasure* 41).³ Early in the novel, we are offered an entirely iterative account of Agastya’s daily routine, as though the narrator were compressing a year of diary entries into one chapter of twelve pages (75–86). Here are just a few examples:

On most days, the [official] jeep came for him between eleven and twelve.

...

3. With reference to *Madame Bovary*, Mikhail Bakhtin describes a similar kind of provincial “chronotope” associated with “cyclical everyday time.” In the provincial town or village, he writes, “there are no events, only ‘doings’ that constantly repeat themselves. Time here has no advancing historical movement; it moves rather in narrow circles: the circle of the day, of the week, of the month, of a person’s entire life. A day is just a day, a year is just a year—a life is just a life. Day in, day out the same round of activities are repeated, the same topics of conversation, the same words and so forth. . . . Time here is without event and therefore almost seems to stand still. Here there are no ‘meetings,’ no ‘partings.’ It is a viscous and sticky time that drags itself slowly through space” (247–48).

The driver of the jeep . . . was usually unable to differentiate one district office from another. So, for almost an hour on some of the (good) days, he would drive Agastya around the town, just trying to *locate* an office.

(79, 82)

[During the afternoon] he could doze a little, . . . daydream, fantasize, think of his past, reorganize it, try to force out of it a pattern, masturbate without joy, sometimes smoke some marijuana, read a little Marcus Aurelius, or just lie down and think of the sun shrivelling up the world outside.

(84–85)

On most nights that he didn't eat with the Collector, dinner was early, at about eight, because Vasant liked to sleep early.

(85)

In Madna [Agastya] could never take sleep for granted. He would repeat the activities of the afternoon, thinking that for more than twenty years he had always slept well, except for one or two nights when excitement had kept him awake. . . . But in Madna he seemed to have appalled sleep. When he finally dropped off, it was out of a weariness even with despair.

(86)

“Thus,” the chapter concludes, “he played out, in one day, one kind of life of the lonely” (86). At this point, the narrative has lapsed, like Agastya himself, into a purely iterative state.⁴ Every act that is narrated carries an implied *et cetera*, indicating its status as plural, gesturing toward the infinite series of (largely identical) occurrences that lies behind it. Under these circumstances, as I suggested earlier, to narrate one day is to narrate every day, and to narrate every day is to narrate the same day innumerable times, for there is no way of distinguishing between these quotidian episodes, no flashes of significance or uniqueness that will allow us to identify one day as being antecedent or subsequent to any other day. Ordinarily, as Genette points out, “iterative sections are almost always functionally subordinate to singulative scenes, for which the iterative sections provide a sort of informative frame or background. . . . Like description, in the

4. The distinction I am making here, following Gérard Genette, is between a *singulative* narrative (“where the singularity of the narrative statement corresponds to the singularity of the narrated event” [114]) and an *iterative* narrative (“where a single narrative utterance takes upon itself several occurrences together of the same event” [116]).

traditional novel the iterative narrative is *at the service* of the narrative ‘as such,’ which is the singulative narrative” (116–17). In *English, August*, however, the iterative dimension of the narrative is consistently foregrounded and in places even actively privileged over the singulative. Moreover, in traditional narratives we tend to find iterative passages embedded within larger singulative narratives; yet in this case, the reverse is true. Here, as Genette writes of Marcel Proust, “the singulative itself is to some extent *integrated* into the iterative, compelled to serve and illustrate it, positively or negatively, either by respecting its code or by transgressing it, which is another way of manifesting it” (140). In this early chapter of Chatterjee’s novel, that is to say, we find the singulative embedded anecdotally within the iterative—liberating the latter from its functional dependence on the former, reducing the capacity of the narrative to move beyond the “always,” the “every day,” the “usually,” and thus replicating, once more, the dilatory and entropic qualities of the bureaucratic apparatus.⁵

I have been arguing so far that the incorporation of these bureaucratic features into the structure of *English, August* leads to the diminution of the narrative’s proairetic code and the privileging, in places, of the iterative over the singulative. Like Agastya, in other words, Chatterjee’s novel has lost its energy—not the energy to continue but the energy to conclude, to achieve what Brooks calls “full predication of the narrative sentence” and “a final plenitude of meaning” (*Reading* 314). And it is this entropic quality, I would like to suggest, this failure to move forward, that ultimately creates the threat of interminability in the narrative, giving rise to the very real possibility that it may

5. It is worth noting that in order to compensate for what Brian McHale would call its “weak narrativity” (165), the discourse greatly intensifies its production of character, creating personalities whose hyperbolic qualities far exceed the banality of their circumstances. Take Shankar, for instance, Agastya’s dissolute, ghazal-reciting neighbor in the Rest House, or Kumar, the gluttonous, pornography-obsessed superintendent of police. However, these intensities in the field of character never quite fill the space created by the diminished proairetic code. One could argue, in fact, that they merely draw the reader’s attention to this deficiency in the narrative—foregrounding the predicament of characters who, despite their prodigious reserves of energy, have been left with “no place to go [and] nothing to do” (88–89).

never achieve the retrospective significance that traditionally accompanies narrative closure.

For Barthes, every narrative produces a kind of “dilatatory area,” a zone filled with delays and stoppages, through which we must proceed in order to reach the end (*S/Z* 75–76); but in *English, August*, this dilatatory space seems to be extended indefinitely, perpetually deferring the final discharge of meaning. Indeed, the novel itself demonstrates no real desire to achieve closure, for as Agastya says, “looking for that kind of cessation was . . . too much effort” (153). Hence the threat of interminability, the threat that the narrative we are reading may be incapable of summoning the energy required to terminate itself and will instead drift on endlessly, oblivious to our need for resolution, like the bureaucratic procedures it replicates. At various junctures throughout the novel, Agastya appears to sense this threat of interminability. More than once, for instance, he cites the following line from the Bhagavad Gita: “[M]any-branched and endless are the thoughts of the man who lacks determination” (153).⁶ In one of the novel’s more mystical passages, he also describes his life as being characterized by “[m]ovement without purpose, an endless ebb and flow, from one world to another” (311). Although he struggles to impose order and patterns of meaning onto this existence, Agastya finally recognizes the futility of longing “for repose through the mastering of chaos”—understanding, perhaps, that the narrative he occupies is simply not equipped to provide this kind of quiescence.

As readers, of course, we are always aware that the threat of linear interminability will never be realized, for the novel is quite clearly finite: we can see the end approaching as we turn the pages. But the possibility of *circular* interminability does surface in two specific places within the narrative, creating a genuine threat of textual rupture. The novel’s opening lines read as follows: “Through the windshield they watched the wide silent road, so well-lit and dead. New Delhi, one in the morning, a

6. The line Agastya is quoting here comes from verse 2.41, which reads in its entirety: “The follower of this path has one thought, and this is the End of his determination. But many-branched and endless are the thoughts of the man who lacks determination” (13).

stray dog flashed across the road, sensing prey" (5). Some time later—164 pages to be precise—Agastya hears one of Tagore's songs playing on the stereo, and he is reminded of that long-ago night in Delhi: "[T]hey had sat in the car outside Dhrubo's flat, watching the wide silent road through the windshield at one in the morning; a stray dog had at one moment flashed across the road, sensing prey" (169). This recollection is significant, for by beginning to narrate once more the novel we are reading, by repeating its opening lines, Agastya inadvertently raises the specter of interminability—the possibility that he may simply *continue* narrating, rehearsing the story we have already read, until he reaches the point of recollection a second time and is forced to start over again from the beginning. The danger represented by this narrative circularity is perhaps best articulated by Jorge Luis Borges in his justly celebrated analysis of *The Arabian Nights*:

The necessity of completing a thousand and one sections obliged the copyists of the work to make all manner of interpolations. None is more perturbing than that of the six hundred and second night, magical among all nights. On that night, the king hears from the queen his own story. He hears the beginning of the story, which comprises all the others and also—monstrously—*itself*. Does the reader clearly grasp the vast possibility of this interpolation, the curious danger? That the queen may persist and the motionless king hear forever the truncated story of the *Thousand and One Nights*, now infinite and circular.

(195)⁷

To identify such a danger in *English, August* would leave one vulnerable to the charge of over-reading were it not for the fact that Agastya himself raises this very possibility just prior to the recollection described above. In the novel's opening pages, on the train to Madna, he had been rudely interrogated by another

7. Italo Calvino, for one, has expressed some skepticism regarding the existence of this "magical" night: "In the translations of *The Arabian Nights* that I have at hand," he writes, "I have never been able to find this 602nd Night. But even if Borges invented it he did well, because it represents the natural culmination of the *enchâssement* of the tales" (117). In a fascinating article on the subject, however, Evelyn Fishburn locates Borges's source in an edition of *The Arabian Nights* published by the Kamashastra Society in London in 1885–88 (38).

passenger: "Agastya? What kind of name is Agastya? . . . You are IAS? You don't look like an IAS officer. . . . You don't even look Bengali" (9). And during a brief visit to Delhi some time later, he is tormented by the possibility that his return to Madna will replicate every last detail of this inaugural journey: "[I]n nine days he would be packing again and saying 'bye to his uncle,'" and "[t]hen someone on the train would again ask him to categorize himself, would not believe that he was what he was, and would never have heard of the name Agastya" (160). What we have here is something far more disconcerting than *déjà vu*—the possibility of *déjà vécu*, an encounter with the "already lived." In other words, the threat of interminability has shifted from the level of the discourse itself (the telling of the story) to the intradiegetic world within the discourse (the "living" of the story), and this shift is what makes it possible for a character located within this discursive universe to have some intimation, however vague, of the ontological danger he faces.

Over the years, as the government itself concedes, such interminability has come to be regarded as a typical feature of Indian bureaucracy. Near the end of the novel, Agastya is sent for further training to a remote "tribal" locality, where he quickly recognizes the strategic value of procrastination and delay. As Block Development Officer for the district, he is required to accept or reject all manner of "[p]etitions, applications, [and] requests" (279). Those he is unable to resolve one way or the other are simply directed elsewhere by his subordinates: "Agastya could see these rejected petitions moving from one ignorant official to another unhelpful one, the black creases on each petition marking its tortuous journey" (277). Although such procedures seem mystifying at first, over time he comes to understand the bureaucratic logic, the "psychology of evasion" (Dwivedi and Jain 209), by which they are informed.⁸ "Eventually," we are told,

he learnt to see the pattern, how an incomprehensibility in the post became, in a few weeks (things moved even more slowly in Jompanna

8. In the article from which this phrase is derived, O. P. Dwivedi and R. B. Jain offer a fierce critique of "bureaucratic morality" in India, arguing that the IAS is characterized by "excessive self-importance, indifference towards the feelings or the convenience of

than in Madna), an incomprehensibility in a file—the passage of a petition, or a request for redress, from desk to desk, gathering around it, like flesh around a kernel, comment and counter-comment, and irrelevant comment, till it was fat enough to be offal for the rats in the office cupboards.

(281)

This last passage provides a good example, in miniature, of the way in which the dilatory tendencies of the bureaucratic process gradually enter into the very texture of the narrative. In this particular case, the representation of interminability is reenacted formally through the steady accretion of subordinate clauses, so that the sentence itself, like the petition it describes, takes on additional layers of unnecessary commentary as it progresses. By the time it finally achieves full predication and closure, we as readers have been made to endure a similarly “tortuous” journey along the corridors of the Collectorate, gaining experience of these superfluties, hindrances, and delays through their various syntactical correlatives. In a particularly incisive reading of *Bleak House*, D. A. Miller has suggested that Charles Dickens’s representation of the Court of Chancery reproduces, in its length and complexity, some of the salient characteristics of the emerging Victorian state bureaucracy. The novel’s “suspension of teleology,” he argues, is exemplary of “a whole social sphere that seems to run on a principle of a purposiveness without purpose” (141). Indeed, for Miller, the Victorian novel as a whole typically “establishes a little bureaucracy of its own, generating an immense amount of paperwork and both physically and mentally sending its readers here, there, backward and forward, like the circumlocutory agencies that Dickens satirizes” (142–43). To some degree, the same thing could be said of *English, August*, which also makes of itself “a little bureaucracy” and operates on a principle of “purposiveness without purpose.” Moreover, as Miller suggests, in the process of reading such a novel, we are inevitably familiarized with the affective consequences of

individuals and by an obsession with the binding and inflexible authority of departmental decisions, precedents, arrangements or forms, regardless of how badly or with what injustice they work in individual cases” (208).

bureaucracy and schooled in the “appropriate” response to its procedures. We learn to wait patiently, to suspend teleology and desire, to embrace entropy and insignificance, and to tolerate perpetually deferred outcomes; in short, like Agastya, we learn to be bored.

But of course this is a dangerous strategy for any narrative to employ, one that gives rise to a formidable discursive challenge. How is the writer to make the boring interesting enough to keep us reading, but not so interesting that it should destroy the verisimilitude of the uninteresting? In order for *English, August* to succeed as a novel, it is crucial that we maintain some interest in its outcome and derive some degree of readerly pleasure from its diachronic unfolding; for as Miller observes of *Bleak House*, “were the novel itself ever to become as dreary [as the world it depicts], were it ever to cease *making itself desirable*, it would also by the same token cease to be read” (140). Given its generic affinities, however, Chatterjee’s narrative is also compelled to convey the reality of the bureaucratic existence—the interminable meetings, the unnecessarily complicated and repetitive procedures, the endless paper trail of signatures and countersignatures—and by pursuing this objective, it inevitably diminishes its own readability. But not fatally so. Chatterjee, I would argue, ultimately manages to accommodate these conflicting imperatives by bringing *English, August* as close as possible to what Sianne Ngai calls “the absolute minimal condition of [the] interesting” (“Merely Interesting” 791), yet without completely destroying its “desirability” as a narrative—doing just enough to keep us turning the pages, just enough to ensure the survival of the (realist) discourse, and no more.

• 3 •

As I have suggested, the threat of interminability in literature is above all the threat of nonmeaning, the threat that the narrative we are reading will fail to deliver the significance and coherence we traditionally expect from fictional discourse. “Meaning,” the anthropologist Victor Turner writes, “is connected with the consummation of a process—it is bound up with termination. . . .

The meaning of any given factor in a process cannot be assessed until the whole process is past" (97). Or as Brooks puts it:

The very possibility of meaning plotted through sequence and through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the meaningless, and the lack of ending would jeopardize the beginning. We read the incidents of narration as "promises and annunciations" of final coherence, that metaphor that may be reached through the chain of metonymies: across the bulk of the as yet unread middle pages, the end calls to the beginning, transforms and enhances it.

(Reading 93–94)

In other words, it is primarily through endings, both anticipated and realized, that we seek to understand beginnings and middles, and that at least partially explains the "curious danger" of narrative interminability: a novel with no ending would never be able to achieve final plenitude of meaning, would never be able to produce the "commanding structure of significance" (Bersani 53) that distinguishes the narrated from the unnarrated or the unnarratable.

Throughout *English, August*, Agastya struggles to derive some kind of meaning from his life in the provinces—a semblance of order that would make everything he experiences, all the disconnected trivialities and absurdities of bureaucratic existence, somehow converge and cohere. But of course it is not to be. Time and again, he is forced to confront, in Jonathan Culler's words, "the discrepancy between meaning and experience" (*Flaubert* 24). Nothing in his life makes sense, nothing matters, nothing satisfies—so it is not particularly surprising that he should contemplate ending it all. "Sometimes," we learn, "he would lie in bed and remember Prashant, his schoolfriend who had been perfectly ordinary and likeable, but who had opted out, one June afternoon five years ago, by stepping into the path of a truck, to be minced into the melting tar of the VIP Road, leaving behind only a note saying he was sorry" (153). For Agastya, suicide represents the "ultimate release, the profoundest renunciation of one's sentience" (251–52). And that, I would argue, is precisely what he is hoping to achieve here—a total quiescence that would defy interminability and bestow retrospective significance on

everything that has gone before. (On this subject, too, he cites his beloved Marcus Aurelius: "O, the consolation of being able to thrust aside and cast into oblivion every tiresome and intrusive impression, and in a trice be utterly at peace" [153].)⁹ Agastya's suicidal tendencies are to be understood, then, both existentially and narratologically—for by terminating his own life, by achieving the "ultimate release," he would also terminate and give meaning to the novel we are reading. But apparently even this kind of cessation requires "too much effort" (153), and so like the words in his diary, the narrative continues "to trail aimlessly across the page" (218), without any sense of direction or urgency.

Needless to say, Chatterjee's novel does eventually run out of pages, but the ending, when it finally arrives, could hardly be considered an ending at all. Although the novel itself obviously comes to a conclusion on page 322, in so doing, it refuses to provide "the complex of narrative summations that would match . . . the external termination of discourse with its internal closure" (Miller 144). It fails, in other words, to ensure that termination coincides with closure, that what finishes the narrative also resolves it. Furthermore, just when we are expecting the novel's proairetic code to achieve a degree of resolution, however diminished or meager, the narrative strives to jettison proairesis altogether by "externalizing" it, by projecting it beyond the spatial and temporal parameters of the text we have before us.

I suggested earlier that something does keep us reading Chatterjee's novel, something prevents us from simply giving up on it, and that something is the question of whether the narrative will sustain its anti-proairetic qualities to the end, or whether there will be a late efflorescence of action that retrospectively "energizes" everything that has gone before. Simply put, the question we ask ourselves as we read is not what will happen in the end but whether anything will happen at all—whether the novel's starved proairetic code will be capable of adequately resolving itself and thus producing a final discharge of meaning and significance. But even this question doesn't generate too much suspense, and we are not particularly surprised when it

9. This line can be found in book 5, section 2 of the *Meditations* (78).

turns out to be answered in the negative. Something does happen at the end of *English, August*, but it happens to someone else, somewhere else, and as readers we are offered only a fleeting, anecdotal glimpse of the kind of “endings” taking place outside the spatial frame of the narrative. While visiting a remote village, Agastya hears some disturbing news about one of the novel’s peripheral characters, a local forestry service officer who had recently been posted to another “very boring” place in the hinterland (294). “He abused the honour of the tribal woman who cooked for him,” Agastya is told. “The men of her village were very angry. They visited [him] three nights ago, and surprised them both. In revenge, and as punishment, they cut off his arms” (290). Thus the most exciting event in the entire novel, indeed its most overtly *novelistic* event, is dispensed with in a mere two or three sentences, leaving us with the distinct impression that we may have been reading the wrong novel all along—or that the novel has inadvertently taken the wrong character as its protagonist, and while we have been following Agastya’s trivial activities, something genuinely interesting and significant has been happening just around the corner. But it is obviously too late to do anything about it. This momentary glimpse of uninhibited proairesis soon fades, and before long we are back where we started, immersed in the quotidian banalities of our hero’s life: “The rest of the months in Jompanna passed, the same routine, office and Rest House, two vegetarian meals a day, exercise on the three feet of jute carpet between bed and desk, in the evening [reading] files in his room to the music from the stalls” (301).

And what of Agastya himself, how does his story conclude? Well, in this case the proairetic is projected beyond the narrative’s *temporal* frame, so that the novel closes by anticipating an event that has yet to occur, one that will take place only after the discourse itself has been terminated. We last see Agastya in a train on his way to Calcutta, where he will be staying with his father while he tries to decide what to do with his life. The novel’s final sentence reads as follows: “He watched the passing hinterland and looked forward to meeting his father” (322). This moment of external prolepsis is particularly significant, for it

ensures that the closure both Agastya and the reader have been seeking must once more be deferred, once more projected into the future.¹⁰ That the novel's last sentence should anticipate something else, something located outside its chronological field, means that the termination of the discourse precedes (and thus precludes) closure—giving rise, yet again, to the threat of interminability. One might be reminded here, too, of Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*, which likewise concludes by transgressing its own temporal boundaries. In the novel's final scene, Frédéric Moreau and Deslauriers are reminiscing about a (frustrated) visit to a brothel they had made some years previously. "That was the happiest time we ever had," Frédéric says. "Yes," his friend replies, "perhaps you're right. That was the happiest time we ever had" (419). And there the narrative concludes, invoking an event that, as Brooks observes:

does not fall within the normal chronology of the novel, a moment presented at the very end that in fact predates the beginning. This striking analepsis . . . seems to say that everything we have read in this very long novel is somehow secondary to the unrecorded moment of three years before it began. It is as if the novel suddenly discovers that it began too late. . . . Closure here also uncloses, suggesting that novels, like [psycho]analyses, may in essence be interminable.

(Reading 211–12)

As indicated above, the final sentence of *English, August* is also significant in that it serves to project the faltering proairetic code beyond the parameters of the narrative we have before us. Something may still happen, that is to say, but it won't be happening in this novel—not yet, not here. And this specific instance of deferral could be seen as emblematic of the narrative's more general procrastinatory tendencies. In the traditional *Bildungsroman*, for example, the hero eventually manages to find a place for himself in the world, and he does so by reconciling the competing imperatives of self and society, autonomy and interdependence. But not here. In Chatterjee's novel, the hero never quite

10. In *Narrative Discourse*, Genette divides prolepses (or anticipatory sequences) into "two classes, external and internal, depending on whether the point to which they reach is located outside or inside the temporal field of the [primary] narrative" (61).

achieves this kind of equanimity, never manages to find “repose through the mastering of chaos” (311). Instead, the narrative constantly frustrates or defers Agastya’s “coming of age,” so that even in the final pages it is clear that he has made almost no progress toward this traditional generic objective. He has simply decided to take a year off to think about what he *might* like to do. But what exactly will that achieve? And what has he been doing during his year in the provinces, anyway, if not idly contemplating his future? This deferral of “maturity,” then, not only denies the narrative the possibility of closure but also deprives it of the capacity for initiating change—leading us to believe that even if it *were* to continue indefinitely, what followed would simply repeat what had gone before. Such inertia thus destroys the linear trajectory of the *Bildungsroman* by exposing the narrative, at the very moment it expires, to the renewed threat of circularity and eternal recurrence.

Here, too, Chatterjee’s novel could be said to resemble the bureaucratic processes it so accurately describes. As we have seen, the Indian Administrative Service is notorious for “delaying [the] finalization of any decision” (Government of India 365) and for consistently valuing procedures over outcomes. In this world, “[e]verything is static” (Chatterjee 237), endlessly deferred, “bewildering and boring” (35). So it is not too surprising that the novel itself should have internalized many of these entropic qualities, that its own energies should have been dissipated by the dilatory drag of IAS procedures. Only thus, I have argued, are we able to make sense of the narrative’s abbreviated proairetic code, its tendency to privilege the iterative over the singulative, and its pronounced aversion to anything that might constitute closure. But it would be unwise to overstate this case, for there is something in the very nature of *English, August* that militates against grand gestures and critical certainties. Jonathan Culler has suggested, rather provocatively, that “interpretation is interesting only when it is extreme” (*Literary* 167)—yet Chatterjee’s novel refuses to accommodate or endorse such extremes and in so doing effectively subdues (bores?) whatever critical discourse it might generate. Overinterpretation may well be more “interesting and intellectually valuable than ‘sound,’ mod-

erate interpretation" (Culler, *Literary* 168), but to make the narrative too interesting, too stimulating or "productive," would be to disregard its essential *ordinariness*, its commitment to the banality of the bureaucratic experience.

Let me explain what I mean by this. To begin with, I have argued that the novel actively pursues "nonmeaning," but this state is something it only partially achieves, for as Barthes notes, "everything in [a narrative] signifies. . . . Even were a detail to appear irretrievably insignificant, resistant to all functionality, it would nonetheless end up with precisely the meaning of absurdity or uselessness" ("Introduction" 89). Take the passages describing Agastya's daily routine: however "meaningless" and inconsequential these descriptions may be, they still manage to produce a secondary layer of signification representing the principle of banality itself. This gesture is banal, they say to the reader; this action is boring and repetitive. Similarly, although the threat of interminability surfaces from time to time in the narrative, it is never fully realized, remaining perpetually mired in the subjunctive ("if it *were* to continue indefinitely, what followed *would* simply repeat what had gone before"). In this regard, too, the novel's dominant structure of feeling takes on additional significance. After all, boredom is an affective attitude that abjures extreme states of being, occupying the same temperate zone as alienation, indifference, and apathy. Indeed, one could describe boredom as the *absence* of feeling, certainly the absence of desire, for when we are bored we lose the capacity to feel strongly, one way or the other, about anything. ("He wanted nothing, it seemed—only a peace, but that was too pompous a word" [155].) Boredom deintensifies our lives, leaving us, as Martin Heidegger writes, "equally distant from despair and joy" (2), and for this reason it has always been regarded as one of the "weaker" and less prestigious dysphoric states. Unlike anger and fear, say, boredom is "explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release" (Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 6). This "greyness," this tendency to avoid extremes or intensities, could be regarded as the last of the novel's bureaucratic qualities. For the bureaucratic world is also a world of half measures and com-

promise—a world in which we are bored but never quite bored enough to leave (or to stop reading), a world in which meaning recedes but never quite disappears, a world in which the end terminates but never quite closes.

• 4 •

What are we to make, then, of realist narratives that seem to contravene their own governing aesthetic principles in this way—resisting closure, suspending meaning, deprivileging the proairetic? What are their commonalities, and what do they tell us about the relationship between bureaucracy, boredom, and narrative? As noted earlier, realism is expected to do everything it can to achieve an overarching significance and a full and final predication of meaning. In other words, the primary obligation of the realist novel is to locate the “interesting” in the everyday, the meaningful in the mundane, and to make of that reality something *worth narrating*. Bureaucracy complicates this imperative, however, for any attempt to achieve Erich Auerbach’s “serious treatment of everyday reality” (491) in the age of the IAS would also require that the uninteresting be treated seriously, and to do so would bring two of the central aesthetic impulses of literary realism into direct conflict: namely, the commitment to verisimilitude and the desire to fill the world with significance. As Theodor Adorno observes, “telling a story means having something *special* to say, and that is precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness” (31). Or to put it another way, how is it possible for realist writers to deliver something (significance, meaning, “interest”) that the reality to which they are beholden simply refuses to yield? For Adorno, this contradiction ultimately invalidates realism as a mode of representation in the bureaucratic age. “The more strictly the novel adheres to realism in external things,” he writes, “to the gesture that says ‘this is how it was,’ the more every word becomes a mere ‘as if,’ and the greater becomes the contradiction between this claim and the fact that it was not so” (33). The only way out of this impasse, Adorno concludes, is for the novel to abandon the “lie of representation”

(34) and defy the “epic precept of objectivity and material concreteness” (32).

Yet narratives such as *Bleak House*, *Sentimental Education*, and *English, August* would seem to contradict Adorno’s stance, for in each case they are able to accommodate this underlying contradiction without entirely abandoning their governing aesthetic principles. Although the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit in *Bleak House* is never adequately resolved—simply “laps[ing] and melt[ing] away” on page 901 of my edition—the novel itself does eventually provide the kind of closure denied by the Court of Chancery. *Sentimental Education* also manages to negotiate the conflicting imperatives of realism and reality by asserting that the failure of meaning and desire can itself be considered “interesting” and thus transformed into an object of readerly desire. And Chatterjee’s novel, as I have suggested, is only partially successful in its pursuit of nonmeaning and insignificance, always managing to create just enough interest and energy to keep the narrative going and the reader reading. In this way, all three narratives generate a kind of “tenuous readability” (Brooks, *Reading* 171)—hovering uncertainly between the interesting and the boring, the readerly and the writerly, energy and inertia, meaning and nonmeaning, significance and inconsequentiality. It is this tenuous quality, this threading together of contradictory impulses and imperatives, that brings these examples of literary realism closer to Adorno’s “anti-realistic” (32) ideal than may at first appear to be the case. Moreover, such ambivalence implies that realism as a mode of representation may be a good deal more agile than is oftentimes allowed—that it may be capable of accommodating (and even encouraging) significant ruptures of meaning, and capable, too, of challenging the very aesthetic principles to which it “officially” adheres.

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