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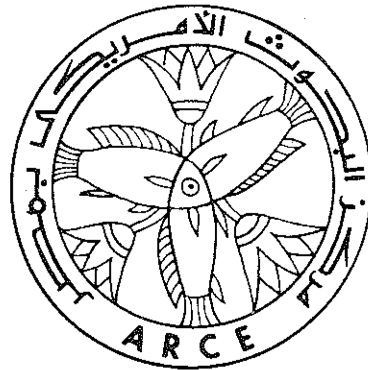

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"Now You See Me, Now You Don't": Point of View and the Embedded Narrator in aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ's, "Dūmat wad ḥāmid"*

SHAWKAT MAHMOOD TOORAWA

By definition, narrative art requires a story and a story-teller.
Scholes and Kellogg

Point of view introduces a dynamic element into a text: every one of the points of view in a text makes claims to be the truth and struggles to assert itself in the conflict with the opposing ones.
J. M. Lotman

I

The Sudanese writer aṭ-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ is known mainly for his novella *ʿUrs az-zayn* (*The Wedding of Zayn*, 1966) and his novel *Mawsim al-hijra ila'sh-shamāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*, 1966).[1] It is, however, the lesser-known story "Dūmat wad ḥāmid" ("The Doum Tree of Wad Hamid," hereafter *DTWH*) that I propose to investigate, the subtle narrative shifts of which deserve attention and need to be explored more closely. Point of view (hereafter *PV*), the uses of which I shall be investigating, is something of which we do not immediately become aware until and unless there is a possibility of changing it during the course of a narrative, or of projecting it onto another text with a different *PV*. Otherwise, it recedes imperceptibly into the background and we remain insensitive to its shifts. It is described by some as comprising "perspective" and "focus," which terminology it shares with film and painting for good reason: the effects and technique are analogous (see fig. 1).

The concept of "literary PV" is essentially the relationship between the linguistic or ideological construct (i.e., some consciousness realizable through the process of reading) and the "subject" or "sentient center." This sentient center, as a perceiving personality, presents the reader with a hierarchy of relationships, a system which attempts to create a "world,"[2] a particular image which can be either subjective or objective. The decision on the part of the author, then, with

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*Doum—from the French *doum*, from the Arabic دَوْم, *dawm*, pronounced دُوَم, *duwam* in Sudanese. The doum or doom palm is an African fern palm, *Hyphenae thebaica*, bearing an edible, gingerbread-flavored fruit for which reason it is also called the gingerbread palm.

*Wad—وَدْ, *wad*, Sudanese Arabic, the shortened form of وَلَد, *walad*, "ikhtiṣār bi-maʿnā ibn": an abbreviation meaning أي ابن, *ibn*, "son of."

*Wad Hāmid—a village on the bank of the Nile in the northern province of Northern Sudan named after a saint, or *walī* who was the slave of an infidel.

[1] All Arabic quotations from *Sabaʿ Qiṣaṣ* (Bayrūt: Dār al-ʿAwda, 1970), 33–52, and all English ones from Denys Johnson-Davies (trans.), *Modern Arabic Short Stories* (London and Washington, D.C.: Heinemann/Three Continents Press, 1985), 83–94.

[2] See Thomas G. Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986).

Fig. 1. Adoration of the Magi. Sandro Botticelli.

respect to the grammar of narration is of vital importance. Stanzel identifies three types of narrator.[3] A text may be structured so that *PV* resides with a first-person narrator, or teller-character, where the narrator is part of the fictional world of the characters; with an authorial narrator, where he is outside the world of the characters; or with a figural narrator who is manifested through a reflector, a character who thinks, feels, and perceives, but does not speak to the reader like a narrator.[4] Whichever one the author chooses, the narration may further be structured so that *PV* remains as one-dimensional as possible (the classic example of this is epic narration[5]) or so that it becomes diffused, focusing not on one center but on several, and their relationship to one another, thereby adding a whole host of other meanings to the text.

The primary opposition which concerns us here is between first-person narration and third-person narration. The essence of this difference lies in the manner in which the narrator views the events of a story and, as Stanzel has pointed out, in the kind of motivation for choosing what is narrated. In the case of first-person narration, everything that is narrated becomes existentially relevant for that first-person narrator. There is no corresponding and "similarly effective dimension of meaning" in the case of third-person narration. The narrative motivation of an authorial narrator is literary-aesthetic, but never existential.[6] The first-person narrator, the narrator embodied, is motivated to narrate by an existential compulsion, an inevitability that is "directly connected with his practical expe-

[3] F. K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), translated by Charlotte Goedsche, 98.

[4] See on this, among others, Gérard Genette, *Nouveau discours du récit* (Paris: Seuil, 1983).

[5] See Boris Uspensky, *A Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

[6] Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative*, 98.

riences, with the joys and sorrows he has experienced, with his moods and needs."[7] The epistemological difference between a narrative communicated by a first-person narrator, a teller-character, and one communicated by a third-person narrator, a reflector-character, "lies mainly in the fact that the teller-character is always aware that he is narrating, while the reflector-character has no such awareness at all."[8] A further opposition is established between internal perspective and external perspective. In the former, the PV from which the narrated world is perceived is located in the main character or in the center of the events. In the latter, the point of view from which the narrated world is perceived is located outside the main character or at the periphery of events.

II

DTWH opens with a proposition that immediately sets up the narrative circumstance and relationship between the narrator or authorial figure and the reader, attuning the reader's imagination to a particular situation and a particular set of givens:

> law jiʾta ilā baladinā, fa-aghlaba'ẓ-ẓann yā bunayya annaka lan tamkutha fīhā ṭawīlan. (33)
>
> Were you to come to our village as a tourist, it is likely, my son, that you would not stay long. (83)

The appelation, "yā bunayya," which is a little more familiar than the English "my son," more as simply "son," is repeated twenty-nine times in the story, nine times in the first two pages alone. The narrator clearly perceives himself, or wishes to be perceived, as an older, perhaps venerable, story-teller. But can he realistically be older than everyone reading this story? If so, he also endows himself with a mythical quality, becoming larger-than-life (other aspects of which do, in fact, emerge later, when he boasts of his own prowess, for example: 43/88). The implied reader, whom we might call the addressee, is, then, if the narrator is to be believed, young and, presumably, foreign to this village to which he is being introduced. Perhaps the addressee is someone within the narrative. A slight suspicion that the addressee is the narrator's own son finds some evidence in the narrator's almost intimate knowledge of his habits and preferences:

> anā aʿrifu yā bunayya annaka takrihu'ṭ-ṭuruqāti'l- muẓallama wa-anta lasta shaghūfan bi'l-mashī (34)
>
> I know, my son, that you do not like dark streets . . . [and] that you are not enamoured of walking. (83)

But the relationship is surely not a natural, i.e., biological, one. In the very first paragraph, the narrator says:

> laʿallaka raʾayta hādhihi'l-afā min qablu. lākin hādha' n-nawʿ minhā aḥlifu annaka mā raʾaytahu qaṭṭ. (33)
>
> Maybe you have seen this pest before, but I swear that you have never seen this particular species. (83)

This sentiment, this belief, to which he swears, suggests that the addressee is unfamiliar with village life. The title "yā bunayya," then, may simply be rhetorical, conscious use of a literary device on the part of both author and the narrator. A "fatherliness" does color the narrative through continued use of the term, though, and through the narrator's almost compulsive desire to teach this "son" all about the village even though he is convinced of his imminent and inevitable departure:

> sa-tarḥalu ʿan baladinā ghadan, anā wāthiq min dhālik, wa ḥasanan tafʿal (34)
>
> Tomorrow you will depart from our village, of this I am sure, and you will be right to do so (84).

This is reiterated throughout the story. We eventually discover that his real son fled the village

[7] Ibid., 93.
[8] Ibid., 47.

for the city and that he would be happier if he never returned:

innī adᶜū an yabqā ḥaythu huwa fa-lā yaᶜūd (52)

and it is my hope that he will stay where he is and not return . . . , (19)

echoing his earlier sentiment that the addressee would be right to return to the city: "wa ḥasanan tafᶜal." Moreover, by introducing the word "tomorrow," an important shift in terms of time and *PV* is signalled. Whereas the opening page or so deals with a possibility ("Were you to . . . you would"), we now have, with the use of the deictic "tomorrow," a factual time phrase that brings us into the here-and-now.[9]

As the story progresses, the degree of certainty shown by the narrator about the addressee's departure increases. What at the beginning was

aghlaba'ẓ-ẓann (33)

it is likely (83)

becomes:

anā wāthiq min dhālik (34)

of this I am sure (84)

then:

innī aᶜlamu dhālik (34)

—I know that (84)

then:

mā fī dhālika shakk (38)

of that there is no doubt (85/6)

then:

ḥīna tarḥalu ᶜannā ghadan—wa anta lā shakka raḥīl (47)

when you leave us tomorrow—and you will certainly do so (91)

[9] On "deictics" see Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986).

and finally:

anta lā shakka raḥīl ᶜannā ghadan (52)

Tomorrow, without doubt, you will be leaving us (94)

With every expression of certitude we can, I believe, detect a latent desire that it be otherwise. He has lost his son to the city and he knows he will "lose" this one too:

fa-aḥra bi-ka yā bunayya allā talᶜananā, bal ẓunna binā khayran (47)

it will be fitting if you do not curse us but rather think kindly of us . . . (91)

fa'dhkurnā bi'l-khayr wa-lā taqsu fī ḥukmika ᶜalaynā (52)

think well of us and judge us not too harshly (94)

So he feels compelled to show him the doum tree:

sa-tarḥalu fī ghadin yā bunayya—innī aᶜlamu dhālik wa-lākin qabla an tarḥala daᶜnī urīka shay'an—qul innanā naᶜtazzu bihi. (34)

Before you leave, though, let me show you one thing—something which, in a manner of speaking, we are proud of. (84)

He not only takes him to the tree but proceeds to recount the lore and the traditions of the village.

III

Bakhtin, Stanzel, and Lotman have all shown that by manipulating *PV* a text acquires a specific orientation toward its "sentient center," through direct speech, for example, and this sentient center in turn projects the text extratextually, as an "image of the world." This view is subject to various levels of verisimilitude with the real world. Direct speech has a high perceived truth value and is often invoked to impute veracity to a narration. It also provides us with supplementary information. We are made to feel that we are being provided with all the

information that is important for an understanding of the narrative (in our implicit contract with the narrator).[10] Theorists so explain the habit of medieval chroniclers of quoting other people, a device that urges the reader to believe that the writer has not invented anything. Ṣāliḥ uses this device too. He has the narrator continually citing and quoting fellow villagers' experiences to back up his answers and explanations to the questions he *supposes* his addressee will ask:

taqūl man zaraᶜa 'd-dūma (38)

you ask who planted the doum-tree? (86)

wa hali'l-arḍu'l-latī nabatat fīha arḍ zirāᶜiyya? (38)

Is the ground in which it grows arable land? (86)

tasᵓalunī limā summiyat bi-dūmat wad ḥāmid? (42)

You ask me why it was called the doum tree of Wad Hamid and who Wad Hamid was? (87)

hal qulta lī yā bunayya mādha nafᶜal ḥīna namruḍ? (44)

My son, have you asked me what we do when we're ill? (89)

mādha nafᶜal fī'l-mulimmāt? (44)

What do we do when faced with real illness? (89)

hal aquṣṣu ᶜalayka yā bunayya qiṣṣat wad ḥāmid am innaka turīdu an tanām? (45)

Shall I tell you the story of Wad Hamid, my son, or would you like to sleep? (90)

This quoting succeeds in elevating the truth value of what he says. Specifically, he creates several first-person narratives so that different texts intersect, each possessed of its own integrity. He imposes various systems and styles upon the overall narration and endows it with several stylistic positions, shifting *PV* between himself and others within the larger text. This is known as "embedded narration," metanarration, and hyponarration. But, in point of fact, the first report is just that, a *report.* The villager is not quoted but described as reporting a story to a neighbor. The descriptions, *in the third person,* of how the sand was "as white as pure silver" (ramluhā abyaḍ ka-lujayn al-fiḍḍa), of how the doum tree was "like a camel amid a herd of goats" (ka-qatīᶜ al-maᶜīz baynahunna baᶜīr), and of how the milk's surface was "still fresh with froth" (raghwatuhu maᶜqūda ᶜalayhi ka-annahu ḥalab li-sāᶜatihi) all become suspect.[11] How does the narrator know these details? Is this a subjective interpolation/interpretation or did the person quoted actually say these things? How reliable is the report? What is the source? Did the narrator hear it from the villager? Or maybe from the neighbor? Here perhaps better than anywhere else in the story we are made keenly aware (if indeed we notice) of the fact that what we see is not the world itself but rather what has passed through the medium of an observing mind, or several. The problem of the unreliability of the first-person narrator makes itself felt. Not only must he "avail himself of the privilege of reproducing dialogues,"[12] but we are almost forced into accepting the report as reliable, truthful. Both Lockemann and Booth stress that the first-person narrator is by definition an "unreliable narrator." This unreliability is not based on personal qualities but on the ontological basis of his position in the world of the narrative. His presence in the world of fictional characters and his individuality mandates a limit to his horizon of perception and knowledge. He can therefore only have a subjective, *and hence only conditionally valid,* view of the narrated events.[13]

When our narrator mentions the next "story," he uses direct speech, set off by the quotation marks. Because of this direct presentation we are

[10] "The reader becomes confident that the teller-character will not allow him to remain uninformed about anything that is important for an understanding of the story. The reader's willingness to supplement that which has been narrated in his own imagination is reduced or suppressed by this narrative attitude rather than stimulated." Stanzel, *Narrative,* 154.

[11] All quotes 39/86.

[12] Stanzel, *Narrative,* 207.

[13] Stanzel, *Narrative,* 89.

more inclined to believe the woman's images to be authentic:

> wa naẓartu fa-idhā ᶜalā'sh-shāṭiᵓayn shajarun aswad khālin min al-waraq lahu shawkun dhū ruᵓūs ka-annahā ruᵓūs aṣ-ṣuqūr (40)
>
> I saw that on two shores were black, leafless trees with thorns, the tips of which were like the heads of hawks. (87)

Or are we? Does the authenticity of the narration not, in fact, diminish when we realize that there is little chance that the narrator could recall the story verbatim? Doubt has been placed in our mind, not, one suspects, unintentionally. We begin to wonder whether or not we should doubt the truthfulness or accuracy of all the narrator's words and quotations. It is not the power of the mystical tree that we doubt, it is the narrator himself:

> kuntu fī shabābī ākilun nisfa'l-kharūf fī iftārī wa ataᶜashshā bi-laban khamas baqarāt wa-arfaᶜu kīs at-tamr bi-yad wāḥida. Wa kadhdhāb man qāla innahu ṣāraᶜanī fa-ṣaraᶜanī. kānū yusammūnanī at-timsāḥ. (43/4)
>
> In my young days I would breakfast off half a sheep, drink the milk of five cows for supper, and be able to lift a sack of dates with one hand. He lies who says he ever beat me at wrestling. They used to call me 'the crocodile'. (89)

The word "kadhdhāb" (liar) is even provided as a clue. But these signals are not the only ones we are given. Immediately after this passage, the narrator excuses himself for prayer, saying:

> ᶜibād allāh aṣ-ṣāliḥīn . . . ashhadu allā ilāha illa'llāh, wa ashhadu anna muḥammadan ᶜabduhu wa rasūluhu . . . as-salāmu ᶜalaykum wa raḥmatu'llāhi . . . as-salāmu ᶜalaykum wa raḥmatu'llahi (43)
>
> God's pious servants—I declare that there is no god but God and I declare that Muhammad is His servant and His prophet. Peace be upon you and the mercy of God. (88/9)

Can such a man be a *liar*?

Another embedded narrative follows. A neighbor one day falls ill. He tells of her adventure, prefacing the account with:

> wa tarwī'l-marᵓa mā ḥadatha fa-taqūl . . . (44)
>
> The woman told us what happened . . . (89)

A few lines into the story he adds:

> wa tastamirru'l-marᵓa fī qiṣṣatihā fa-taqūl . . . (44)
>
> The woman continued with her story . . . (90)

The woman is pious; she dreams of Qurᵓanic recitation and swears by and to her story:

> wa qasman innanī qumtu (45)
>
> I swear that I got up (90)
>
> wa qasman mā khuftu baᶜdahā (45)
>
> I swear that I have never again been afraid (90)

The socially unusual "I told my husband to light the fire and make tea" (wa qultu li-zawjī awqid an-nār wa diᶜ ᶜalayhi wiᶜā'a'sh-shāy) is reported speech reported as reported speech.

A little further, in informed anticipation of our doubts, we read, and have to contend with, the following words of the narrator:

> ḥaddathanī abī naqlan ᶜan jaddī qāl (46)
>
> My father, reporting what my grandfather had told him, said: (90)

This phrase follows the *isnād* (chain of transmission) structure of the Prophetic traditions, the *ḥadīth*. It is used here to help establish the authenticity of the story that follows or at least to frame the story in the form of *ḥadīth* transmission and force us to consider, perhaps *accept*, the truth value of the reported statements against that background.[14] Lying is deftly mentioned

[14] This is a device used also in the *Maqāmāt* of al-Hamadhānī. See James Munroe, *The Art of Badīᶜ az-Zamān al-Hamadhānī* (Beirut: American University in Beirut Press, 1973); Kilito, *Les séances* (Paris: Sindbad, 1983), especially

once more within the body of this report and in precisely the same way as it was before:

> kadhdhāb man yaqūl laka innahu yaᶜrif taᵓrīkh nashᵓatihā (46)[15]
>
> Anyone who tells you he knows the history of its origin is a liar. (91)

In the instance of sacred texts, into which category *ḥadīth* doubtless falls, a common creator (of the text) is implied and human involvement is limited to the role of transmitter or copyist, the value of whose creative contribution is, or is meant to be, zero. Any speech reported in the context of sacred text, then, can allow but two positions: truth or untruth. Which do we choose? We can only read on. The narrator comes right back to the addressee and interrogates him. The reader who accompanies (or is?) the addressee is asked to cast his mind back to the visit and to the things he saw there:

> ḥīna akhadhtuka li-ziyāratihā, hal tadhkuru yā bunayya aṣ-ṣūra'l-ḥadīdiyya ḥawlahā wa hal tadhkuru'l-lawḥ ar-rukhāmi al-qāᵓim ᶜalā nuṣb mina'l-ḥajar, wa qad kutiba ᶜalayhā «dūmat wad ḥāmid»? wa hal tadhkuru'l-qubba dhāt al-ahilla'l-mudhahhaba fawqa'ḍ-ḍarīḥ? (47)
>
> When I took you to visit the tree, my son, do you remember the marble plaque standing on a stone pedestal with "The doum tree of Wad Hamid" written on it? Do you remember the doum tree with the gilded crescents about the tomb? (91)

The earlier narrative had made no mention of what had been "seen." It is only through these "questions" that we learn about the tree. The addressee is asked if he does not think the tree is

> ka-qāmati 'l-marᵓati 'l-badīna (37)
>
> like the form of a comely woman (85)
>
> ᶜuqāban khurāfiyan (37)
>
> like some mythical eagle (85)
>
> ka-annahā . . . ka-annaha ṣanam qadīm (38)
>
> as though it were some ancient idol (38)

Three pages of how the tomb and tree came to be a monument of not inconsiderable national prominence follow. Reading with eagerness and lulled into a sense of belief, we finally learn (hear?) the story of Wad Hamid, "who has not?" (84), and of the monument. This narrative is a complicated one. The narrator recounts the story quoting "one of those strangers" (93). This stranger then "tells" him part of the story quoting the Member of Parliament who in turn recounts a story.

If Ṣāliḥ has toyed with us, providing multiple frames of narrative, manipulating time in a sequence such as:

> hayyā binā yā bunayya ilā 'l-bayt . . . hādha 'l-waqt qabla 'l-maghrib bi-qalīl . . . (38)
>
> Let us go home, my son . . . This hour just before sunset . . . (85)

followed by:

> mā hiya illā sāᶜa wa tahubbu nasamātu 'l-ᶜaṣr . . . (38)
>
> In a little while there will be the noonday breeze (85);

if he has made the literary journey a spatial one too:

> hā qad waṣalnā (37)
>
> We have arrived (85)
>
> hādhī āthāru 'l-jawlati 'ṣ-ṣaghīrati'l-latī qumnā bihā (38)
>
> the mementoes of the short walk we have taken (86);

chapters 7, 11 and 15; and A. Sherman Jackson's unpublished paper on the formula "ḥaddathanī."

[15] In the Denys Johnson-Davis translation (the first paragraph of p. 91), this does not appear in quotation marks, as it does in the Arabic. It is, I believe, to be considered part of the reported speech of the grandfather.

Fig. 2. Adoration of the Magi. Sandro Botticelli. Notice the figure of the artist painted into the painting, on the right. I omitted this from Figure 1.

if he has controlled our perspective of and in the narrated world with:

> aynamā kunta fī hādhihi 'l-baldati tarāhā . . . bal innaka latarāhā wa anta fī rabī^{c} baldatin min hunā (38)
>
> Wherever you happen to be in the village you can see it; in fact you can even see it from four villages away; (85)

he now pulls out his trump card and presents us with a fundamental shift in PV:

> wa-lammā faragha'r-rajulu min kalāmihi naẓara ilayya wa ^{c}alā wajhihi ibtisāma ghāmida turafrifu ^{c}alā jānibay famihi ka-ḍaw^{ɔ}i 'l-miṣbāḥi'l-khāfit (52)
>
> When the man had finished what he had to say he looked at me with an enigmatic smile playing at the corners of his mouth like the faint flickerings of a lamp. (94)

A new "I" is introduced and the preceding sixteen pages—but one page remains—all become reported speech, one long quotation embedded in the narrative of this new narrator, the erstwhile addressee, "authorial figure 2." We had assumed a specific attitude with respect to the narration, one with a specific spatio-temporal orientation. Now a change has been signalled for which we are wholly unprepared.

Who is this new figure, "authorial figure 2"? Not the son and certainly no longer the reader. Is it, perhaps, the author? If we do try to assimilate the individual personality of a fictional narrator to the personality of the author, however, would we not, as Stanzel says, "relinquish the most important use which the mediacy of narration has: to reveal the biased nature of our experience of reality?"[16] But "the first-person narrator who appears at the end of a narrative has the same function as the self-portrait artist at the periphery of a painting . . . who in some instances may represent the author . . . The author . . . finds it necessary to establish the position of a perceiver—to create an abstract subject from whose point of view the described events acquire a specific meaning (and become significative and, correspondingly, semiotic)."[17] (Now see fig. 2.)

[16] Stanzel, *Narrative*, 11.
[17] Stanzel, *Narrative*, 147.

The story closes with a dialogue between the two characters wherein authorial figure 1 says, in answer to authorial figure 2's question "And do you think that the doum tree will one day be cut down?" (94; wa hal taẓunnu anna'd-dūmata sataqṭiᶜu yawman, 52):

> lan takūna thammatu ḍurūrat li-qaṭᶜi 'd-dūma. Laysa thammatu dāᶜin li-izālatiᵓḍ-ḍarīḥ. al-amr al-ladhī fāta ᶜalā haᵓulāᵓi'n-nās jamīᶜan anna 'l-makān yattasiᶜu li-kulli hādhihi 'l-ashyāᵓ—yattasiᶜu li-d-dūma wa'ḍ-ḍarīḥ wa makānati 'l-māᵓ wa maḥattati'l-bākhira (52)

> There will not be the least necessity for cutting down the doum tree. There is not the slightest reason for the tomb to be removed. What all these people have overlooked is that there's plenty of room for all these things: the doum tree, the tomb, the water-pump, and the steamer's stopping-place. (19)

The wisdom of the villager prevails over the tyranny of the government. He understands that tradition can coexist with progress. This story is a gem. Ṣāliḥ discards a focused style in favor of stylistic switches which beget a dispersed, multiple *PV* effect that becomes the center of a metasystem (and metatext) which we, the readers, perceive as an illusion of reality itself. We are forced to identify with the ultimate narrator and are made into narrators who are "forced" to take the account(s) on faith, to tell it again in much the same way that it/they have been (re)told to us. The folklore of the village, we learn, is what keeps it together in times of trial and pride; and the truth value of legend takes second place to the collective cultural truth, a truth of which we have now become part, a narrative into which we have now been included. And the author stands to one side and smiles.

Duke University

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