

6

As is often the case with people who are waylaid by unpredictable events, for years afterwards my mind kept returning to my encounter with the tornado. Why had I walked down a road that I almost never took, just before it was struck by a phenomenon that was without historical precedent? To think of it in terms of chance and coincidence seemed only to impoverish the experience: it was like trying to understand a poem by counting the words. I found myself reaching instead for the opposite end of the spectrum of meaning—for the extraordinary, the inexplicable, the confounding. Yet these too did not do justice to my memory of the event.

Novelists inevitably mine their own experience when they write. Unusual events being necessarily limited in number, it is but natural that these should be excavated over and over again in the hope of discovering a yet undiscovered vein.

No less than any other writer have I dug into my own past while writing fiction. By rights then, my encounter with the tornado should have been a mother lode, a gift to be mined to the last little nugget.

It is certainly true that storms, floods and unusual weather events do recur in my books, and this may well be a legacy of the tornado. Yet, oddly enough, no tornado has ever figured in my novels. Nor is this due to any lack of effort on my part. Indeed, the reason I still possess those cuttings from the *Times of India* is that I have returned to them often over the years, hoping to put them to use in a novel, but only to meet with failure at every attempt.

On the face of it there is no reason why such an event should be difficult to translate into fiction; after all, many novels are filled with strange happenings. Why then did I fail, despite my best efforts, to send a character down a road that is imminently to be struck by a tornado?

In reflecting on this, I find myself asking, What would I make of such a scene were I to come across it in a novel written by someone else? I suspect that my response would be one of incredulity; I would be inclined to think that the scene was a contrivance of last resort. Surely, only a writer whose imaginative resources were utterly depleted would fall back on a situation of such extreme improbability?

Improbability is the key word here, so we have to ask, What does the word mean?

Improbable is not the opposite of *probable*, but rather an inflexion of it, a gradient in a continuum of probability. But what does probability—a mathematical idea—have to do with fiction?

The answer is: Everything. For, as Ian Hacking, a prominent historian of the concept, puts it, probability is a ‘manner of conceiving the world constituted without our [being aware of it](#)’.

Probability and the modern novel are in fact twins, born at about the same time, among the same people, under a shared star that destined them to work as vessels for the containment of the same kind of experience. Before the birth of the modern novel, wherever stories were told, fiction delighted in the unheard-of and the unlikely. Narratives like those of *The Arabian Nights*, *The Journey to the West* and *The Decameron* proceed by leaping blithely from one exceptional event to another. This, after all, is how storytelling must necessarily proceed, inasmuch as it is a recounting of ‘what happened’—for such an inquiry can arise only in relation to something out of the ordinary, which is but another way of saying ‘exceptional’ or ‘unlikely’. In essence, narrative proceeds by linking together moments and scenes that are in some way distinctive or different: these are, of course, nothing other than instances of exception.

Novels too proceed in this fashion, but what is distinctive about the form is precisely the concealment of those exceptional moments that serve as the motor of narrative. This is achieved through the insertion of what Franco Moretti, the literary theorist, calls ‘fillers’. According to Moretti, ‘fillers function very much like the good manners so important in [Jane] Austen: they are both mechanisms designed to keep the “narrativity” of life under

control—to give a regularity, a “style” to existence’. It is through this mechanism that worlds are conjured up, through everyday details, which function ‘as *the opposite of narrative*’.

It is thus that the novel takes its modern form, through ‘the relocation of the unheard-of toward the background . . . while the everyday moves [into the foreground](#)’.

Thus was the novel midwifed into existence around the world, through the banishing of the improbable and the insertion of the everyday. The process can be observed with exceptional clarity in the work of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a nineteenth-century Bengali writer and critic who self-consciously adopted the project of carving out a space in which realist European-style fiction could be written in the vernacular languages of India. Bankim’s enterprise, undertaken in a context that was far removed from the metropolitan mainstream, is one of those instances in which a circumstance of exception reveals the true life of a [regime of thought and practice](#).

Bankim was, in effect, seeking to supersede many old and very powerful forms of fiction, ranging from ancient Indian epics to Buddhist Jataka stories and the immensely fecund Islamicate tradition of Urdu *dastaans*. Over time, these narrative forms had accumulated great weight and authority, extending far beyond the Indian subcontinent: his attempt to claim territory for a new kind of fiction was thus, in its own way, a heroic endeavour. That is why Bankim’s explorations are of particular interest: his charting of this new territory puts the contrasts between the Western novel and other, older forms of narrative in ever sharper relief.

In a long essay on Bengali literature, written in 1871, Bankim launched a frontal assault on writers who modelled their work on traditional forms of storytelling: his attack on this so-called Sanskrit school was focused precisely on the notion of ‘mere narrative’. What he advocated instead was a style of writing that would accord primacy to ‘sketches of character and [pictures of Bengali life](#)’.

What this meant, in practice, is very well illustrated by Bankim’s first novel, *Rajmohan’s Wife*, which was written in English in the [early 1860s](#). Here is a passage: ‘The house of Mathur Ghose was a genuine specimen of

mofussil [provincial] magnificence united with a mofussil want of cleanliness. . . . From the far-off paddy fields you could descry through the intervening foliage, its high palisades and blackened walls. On a nearer view might be seen pieces of plaster of a venerable antiquity prepared to bid farewell to their old and weather-beaten tenement.'

Compare this with the following lines from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: 'We leave the high road . . . whence the valley is seen. . . . The meadow stretches under a bulge of low hills to join at the back with the pasture land of the Bray country, while on the eastern side, the plain, gently rising, broadens out, showing as far as eye can follow its blond cornfields.'

In both these passages, the reader is led into a 'scene' through the eye and what it beholds: we are invited to 'descry', to 'view', to 'see'. In relation to other forms of narrative, this is indeed something new: instead of being told about what happened, we learn about what was observed. Bankim has, in a sense, gone straight to the heart of the realist novel's 'mimetic ambition': detailed descriptions of everyday life (or 'fillers') are therefore central to his experiment with this new form.

Why should the rhetoric of the everyday appear at exactly the time when a regime of statistics, ruled by ideas of probability and improbability, was beginning to give new shapes to society? Why did fillers suddenly become so important? Moretti's answer is 'Because they *offer the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life*. Fillers turn the novel into a "calm passion". . . they are part of what Weber called the "rationalization" of modern life: a process that begins in the economy and in the administration, but eventually pervades the sphere of free time, private life, entertainment, feelings. . . . Or in other words: fillers are an attempt at rationalizing the novelistic universe: turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and **no miracles at all**.'

This regime of thought imposed itself not only on the arts but also on the sciences. That is why *Time's Arrow*, *Time's Cycle*, Stephen Jay Gould's brilliant study of the geological theories of gradualism and catastrophism is, in essence, a study of narrative. In Gould's telling of the story, the catastrophist recounting of the earth's history is exemplified by Thomas

Burnet's *Sacred Theory of the Earth* (1690) in which the narrative turns on events of 'unrepeatable uniqueness'. As opposed to this, the gradualist approach, championed by James Hutton (1726–97) and Charles Lyell (1797–1875), privileges slow processes that unfold over time at even, predictable rates. The central credo in this doctrine was 'nothing could change otherwise than the way things were seen to [change in the present](#)'. Or, to put it simply: 'Nature [does not make leaps](#).'

The trouble, however, is that Nature does certainly [jump, if not leap](#). The geological record bears witness to many fractures in time, some of which led to mass extinctions and the like: it was one such, in the form of the Chicxulub asteroid, that probably killed the dinosaurs. It is indisputable, in any event, that catastrophes waylay both the earth and its individual inhabitants at unpredictable intervals and in the most improbable ways.

Which, then, has primacy in the real world—predictable processes or unlikely events? Gould's response is 'the only possible answer can be "[both and neither](#)"'. Or, as the National Research Council of the United States puts it: 'It is not known whether the relocation of materials on the surface of the Earth is dominated by the slower but continuous fluxes operating all the time or by the spectacular large fluxes that operate during [short-lived cataclysmic events](#).'

It was not until quite recently that geology reached this agnostic consensus. Through much of the era when geology—and also the modern novel—were coming of age, the gradualist (or 'uniformitarian') view held absolute sway, and catastrophism was exiled to the margins. Gradualists consolidated their victory by using one of modernity's most effective weapons: its insistence that it has rendered other forms of knowledge obsolete. So, as Gould so beautifully demonstrates, Lyell triumphed over his adversaries by accusing them of being primitive: 'In an early stage of advancement, when a great number of natural appearances are unintelligible, an eclipse, an earthquake, a flood, or the approach of a comet, with many other occurrences afterwards found to belong to the regular course of events, are regarded as prodigies. The same delusion prevails as to moral phenomena, and many of these are

ascribed to the intervention of demons, ghosts, witches, and other [immaterial and supernatural agents](#).’

This is exactly the rhetoric that Bankim uses in attacking the ‘Sanskrit school’: he accuses those writers of depending on conventional modes of expression and fantastical forms of causality. ‘If love is to be the theme, Madana is invariably put into requisition with his five flower-tipped arrows; and the tyrannical king of Spring never fails to come to fight in his cause, with his army of bees, and soft breezes, and other ancient accompaniments. Are the pangs of separation to be sung? The moon is immediately cursed and anathematized, as scorching the poor [victim with her cold beams](#).’

Flaubert sounds a strikingly similar note in satirizing the narrative style that entrances the young Emma Rouault: in the novels that were smuggled into her convent, it was ‘all love, lovers, sweethearts, persecuted ladies fainting in lonely pavilions, postilions killed at every stage, horses ridden to death on every page, sombre forests, heartaches, vows, sobs, tears and kisses, little skiffs by moonlight, [nightingales in shady groves](#)’. All of this is utterly foreign to the orderly bourgeois world that Emma Bovary is consigned to; such fantastical stuff belongs in the ‘dithyrambic lands’ that she longs to inhabit.

In a striking summation of her tastes in narrative, Emma declares, ‘I . . . adore stories that rush breathlessly along, that frighten one. I detest commonplace heroes and moderate sentiments, such as there are in Nature.’

‘Commonplace’? ‘Moderate’? How did Nature ever come to be associated with words like these?

The incredulity that these associations evoke today is a sign of the degree to which global warming has already disrupted many assumptions that were founded on the relative climatic stability of the era that nourished human civilization: the Holocene. From the reversed perspective of our time, the complacency and confidence of the emergent bourgeois order appears as yet another of those uncanny instances in which the planet seems to have been toying with humanity by allowing it to assume that it was free to shape its own destiny.

Unlikely though it may seem today, the nineteenth century was indeed a time when it was assumed, in both fiction and geology, that Nature was moderate and orderly: this was a distinctive mark of a new and ‘modern’ worldview. Bankim goes out of his way to berate his contemporary, the poet Michael Madhusudan Datta, for his immoderate portrayals of Nature: ‘Mr. Datta . . . wants repose. The winds rage their loudest when there is no necessity for the lightest puff. Clouds gather and pour down a deluge, when they need do nothing of the kind; and the sea grows terrible in its wrath, when everybody feels inclined to [resent its interference](#).’

The victory of gradualist views in science was similarly won by characterizing catastrophism as un-modern. In geology, the triumph of gradualist thinking was so complete that Alfred Wegener’s theory of continental drift, which posited upheavals of sudden and unimaginable violence, was for decades discounted and derided.

It is worth recalling that these habits of mind held sway until late in the twentieth century, especially among the general public. ‘As of the mid-1960s,’ writes the historian John L. Brooke, ‘a gradualist model of earth history and evolution . . . [reigned supreme](#).’ Even as late as 1985, the editorial page of the *New York Times* was inveighing against the asteroidal theory of dinosaur extinction: ‘Astronomers should leave to astrologers the task of seeking the causes of [events in the stars](#).’ As for professional palaeontologists, Elizabeth Kolbert notes, they reviled both the theory and its originators, Luis and Walter Alvarez: “‘The Cretaceous extinctions were gradual and the catastrophe theory is wrong,’ . . . [a] paleontologist stated. But “simplistic theories will continue to come along to seduce a few scientists and enliven the [covers of popular magazines](#)”.’

In other words, gradualism became ‘a set of blinders’ that eventually had to be put aside in favour of a view that recognizes the ‘twin requirements of uniqueness to mark moments of time as distinctive, and lawfulness to establish a [basis of intelligibility](#)’.

Distinctive moments are no less important to modern novels than they are to any other forms of narrative, whether geological or historical. Ironically, this is nowhere more apparent than in *Rajmohan’s Wife* and *Madame Bovary*,

in both of which chance and happenstance are crucial to the narrative. In Flaubert's novel, for instance, the narrative pivots at a moment when Monsieur Bovary has an accidental encounter with his wife's soon-to-be lover at the opera, just after an impassioned scene during which she has imagined that the lead singer 'was looking at her . . . She longed to run to his arms, to take refuge in his strength, as in the incarnation of love itself, and to say to him, to cry out, "Take me away! [carry me with you!](#)"'

It could not, of course, be otherwise: if novels were not built upon a scaffolding of exceptional moments, writers would be faced with the Borgesian task of reproducing the world in its entirety. But the modern novel, unlike geology, has never been forced to confront the centrality of the improbable: the concealment of its scaffolding of events continues to be essential to its functioning. It is this that makes a certain kind of narrative a recognizably modern novel.

Here, then, is the irony of the 'realist' novel: the very gestures with which it conjures up reality are actually a concealment of the real.

What this means in practice is that the calculus of probability that is deployed within the imaginary world of a novel is not the same as that which obtains outside it; this is why it is commonly said, 'If this were in a novel, no one would believe it.' Within the pages of a novel an event that is only slightly improbable in real life—say, an unexpected encounter with a long-lost childhood friend—may seem wildly unlikely: the writer will have to work hard to make it appear persuasive.

If that is true of a small fluke of chance, consider how much harder a writer would have to work to set up a scene that is wildly improbable even in real life? For example, a scene in which a character is walking down a road at the precise moment when it is hit by an unheard-of weather phenomenon?

To introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as 'the Gothic', 'the romance', or 'the melodrama', and have now come to be called 'fantasy', 'horror', and 'science fiction'.