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"Our Supreme Objective": Nehru, *A Suitable Boy*, and the Moderation of Feeling

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This article explores the various ways in which Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy *privileges the affective (and aesthetic) quality of reticence. I begin by addressing the broader political significance of such moderation—relating it, more specifically, to the placatory content of the speeches made by Jawaharlal Nehru during the late forties and early fifties. I then trace the process by which Nehru's "meandering pleas for mutual tolerance" eventually find their way into the very structure of* A Suitable Boy*, directly influencing its formal qualities and creating a general discursive "climate" of order and stability. In other words, I would like to suggest that the narrative not only privileges this Nehruvian virtue at the level of content—by explicitly advocating the renunciation of strong feeling—but also* practices *it at the formal or structural level. And by doing so, I shall argue, it ultimately obliges the reader to adopt a similar affective stance.*

Keywords: Jawaharlal Nehru, *A Suitable Boy*, secularism, affective moderation, emotional regime

I do not like being moved: for the will is excited; and action
Is a most dangerous thing.

Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage*, 1849

[W]e should keep away from passion and prejudice.

Jawaharlal Nehru, "Linguistic States," 1952

I

According to Roland Barthes, every literary narrative is structured around a series of (greater or lesser) enigmas; and it is the narrative's hermeneutic code that is ultimately responsible for their formulation and resolution. Under the category of the hermeneutic, Barthes argues, we may "list the various (formal) terms by which an enigma can be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed."[1] The significance of this particular code lies in its control over the pace and

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1 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 19.

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duration of the narrative—something it achieves by inserting a number of "dilatory morphemes"[2] whose purpose it is to defer, for as long as necessary, the moment of full disclosure. Or as Barthes himself writes:

> [T]he hermeneutic code has a function, the one we . . . attribute to the poetic code: just as rhyme (notably) structures the poem according to the expectation and desire for recurrence, so the hermeneutic terms structure the enigma according to the expectation and desire for its solution. The dynamics of the text . . . is thus paradoxical: it is a static dynamics: the problem is to *maintain* the enigma in the initial void of its answer; whereas the sentences quicken the story's "unfolding" and cannot help but move the story along, the hermeneutic code performs an opposite action: it must set up *delays* (obstacles, stoppages, deviations) in the flow of the discourse; its structure is essentially reactive, since it opposes the ineluctable advance of language with an organized set of stoppages: between question and answer there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named "reticence," the rhetorical figure which interrupts the sentence, suspends it, turns it aside.[3]

In Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), the narrative's central enigma is stated, quite clearly, in the opening sentence (if not in the title itself). "You too will marry a boy I choose," Mrs Rupa Mehra says firmly to her younger daughter.[4] The hermeneutic sequence initiated by this simple declaration will determine much of what follows—sustaining the narrative, driving it forward, until the identity of the "suitable boy" in question is finally revealed on page 1335. Here, at long last, we learn just who Lata Mehra will marry; and it is typical of the narrative that this epic, seemingly unending hermeneutic sequence should be resolved in the most understated manner possible: "The civil ceremony," we are told, "was such a brief and dry affair that almost no one attached any significance to it, although from the moment it was over, Haresh and Lata were legally man and wife."[5] At this point, the reader could be forgiven for wondering why it was necessary to dedicate 1332 pages to resolving such a commonplace, even banal, enigma. Why did the author find it necessary to insert *so many* delays ("obstacles, stoppages, [and] deviations") before bringing things to a close? Why was it necessary to take so many detours, to trace so many elaborate arabesques, before finally arriving at a conclusion that, as we shall see, offers the reader very little in the way of narrative satisfaction? The answer to these questions can be found embedded within the passage from *S/Z* given above. "Between question and answer," Barthes writes, "there is a whole dilatory area whose emblem might be named 'reticence'"—and it is precisely this reticence, this quality of affective moderation, that *A Suitable Boy* seeks to emphasize by expanding its own "dilatory area" over so many pages. Indeed, there are very few narratives in world literature that have been able to resist the "ineluctable advance of language," and the closure it promises, for as long as this one does.

In what follows, I shall be exploring the various ways in which the novel manages to privilege this quality of reticence. I shall begin by addressing the broader political

2 Ibid., 75.
3 Ibid., 75.
4 Vikram Seth, *A Suitable Boy* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 3.
5 Ibid., 1335.

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significance of such affective moderation—relating it, more specifically, to the placatory content of the speeches made by Jawaharlal Nehru during the late forties and early fifties. I will then trace the process by which Nehru's "meandering pleas for mutual tolerance"[6] eventually find their way into the very structure of *A Suitable Boy*, directly influencing its formal qualities and creating a general discursive "climate" of order and stability. In other words, I would like to suggest that the narrative not only privileges this Nehruvian virtue at the level of content—by explicitly advocating the renunciation of strong feeling—but also *practices* it at the formal or structural level. And by doing so, I shall argue, it ultimately obliges the reader to adopt a similar affective stance. According to Barthes, another key function of the hermeneutic code is to instill a sense of desire in the reader—a desire for meaning, for the retrospective coherence that the resolution of any hermeneutic sequence provides. And it is only once we reach the end of a narrative, where the final predication of meaning traditionally takes place, that we can fully satisfy this desire for closure. In the case of *A Suitable Boy*, however, we are required to practice the same kind of reticence and self-control that the novel itself demonstrates—deferring the final discharge of meaning for more than a thousand pages, and learning to appreciate, in the meantime, the value of everything that stands between us and the object of our readerly desire.

II

Set during the years 1950 to 1952, *A Suitable Boy* covers a period that was crucial to the consolidation of the postcolonial Indian nation-state—and to the consolidation of the secularism that would become one of its guiding principles.[7] The late forties and early fifties were also a time of considerable social and political turbulence in India. The nation had only recently achieved independence, and its long-term viability was far from assured. In addition, the country was still recovering from the trauma of Partition, during which an estimated 1 million people had been killed, and 12 million displaced. As part of the project of ethnic cleansing that accompanied Partition on both sides of the border, between 75,000 and 100,000 women were also abducted—to be raped and murdered, sold into prostitution, or forced into marriage. In 1947, according to one social worker, women were distributed "in the same way that baskets of oranges or grapes are sold or gifted."[8] Some were sold in the marketplace for ten or twenty rupees apiece, while others were sent as gifts to friends and acquaintances.[9] During this period, Jawaharlal Nehru delivered numerous speeches denouncing

6 Ibid., 1241.

7 In a 1961 essay on the subject, Nehru offered a particularly clear definition of the Indian secular state: "It is not very easy," he wrote, "to find a good word in Hindi for 'secular.' Some people think that it means something opposed to religion. That obviously is not correct. What it means is that it is a state which honours all faiths equally and gives them equal opportunities; that, as a state, it does not allow itself to be attached to one faith or religion, which then becomes the state religion" (*Jawaharlal Nehru: An Anthology*, ed. Sarvepalli Gopal [Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980], 330).

8 Kamlaben Patel quoted in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), 76.

9 Gurbachan Singh Talib, ed., *Muslim League Attack on Sikhs and Hindus in Punjab, 1947* (Amritsar: Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, 1950), 287; Aparna Basu, *Mridula Sarabhai: Rebel with a Cause* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 123.

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communal violence and appealing for an end to such atrocities. In June 1947, for instance, on the day that the plan to divide India was announced, he issued the following appeal by radio:

> On this historic occasion each one of us must pray that he might be guided aright in the service of the motherland and of humanity at large. We stand on a watershed dividing the past from the future. Let us bury that past in so far as it is dead and forget all bitterness and recrimination. Let there be moderation in speech and writing. Let there be strength and perseverance in adhering to the cause and the ideals we have at heart. Let us face the future not with easy optimism or with any complacency or weakness, but with confidence and a firm faith in India. There has been violence—shameful, degrading and revolting violence—in various parts of the country. This must end. We are determined to end it. We must make it clear that political ends are not to be achieved by methods of violence now or in the future. On this the eve of great changes in India we have to make a fresh start with clear vision and a firm mind, with steadfastness and tolerance. . . . We should not wish ill to anyone, but think always of every Indian as our brother and comrade. The good of the [people] of India must be our supreme objective.[10]

Despite such persuasive rhetoric, however, communal violence would continue to plague both India and Pakistan throughout the 1950s. Time and again, Nehru would be required to make similar speeches, reiterating the same theme of intercommunal tolerance. In 1950, for example, an outbreak of violence across the border in East Bengal led to reprisal attacks against the Muslim community in Calcutta; and in February of that year, Nehru was obliged to release the following statement:

> I would like to make an earnest appeal to the people of Calcutta to help in controlling the situation and bringing it back to normal in every way they can. . . . I can well understand the strong feelings that have been roused by the gruesome accounts brought from East Bengal by the refugees and others. We share those feelings. But action should not flow from emotion alone. In order to be effective and firm, it has to be calm, well thought out and based on right principles. . . . On no account must we fall prey to communal passion and retaliation.[11]

Although Nehru was responding to specific episodes of communal violence throughout this period, the general point he sought to make was always the same. India's social and political stability, and the security of its minorities, could be achieved only by renouncing "hatred, violence [and] anger."[12] And by repeating himself in this way, by tirelessly promoting the same two or three core values, he obviously hoped to influence the affective atmosphere within the country—to create a climate of tolerance and amity among the different religious communities. In *The Navigation of Feeling*, the anthropologist William Reddy argues that any stable

10 Nehru, *Anthology*, 73–74.
11 Jawaharlal Nehru, *Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches, Volume Two* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1954), 135–36.
12 Ibid., 23.

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political system must establish a normative emotional order that either endorses or anathematizes certain affective qualities. He describes this order as an "emotional regime," and offers as an example "the impact of the Iranian revolution on the experience of grief in that country." Although previously a symbol of resistance, Reddy writes, "grief is now an emotion mandated by the state," and as a consequence it has become one of the dominant structures of feeling within Iranian public life.[13] Similarly, in the decade or so following Partition, Nehru was attempting to establish an emotional regime that would ensure the stability (and durability) of the postcolonial Indian nation-state. In order to counteract the divisive legacies of 1947, it was essential that he anathematize "strong feelings"[14] of any kind, and instead promote the virtues of tolerance and temperance. For Nehru, such virtues were to be practiced not only socially or politically, but also linguistically—at the level of language and discourse. In the first passage I quoted earlier, it is significant that he should appeal for moderation *in speech and writing*, and we find the same emphasis elsewhere too. Responding to the violence in Calcutta in 1950, he declared that people should "remain calm and determined and not indulge in loose language . . . which is improper and harmful";[15] and in another speech on the same subject, he had this to say:

> I happen to hold a responsible position and my decisions are not merely expressions of opinion but may have to be translated into action. Therefore, *I must be careful that at this moment I am not led away by emotion, excitement or indignation*. Normally, I speak without having to keep a tight hold of myself. In this instance, however, I dare not allow myself to go because the responsibility and the consequences are too grave. That does not mean that I am unaware of what has happened; it is because of the very nature of the crisis, the depth of it and its far-reaching consequences, that *I hesitate to speak in unrestrained language*.[16]

In *A Suitable Boy*, we find several direct references to the placatory speeches—the "meandering pleas for mutual tolerance"[17]—that Nehru made during this period. After Partition, we are told, he had "preached against communal enmity in every speech he had given."[18] And by doing so, he had managed to "keep a volatile

13 William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 48. For more on the development of this particular emotional regime, see Mary-Jo Delvecchio Good and Byron J. Good, "Ritual, the State, and the Transformation of Emotional Discourse in Iranian Society," *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 12 (1988): 43–63. By contrast, the medical anthropologist Arthur Kleinman has described the way in which the Chinese Communist Party sought to anathematize affective states such as depression and anxiety after it came to power in 1949—claiming that these feelings were bourgeois pathologies that a program of "socially productive labour" would quickly eradicate (*Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine, and Psychiatry* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981], 128).

14 Nehru, *Speeches*, 135.

15 Ibid., 146.

16 Ibid., 147; my italics. Here, Nehru is clearly acknowledging the performative nature, the illocutionary force, of such utterances—however remote they may appear to be from the lived reality of communal violence.

17 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1241.

18 Ibid., 955.

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country . . . safe [from] religious fanaticism," not "merely in those early and most dangerous years but throughout his own lifetime."[19] As we shall see in the following pages, however, the affective moderation advocated by Nehru operates at every level of the novel—giving rise to an "emotional regime" within the narrative itself, one that makes a virtue of restraint and reticence while categorically rejecting any feelings (dysphoric or otherwise) that might compromise the stability of the discourse.

Before proceeding, it may also be worth acknowledging, just briefly, the tension between Nehru's rhetorical moderation and the underlying radicalism of his political program during this period. In *A Suitable Boy*, the revolutionary potential of Nehru's post-1947 social policies is most obvious in those passages that deal with the introduction of the Zamindari Abolition Act (which did indeed take place during the early 1950s). This legislation was designed, in principle, to abolish feudal estates and create a more equitable distribution of land. In the novel, it is Mahesh Kapoor, the revenue minister for the (fictional) state of Purva Pradesh, who introduces the act into the Legislative Assembly; and the debates we witness there (see Chapters 5.15–16) demonstrate just how divisive this legislation would prove to be.[20] By advocating moderation during these transitional years, then, Nehru was attempting not only to quell specific episodes of communal violence, but also, one could argue, to contain and control the revolutionary political energies that he himself was responsible for creating. And to some degree the same thing could be said of *A Suitable Boy*—for it is one of the novel's central ironies that it should demonstrate such a strong aversion, at the discursive level, to the volatile and melodramatic substance of its own story. On the one hand, like Nehru, it does everything it can to discourage upsurges of strong feeling, yet on the other hand, it actively contributes to this affective disorder by creating a narrative of profound social and political change. Indeed, this tension may also partly explain the rather anticlimactic nature of the novel's conclusion, in which the values of bourgeois (Hindu) respectability are finally allowed to reassert themselves—thus containing, or at least dissipating, some of the "revolutionary" energy that the narrative itself has brought into being.

19 Ibid., 1241. Neelam Srivastava has pointed out that *A Suitable Boy*'s endorsement of Nehruvian secularism carried a broader social and political significance at the time of its publication in the early nineties, "when Nehru's idea of the Indian secular state was subject to severe erosion in the political sphere, with the rise of the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party [BJP]." As Srivastava observes, "The cultural and social mores of 1950s India [were] still easily recognizable in the India of the 1990s. But the political present of 1993 had witnessed a radical shift in the hegemonic ideology of the Indian public sphere: Nehruvian secularism was out, Hindutva ideology was in. . . . The novel can [thus] be read as a way of addressing the 'present needs' of the Indian polity by proposing a return to Nehruvianism, by recreating a national narrative set in the heart of the Nehru era, the heyday of secular nationalism in the aftermath of Partition" (*Secularism in the Postcolonial Indian Novel* [London: Routledge, 2008], 11).

20 There was, however, a significant disparity between the act's proclaimed objectives and its practical implementation. In Bihar, for instance, "[t]he state government did not have the administrative competence to implement it fully. Former *zamindars* [landlords] were well advised and knew in advance the provisions of the forthcoming abolition legislation, and they were in many cases able to circumvent the intentions of the measure and retain for themselves significant landholdings" (Judith M. Brown, *Nehru: A Political Life* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003], 234).

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III

A Suitable Boy is structured around the interconnected lives of four different families: the Khans, the Mehras, the Chatterjis, and the Kapoors (the first of these being an aristocratic Muslim family, whereas the other three, related by marriage, belong to the Hindu elite). Over the course of several years, each family generates multiple plotlines that are also, inevitably, woven together. There are, among other things, love affairs, court cases, political alliances and rivalries, elections, business negotiations, communal riots, medical crises, resignations, suicides, and, in the words of one character, "God knows what else."[21] But despite these diverse plotlines, *A Suitable Boy* is, in essence, a classic narrative of courtship and marriage. In the very first sentence, as we have noted, Mrs Rupa Mehra delivers the "maternal imperative"[22] that initiates much of what follows. And it is in this narrative strand that the virtues of reticence and rationality are most clearly thematized.[23] As Lata's quest to find a "suitable boy" progresses, she is presented with three very different suitors: Kabir, the romantic young undergraduate with whom she falls in love; Amit, the "[f]amous poet"[24] and composer of whimsical acrostics; and Haresh, the manufacturer of shoes, who is really only notable for his practicality and mercantile "good sense." Of the three, Kabir is certainly the most appealing, and so it comes as something of a disappointment when we learn, in Chapter 18.21, that Lata has decided to reject him in favor of Haresh. Her reasons for doing so are simple. For one thing, the fact that Kabir is Muslim makes him, from Lata's perspective, "the most unsuitable boy of them all."[25] And she is also deeply disturbed by the emotions he inspires in her—the "erratic swings of mood,"[26] the feelings of love and desire. So in the end she decides to marry Haresh, whose stability and pragmatism she finds reassuring. (He is, she tells herself, "as solid as a pair of Goodyear Welted shoes."[27]) Appalled by this decision, Lata's friend Malati asks her to explain herself, and the following dialogue ensues:

> "Malati, I can't describe it—my feelings with [Kabir] are so confused. I'm not myself when I'm with him. I ask myself who is this—this jealous, obsessed woman who can't get a man out of her head—why should I make myself suffer like this? I know that it'll always be like this if I'm with him."
>
> "Oh, Lata—don't be blind—" exclaimed Malati. "It shows how passionately you love him—"

21 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 261.
22 Ibid., 3.
23 Needless to say, I am not alone in having noticed this thematic emphasis in *A Suitable Boy*. In her review of the novel, for example, Anita Desai argues that it implicitly endorses "Aristotle's golden mean—the avoidance of excess, the advisability of moderation, the wisdom of restraint, temperance, and control" ("Sitting Pretty," *New York Review of Books* [May 27, 1993]: 24); and David Myers makes a similar claim in "Vikram Seth's Epic Renunciation of the Passions: Deconstructing Moral Codes in *A Suitable Boy*," *Indian Literature Today, Vol. I: Drama and Fiction*, ed. R. K. Dhawan (Delhi: Prestige, 1994), 79–102. Where my analysis differs, however, is in its focus on the formal and structural consequences of these Aristotelian (and Nehruvian) virtues.
24 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 385.
25 Ibid., 1138.
26 Ibid., 14.
27 Ibid., 1291.

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> "I don't want to," cried Lata, "I don't want to. If that's what passion means, I don't want it. Look at what passion has done to the family. Maan's broken, his mother's dead, his father's in despair. When I thought that Kabir was seeing someone else, what I remember feeling was enough to make me hate passion. Passionately and forever."[28]

Seeing that Malati is still unconvinced, Lata invokes the poet Arthur Hugh Clough, whose *Amours de Voyage* (1849) offers a similar critique of strong romantic feeling. "I can't remember [the passage] exactly," she says, "but he talks about a calmer, less frantic love, which helps you to grow where you were already growing, 'to live where as yet I had languished . . .'"[29] And this is precisely the kind of love she believes she will come to feel for Haresh—not the kind that "merely excites, unsettles, and makes you uneasy,"[30] but the kind that will develop over time into something solid and reliable and enduring (like a pair of Goodyear Welted shoes).[31]

As suggested previously, there is a clear correspondence between Lata's rather muted matrimonial desire, the "desire" of the narrative itself, and our readerly desire for the full and final predication of meaning that traditionally accompanies narrative closure. Allow me to explain what I mean by this, and to do so by citing Peter Brooks. For Brooks, all narratives possess an internal energy that drives them forward, "connecting beginning and end across the middle and making of that middle—what we read *through*—a field of force."[32] This energy, he argues, is ultimately produced by the "dynamic of desire"[33] within the narrative: "the desire to wrest beginnings and ends from the uninterrupted flow of middles, from temporality itself; the search for

28 Ibid., 1296. In this passage Lata is referring to one of the novel's other major plotlines, which involves the relationship between Maan Kapoor, her brother-in-law, and Saeeda Bai, a Muslim courtesan. As the narrative progresses, Maan becomes increasingly infatuated with Saeeda Bai—until finally, in Chapter 17.12, this excess of feeling erupts into violence. Discovering his friend Firoz in her bedroom, he flies into a jealous rage and stabs him with a fruit knife. Once he realizes what he has done, however, Maan finally "comes to his senses"—repudiating the courtesan ("He had been eager to visit Saeeda Bai when he was in jail, but now that he was out of jail, he found that he had inexplicably lost his eagerness to do so" [ibid., 1299]) and reentering the family fold. By the end of the novel, then, he too has been exposed to the disruptive consequences of desire and learned to appreciate the "conservative" virtues of moderation and stability.

29 Ibid., 1299. In its entirety, the stanza Lata is quoting here reads as follows: "There are two different kinds, I believe, of human attraction: / One which simply disturbs, unsettles, and makes you uneasy, / And another that poises, retains, and fixes and holds you. / I have no doubt, for myself, in giving my voice for the latter. / I do not wish to be moved, but growing where I was growing, / There more truly to grow, to live where as yet I had languished. / I do not like being moved: for the will is excited; and action / Is a most dangerous thing; I tremble for something factitious, / Some malpractice of heart and illegitimate process; / We are so prone to these things, with our terrible notions of duty" (Arthur Hugh Clough, *Amours de Voyage* [1903], Project Gutenberg, August 2008, www.gutenberg.org/files/1393/1393-h/1393-h.htm, accessed February 27, 2015).

30 Clough quoted in Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1299. As can be seen from the preceding footnote, however, Lata has slightly misremembered this phrase.

31 Interestingly, we find the same renunciation of strong feeling in *The Golden Gate*, Seth's 1986 novel in verse. "Passion's a prelude to disaster," one character declares, while proposing to our heroine, Liz. "It's something else that makes us sure / Our bond can last five decades more." In the end, Liz acquiesces to this logic, deciding that instead of marrying a man she passionately loves, "she'd far rather / Marry a man who's a good father" (*The Golden Gate* [New York: Vintage, 1991], 244–45).

32 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 47.

33 Ibid., 38.

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that significant closure that would illuminate the sense of an existence, the meaning of life."[34] Indeed, Brooks writes, one could "analyze the opening paragraph of most novels and emerge in each case with the image of a desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics."[35] This is certainly true of *A Suitable Boy*, whose inaugural image of desire couldn't be clearer: "You too will marry a boy I choose," Mrs Rupa Mehra tells her daughter in the opening sentence, thus activating the "textual energetics" that will sustain the novel for a thousand-odd pages. So the narrative is obviously not *without* desire—if it were, it would be unable to sustain itself in this way—but it is a particularly diluted species of desire, one that allows for delayed gratification, for the endless "obstacles, stoppages, [and] deviations" that impede the onward "flow of the discourse."[36] And as I have observed, this also influences the way in which we read the novel. According to Brooks, citing Barthes, what animates us as readers of narrative is "*la passion du sens*, which [he would] translate as both the passion *for* meaning and the passion *of* meaning: the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle."[37] In other words, the desire for meaning is, above all, desire for the end, for the sense of unity and plenitude that the termination of (readerly) discourse provides. But here, too, *A Suitable Boy* demonstrates its aversion to any kind of emotional intensity. By creating so many detours and delays, by elongating the discourse to such a large degree, the novel forces us to renounce (or at least modify) our own readerly desire for meaning and closure. Of course, we don't entirely *lose* our desire for the end—if we did, we would simply stop reading—but we do learn to control this desire, to subordinate it to the "reality principle" that the discourse so actively promotes. In this way, then, Lata's sublimated matrimonial desire could be said to serve as an objective correlative for the narrative's own sublimated desires, and for those of the reader, who is obliged to tolerate (and even enjoy) over a thousand pages of "imposed delay."[38]

And this brings us to the long-awaited conclusion of the novel. After persisting for more than a thousand pages, the reader is entitled to expect a particularly gratifying discharge of meaning when the narrative finally draws to a close. But of course the conclusion we are eventually offered (on page 1335) is anything but gratifying. Instead of choosing to marry the romantic Kabir (or even the charming Amit), Lata decides to spend the rest of her life with Haresh, the least engaging of her three suitors. The motivation behind this decision is never made entirely clear to the reader. On page 1295, out of the blue, as it were, she simply writes to Haresh, "accepting with gratitude . . . his often repeated offer of marriage." More significantly, however, it soon becomes apparent that even Lata herself doesn't fully understand why she has made this decision—why she has perversely abandoned the man she loves in favor of a man with whom she has "nothing at all in common."[39] When she is

34 Ibid., 140.
35 Ibid., 38.
36 Barthes, *S/Z*, 75.
37 Brooks, *Reading*, 19.
38 Ibid., 107.
39 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1295.

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interrogated on the subject by her friend Malati, in Chapter 18.21, she is unable to explain the logic of what she has done ("I'm not at ease," she finally confesses, "I hardly know who I am or what I'm doing . . . everything is pressing in on me"[40]); and this is the case, I would argue, because it was a decision that she did not ultimately make. Rather, it was made *for her* by the discourse itself, which chose to intervene at this late stage in order to prevent the efflorescence of feeling—strong feeling, *dangerous* feeling—that a more gratifying conclusion would have provided. In the end, that is to say, Lata loses her "autonomy" as a character and is obliged to marry the "suitable boy" who has been chosen for her by the discourse she occupies.[41] And that is why both Malati and Lata herself are so mystified by the decision she finally makes—because at this stage she is no longer obeying the internal logic of the story (the contingencies of plotting or the psychology of her "character") but *the external logic of the discourse itself*. According to Jonathan Culler, all narratives obey a kind of double logic: the logic of story and the logic of discourse. It is only natural, Culler writes, to assume that story precedes (and in many ways determines) discourse, yet this premise is "frequently questioned in narratives themselves, at moments when the hierarchy of narrative is inverted."[42] At the end of *A Suitable Boy*, when Lata decides to take Haresh as her husband, we witness precisely this kind of inversion, as the novel's discourse suddenly takes precedence over the story it has been charged with telling. And it does so, I believe, for a very simple reason. Only by intervening in this way is it able to prevent a final discharge of meaning and significance that would otherwise prove far too gratifying, far too pleasurable, for the reader—and thus undermine the climate of affective moderation that it has worked so hard, over so many pages, to create.

In order to make itself last as long as it does, the discourse is obliged to insert a great deal of unnecessary "filler" between the initiation of the novel's central hermeneutic sequence on page 3 and its ultimate resolution on page 1335. Not everything that separates these two critical episodes can carry significance; in fact, the more dilatory space a narrative creates, the more *insignificant* material it requires to fill that space. By making this point, I am really distinguishing between two different types of narrative function. On the one hand, we have what Barthes calls plot nuclei (those occurrences that "constitute [the] real hinge points of [a] narrative"), while on the other, we have what he refers to as catalyzers (those occurrences that

40 Ibid., 1299.

41 In his analysis of Balzac's "Sarrasine," Barthes describes a similar moment of discursive intrusion. One evening, as he is leaving the Teatro Argentina, the eponymous hero of the story is cautioned against pursuing his infatuation with the singer La Zambinella. "Be on your guard, Frenchman," a stranger whispers in his ear. "This is a matter of life and death . . ." (Balzac quoted in Barthes, *S/Z*, 241). At this point, Sarrasine would seem to have a choice—he could either heed the stranger's warning or ignore it. But of course this "choice" (and the agency it implies) is ultimately illusory. As Barthes observes, "Sarrasine is not free to reject the Italian's warning; if he were to heed it and to refrain from pursuing his adventure, there would be no story. In other words, *Sarrasine is forced by the discourse* to keep his rendezvous with La Zambinella"—the character's "freedom" being dominated, at this particular juncture, "by the discourse's instinct for preservation" (135).

42 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 2001), 191. The point Culler is making here emerges out of the classic narratological distinction between story (what is told) and discourse (the way it is told). For more on this "double logic," see 188–208.

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"merely 'fill in' the narrative space separating the [plot nuclei]"[43]). Needless to say, a narrative the size of *A Suitable Boy* requires a large number of inessential catalyzers, or "subsidiary notations,"[44] whose primary function is to fill empty space—and in so doing, to delay the predication of the narrative sentence for as long as possible. In this particular case, though, the novel's catalyzers also serve a secondary purpose, having been put there to ensure the ongoing stability of the discourse (through the careful regulation of its affective economy). On page 45, we find a paradigmatic example of this secondary function. While browsing in a local bookstore, Lata picks up a book at random and reads a rather cryptic paragraph:

> It follows from De Moivre's formula that $z^n = r^n$ (cos n + i sin n). Thus, if we allow complex number z to describe a circle of radius r about the origin, z^n will describe n complete times a circle of radius r^n as z describes its circle once. We also recall that r, the modulus of z, written |z|, gives the distance of z from O, and that if $z' = x' + iy'$, then $|z-z'|$ is the distance between z and z′. With these preliminaries we may proceed to the proof of the theorem.

Although this passage carries no real significance for Lata, she finds it comforting to read. "What exactly pleased her in these sentences she did not know, but they conveyed weight, comfort, inevitability. . . . The words were assured, and therefore reassuring: things were what they were even in this uncertain world, and she could proceed from there."[45] This is also the function such inessential passages serve in the novel as a whole. They are there not only to fill the pages, but also to create a general atmosphere of stability and composure—reassuring us that things are what they are and that they will always be that way. From time to time, of course, the placid surface of the narrative is still disturbed by a sudden irruption of strong feeling; and such feelings, when they appear, are often associated with the emergence of crucial plot nuclei (the acceptance of a marriage proposal, for instance, or the death of a beloved spouse). But it never takes long for the excitement generated by these isolated plot nuclei to subside, once more, into the reassuring banality of the superfluous—that "very necessary thing."[46]

A less obvious example of the dual function served by such catalyzers can be found in Chapter 9.5, which describes in some detail a long train journey that Lata takes from Calcutta to Kanpur. On page 558, we learn that "[t]he train departed on time"; and on page 560, it duly arrives at its destination. In the intervening pages, however, nothing of any obvious significance takes place. "A sickly smell of molasses

43 Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives," *A Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 2000), 265. For a function to qualify as a nucleus, Barthes argues, "it is enough that the action to which it refers open (or continue, or close) an alternative that is of direct consequence for the subsequent development of the story, in short that it inaugurate or conclude an uncertainty. . . . Between two [nuclei] however, it is always possible to set out subsidiary notations which cluster around one or other nucleus without modifying its alternative nature. . . . These catalyzers are still functional, insofar as they enter into correlation with a nucleus, but their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic" (ibid., 265–66).

44 Ibid., 265.

45 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 45–46.

46 Voltaire quoted in ibid., "Epigraph."

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[rises] from a sugar-cane factory." A woman in a burqa "roll[s] out a small prayer-rug, and [begins] to pray." An egret flies over an adjacent field. At one point, "for no particular reason," the train stops at a small, unidentified station, where some beggars ply their usual trade. After a few minutes, the train begins moving again, and eventually it crosses the Ganges. Lata reads for a while; then she buys some samosas and a cup of tea, before drowsing off for an hour or so. When she wakes she finds that her neighbor, an old woman in a white sari, has been keeping the flies off her face. And so it goes—one insignificant thing after another, for more than three pages. On one level, then, the primary function of these catalyzers is to transform the train journey into a narrative, to separate the moment of departure from that of arrival. If there was no filler here at all, there would be no story; the beginning of the journey would simply collapse into the end, leaving no room whatsoever for any intervening narrative "substance." But at a secondary level, once again, these details could also be said to represent the general principle of normality. Everything is fine, they seem to be insisting, everything is as it should be. There is no anger here, no hatred, no violence—just a long, boring train journey full of "[d]ust and flies."[47]

Of course, at some level, it is possible to recuperate any narrative detail, to ascribe functionality, however limited, to even the most inconsequential of utterances. In other words, as Barthes quite rightly observes, "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."[48] It is, then, ultimately a question of the quantity and "quality" of meaning each narrative unit produces; and here, too, it may be useful to invoke some of the semiotic codes Barthes delineates in *S/Z*. During Lata's train journey, the descriptive details we are offered contribute very little to the development of the novel's proairetic code—the term Barthes uses to describe the logical sequences of action and behavior that structure literary narratives. By giving substance to a proairetic sequence that might be labeled, quite simply, "a train journey," they certainly contribute a degree of narrativity to the novel; but because no consequential action takes place *during* the journey, their proairetic significance remains negligible. Similarly, at the hermeneutic level, this descriptive passage also demonstrates limited functionality—neither initiating nor resolving, nor even deepening our understanding of, any of the novel's central "enigmas." It is only once we explore the narrative's other codes that we begin to recognize the potential functionality of this particular passage. One could argue, for instance, that it represents, at the semic (or "connotative") level, the sociocultural diversity of postcolonial India—as Lata travels from the cosmopolitan urban center of Calcutta, through "the green and moist countryside of Bengal," the "dusty fields and poor villages"[49] of Uttar Pradesh, and the sacred cities of Banaras and Allahabad, to the Raj-era settlement of Kanpur. Or indeed one could claim that her journey takes on a broader symbolic significance: emphasizing the difficulties Nehru will face unifying a country of this magnitude and diversity, while at the same time providing a metaphor for such unity in the form of the journey itself, which arguably serves as a chronotopic

47 Ibid., 559.
48 Barthes, "Introduction," 261.
49 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 558.

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tour d'horison, weaving "together the various locales of the nation into an imaginatively enclosed continuum."[50] Such interpretations would of course be perfectly legitimate; but the real significance of the passage, I believe, lies elsewhere. Although these catalyzers are still capable of producing a (rather attenuated) degree of meaning at the semic and symbolic levels, their primary function within the novel remains the same. They are there to substantiate, to "fill," Lata's journey, to separate A from B—and in so doing, to infuse the narrative with a reassuring sense of the prosaic, the ordinary, and the banal.

In a recent study, Franco Moretti has argued that narrative "filling" of this kind came to serve a similar purpose during the late nineteenth century. It was, he says, "a mechanism designed to keep the "narrativity" of life under control; to give it a regularity, a 'style.'"[51] In 1800, such catalyzers were still a rarity, but "a hundred years later they [were] everywhere";[52] and for Moretti, it is particularly significant that their growing ubiquity as a narrative device should have coincided with the rise of the European bourgeoisie. "Why fillers, in the nineteenth century?" he asks.

> Because they offer *the kind of narrative pleasure compatible with the new regularity of bourgeois life*. They are to story-telling what comforts are to physical pleasure: enjoyment pared down, adapted to the daily activity of reading a novel. . . . [S]mall things become significant, without ceasing to be "small"; they become *narrative*, without ceasing to be *everyday*. . . . [F]illers *rationalize the novelistic universe*, turning it into a world of few surprises, fewer adventures, and no miracles at all. They are a great bourgeois invention, not because they bring into the novel trade, or industry, or other bourgeois "realities" (which they don't), but because through them the logic of rationalization pervades *the very rhythm of the novel*.[53]

As I have suggested, the fillers in Seth's novel serve an identical purpose. Simply put, they are there to emphasize the systematic regularity of the characters' lives and to minimize the disruption caused by those critical episodes in the narrative that Barthes would describe as plot nuclei. Things certainly happen in *A Suitable Boy*—there are a few surprises and adventures that are caused by, or give rise to, strong feelings of one kind or another—but the catalyzers surrounding these episodes of affective intensity are always quick to reassert themselves, to submerge such disruptive emotional energy beneath the unstimulating quiescence of the everyday.

The length of the novel testifies to the general efficacy of this strategy; however, there are some places where the simple accumulation of catalyzers is not enough to quell the upsurge of disruptive feeling. At such times, when the stability of the narrative is particularly endangered, the discourse is obliged to deploy other, more radical protective measures. A notable example of this can be found in Chapter 5.3,

50 Joe Cleary, *Literature, Partition and the Nation-State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 221. Turning to the referential (or cultural) code, one could even focus on the intertextual significance of Lata's train journey—invoking, as it does, any number of literary and cinematic precursors, from *Anna Karenina* to *Pather Panchali*.

51 Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2013), 72.

52 Ibid., 79.

53 Ibid., 81–82.

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where we witness the following episode of communal violence (provoked by the construction of a Hindu temple alongside a mosque):

> No one knew how the men who were gathering in the narrow alleys of the Muslim neighbourhood . . . became a mob. One moment they were walking individually or in small groups through the alleys towards the mosque for evening prayer, then they had coalesced into larger clusters, excitedly discussing the ominous signals they had heard. After the midday sermon most were in no mood to listen to any voice of moderation. A couple of the more eager members of the Alamgiri Masjid Hifaazat Committee made a few crowd-rousing remarks, a few local hotheads and toughs stirred themselves and those around them into a state of rage, the crowd increased in size as the alleys joined into larger alleys, its density and speed and sense of indistinct determination increased, and it was no longer a collection but a thing—wounded and enraged, and wanting nothing less than to wound and enrage. There were cries of "Allah-u-Akbar" which could be heard all the way to the police station. A few of those who joined the crowd had sticks in their hands. One or two even had knives. Now it was not the mosque that they were headed for but the partly constructed temple just next to it. It was from here that the blasphemy had originated, it was this that must be destroyed.[54]

I would contend that it is not only the temple that is being threatened with destruction in this passage, but the discourse itself—or at least, the climate of affective moderation it has so carefully created. As indicated previously, the judicious insertion of a few catalyzers here (a flying egret, say, or a woman in a white sari) would not be enough to protect the narrative from the crowd's overflowing rage, and so the discourse is obliged to take more radical measures. Earlier, I suggested that Lata's decision to marry Haresh was ultimately determined by certain discursive imperatives; and here, too, the discourse suddenly intervenes, taking precedence over the story it has been charged with telling, in order to protect itself from these dangerous dysphoric energies. In this case, however, it chooses another accomplice—the young district magistrate, Krishan Dayal—whose only real function in the novel is to restore social (and discursive) order as quickly as possible. As the crowd approaches the temple, he positions his men on either side of a large alleyway and waits:

> The mob was less than a minute away. He could hear it screaming and yelling; he could feel the vibration of the ground as hundreds of feet rushed forward.
>
> At the last moment he gave the signal. [His] men roared and charged and fired.
>
> The wild and dangerous mob, hundreds strong, faced with this sudden terror, halted, staggered, turned and fled. It was uncanny. Within thirty seconds it had melted away. Two bodies were left in the street: one young man had been shot through the neck and was dying or dead; the other, an old man with a white beard, had fallen and been crushed by the retreating mob. He was badly, perhaps fatally, injured. . . .
>
> The DM looked around at his men. A couple of them were trembling, most of them were jubilant. None of them was injured. He caught the head constable's eye. Both of

54 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 235.

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> them started laughing with relief, then stopped. A couple of women were wailing in nearby houses. Otherwise, everything was peaceful or, rather, still.[55]

In *S/Z*, Barthes claims that all literary characters could be regarded as willing accomplices of the discourse by which they have been constituted—and it is certainly difficult to argue otherwise.[56] But this complicity is usually concealed by the characters' ostensible autonomy and by the "agency" they appear to demonstrate. Only at certain critical junctures, when the very survival of the discourse is threatened, does this complicity become more pronounced. In this episode, for instance, the district magistrate is quite clearly intervening *on behalf of* the discourse when he delivers the order to fire—protecting it from the untrammeled rage of the crowd and from the dysphoric energy that such anger inevitably generates.

Much later in the novel, we are given some intimation of what might have happened to the discourse had he not intervened in this way. In Chapter 18.33, a character by the name of Rasheed suffers an emotional crisis, and in doing so, brings the narrative itself to the verge of complete discursive collapse:

> Rasheed walked along the parapet of the Barsaat Mahal, his thoughts blurred with hunger and confusion.
>
> Darkness, and the river, and the cool marble wall.
>
> Somewhere where there is nowhere.
>
> It gnaws. They are all around me, the leaders of Sagal.
>
> No father, no mother, no child, no wife.
>
> Like a jewel above the water. The parapet, the garden under which a river flows.
>
> No Satan, no God, no Iblis, no Gabriel.
>
> Endless, endless, endless, endless, the waters of the Ganga.
>
> The stars above, below. . . .
>
> Peace. No prayers. No more prayers.
>
> To sleep is better than to pray.
>
> O my creature, you gave your life too soon. I have made your entry into Paradise unlawful.
>
> A spring in Paradise.
>
> O God, O God.[57]

It is difficult to understand precisely what is happening here; only later do we learn that Rasheed has actually committed suicide at the end of this chapter (which concludes with the final line I have quoted ["O God, O God"]). But before he does so,

55 Ibid., 237–38.

56 "From a critical point of view," he writes, "it is as wrong to suppress the character as it is to take him off the page in order to turn him into a psychological character (endowed with possible motives): *the character and the discourse are each other's accomplices*: the discourse creates in the character its own accomplice: a form of theurgical detachment by which, mythically, God has given himself a subject, man a helpmate, etc., whose relative independence, once they have been created, allows for *playing*. Such is discourse: if it creates characters, it is not to make them play among themselves before us but to play with them, to obtain from them a complicity which assures the uninterrupted exchange of codes: the characters are types of discourse and, conversely, the discourse is a character like the others" (*S/Z*, 178–79).

57 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1315–16.

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the emotional turmoil he creates very nearly brings about the demise of the narrative itself—certainly the demise of the readerly values it has privileged over the preceding thousand-odd pages: clarity, order, logic, rationality, and so on. Here, suddenly, the disruptive forces the narrative has worked so hard to control appear to be gaining the upper hand. And it is only by bringing the chapter to a premature close *before* Rasheed's suicide takes place, only by actively repressing this particular plot nucleus, that the discourse is able to save itself. Or to put it another way, there's a very good reason why Chapter 18.33 should be the shortest chapter in the entire novel. If the narrative were to represent Rasheed's suicide directly, in the form of a mimetic "scene," the negative energy released by this event could easily bring about its complete discursive collapse. So instead it is necessary to approach the subject obliquely, retrospectively, in the form of diegetic "reportage."[58] Only thus can the discourse hope to reassert the supremacy of its own emotional regime—one that both adheres to and actively promotes the guiding principles of the Nehruvian secular state.[59]

IV

In this article I have discussed some of the ways in which *A Suitable Boy* "internalizes" the affective moderation advocated by Jawaharlal Nehru during the late forties and early fifties. It does so, I have argued, by delaying the resolution of its central hermeneutic sequence for as long as possible (thus diminishing our readerly desire for the full and final predication of meaning), by saturating the intervening thousand-odd pages with an abundance of reassuring "filler," and by allowing the discourse itself to intervene directly whenever the stability of the narrative is threatened by a dangerous upsurge of feeling. These measures all serve to reinforce the narrative's governing emotional regime, so that any dysphoric energy released by the characters *within* the story is safely contained, at the extradiegetic level, by the discourse they have been made to occupy. Of course, there are places where this discursive control reveals its vulnerability—during episodes of communal violence, for instance, or in the scene where Rasheed prepares to end his life. And at such junctures the connection between the affective stability of the narrative and its *generic* stability becomes particularly pronounced. Confronted by these challenges to its core aesthetic values (clarity, order, rationality, etc.), the narrative is forced to contemplate a radical shift in generic allegiance—and even the possibility of complete discursive collapse. But in every case, as I have suggested, the aesthetic values of literary realism and the political values of Nehruvian secularism are able to reassert themselves, ensuring that

58 Twenty-four pages later, during Lata's wedding, we learn in passing of "that fellow Rasheed's suicide" (ibid., 1340).
59 It is, however, worth acknowledging the fact that the novel's secular principles—like those of Nehru himself—are largely confined to the public sphere. As Nehru wrote in 1961, secularism does not mean the "absence of religion, but putting religion on a different plane from that of normal political and social life" (*Anthology*, 331). And this is a distinction that is also emphasized in *A Suitable Boy*, where the anti-sectarianism advocated in the public sphere doesn't quite extend to the "private" issue of intercommunal marriage.

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when we finally bid farewell to our heroine and her "suitable boy" on page 1349 of the novel, we are able to do so in a state of relatively untroubled equanimity.

It is the morning after their wedding, and Lata and Haresh have just boarded a train bound for Calcutta. After an hour or so, the train comes to a halt at a provincial railway station, where Lata notices a small group of monkeys searching for food. She takes out a musammi, "peel[s] the thick green skin with care, and [begins] to distribute the segments" among the monkeys. Only later, as the train is leaving the station, does she notice an old monkey sitting by himself at the end of the platform. She quickly reaches into her bag for another musammi and throws it in his direction. In the last sentence of the novel, we are told that the old monkey "moved towards [the piece of fruit], but the others, seeing it roll along, began running towards it too; and before [Lata] could see what had become of it, the train had steamed out of the station."[60] It is a curious, rather enigmatic way to conclude the narrative, but also entirely appropriate—for what we are being offered here is simply the last in a long line of inessential catalyzers. Lata could have noticed anything at this particular station (another flying egret, say, or a woman in a white sari) as such "subsidiary notations" are ultimately interchangeable. Alter or delete a plot nucleus and you have a different story; alter or delete a catalyzer, on the other hand, and you have the same story told in a different way.[61] By definition, then, such catalyzers have no influence whatsoever over the subsequent development of the narrative. Their principal function is to fill empty space, and to convey, at a secondary level of meaning, not only the reality of what we are reading, but also its profound *ordinariness*, its compatibility with the mundane substance of our own daily lives. And that, I would argue, is precisely what the monkeys are doing on page 1349 of *A Suitable Boy*. They are not there to "symbolize" anything, to alter anything, or to destroy anything; they are simply there to replicate the reassuring banality of the everyday and to protect the narrative—even at this late stage—from the sudden irruption of strong feeling.

60 Seth, *A Suitable Boy*, 1349.

61 I am paraphrasing David Herman here ("Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, ed. David Herman [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 13).

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