

Notes on Harry Mathews, *The Journalist*

(The essays I am posting on Humanities Commons are also on Librarything and Goodreads. These aren't reviews. They are thoughts about the state of literary fiction, intended principally for writers and critics involved in seeing where literature might be able to go. Each one uses a book as an example of some current problem in writing. The context is my own writing project, described [here](#), theorized [here](#). All comments and criticism are welcome!)

On the Possibility of Teaching the Reader Chinese

I have decided to title all my reviews from now on, because I've found -- after 300 reviews -- that I tend to use books to open problems of writing. Each book tends to raise a different problem, so the titles are a way of keeping those in order.

That first paragraph is written in emulation of the narrator in Mathews's book. He has recently had a nervous breakdown, and is heading for another. He decides to control his experiences by keeping a journal, and as the narrative progresses the journal becomes more and more elaborate. I bought this book because I am interested in the idea of writing a novel that becomes stranger as it goes along, until eventually -- in the version of this idea that the Norwegian novelist Thure Erik Lund recounted to Karl-Ove Knausgaard -- the novel itself teaches the reader an entirely new language. In Lund's metaphor, the language is Chinese, and the book becomes so complex, and at the same time so compelling, that by the end the reader finds herself reading in Chinese. (I heard this story from Knausgaard in April 2016, and I posted the pertinent information on Facebook on April 29, including interviews in which Knausgaard has retold this story of Lund's.)

"The Journalist" is partly such a book. The narrator becomes increasingly agitated when he is off his medications, and he calms himself by starting a journal. The journal becomes "Chinese" when he has the idea of inventing categories for his entries. At first he classifies all entries "A" for public and "B" for subjective or private. Then he divides both A and B into I and II -- I for events that involve other people, and II for those that concern only himself. Then he divides each of those subdivisions into two parts, and then each of those subdivisions into two or three parts (pp. 84-85). From that point on, the diary -- the text of this novel -- is indented, to make room for the narrator's classifications of each thought, which run along the left margin: B II/a.1, A I,II, and so forth.

For the first half of "The Journalist," the diary is not presented as a model for the novel, but only as a diary. There is a passage in which the narrator's description of his project has an uncanny resemblance to one of Knausgaard's ways of talking about "My Struggle":

"I know I'm not Plato, or even Boethius, not Diderot or Maganoff either. I haven't got profundity or clout, nothing but a devotion to the truth. So is my activity the pursuit of truth? It's a pursuit of the truth, a laborious, pedestrian, accumulative one, and not less than that. Not profundity but extensiveness (I escaped the lure of scope): establishing bounds as broad as I can imagine them, extending them day after day, and within them honestly gathering all I find." [p. 185]

(Perhaps this would fit Knausgaard better if "ambition" were substituted for "the truth.") But the diary concept works less well as the novel progresses. Increasingly, the narrator's project is an allegory of all fiction writing, especially when he reflects on the fact that it is an entirely solitary enterprise (p. 153), and also when he notes that he devotes "more time, thought, and passion to it than to anything else" (p. 191). The diary is less effectively proposed as an allegory of all fiction

writing when the narrator has a fantasy that an editor might be interested in publishing the diary (p. 206); this isn't a convincing move on Mathews's part, because it makes a reader think of the author and his career, rather than the narrator, who is a generalized figure for a writer.

In theory, then, this could be an example of a Chinese novel in Lund's sense. One reason it isn't is that a reader of Mathews's book skips by the narrator's obsessive annotations. For the most part the narrator's diary runs continuously on past the annotations, making it unnecessary to learn, read, or remember them. (In the allegory: you can read this book without learning Chinese.) At one point the narrator decides to write an index, and he does, but we never see it, providing an additional reason not to learn the new language. He also thinks of turning his journal into a journal about writing (a "Journal of the Journal," p. 195), but again we don't see the results of that notion.

The closest the book comes to Lund's, and Knausgaard's, interest is on p. 191, when the narrator ponders his ramifying classification system:

"I imagine duplicating each existing category with its journalistic parallel: the first records an event, while the second records the even of its recording -- for every A I/b.2b, a J (for Journal): A I/b.2b (or it could be in quotation marks, A I/b.2b, and "A I/b.2b"). I know that won't work. Consider this question: how can I include what happens when I write about A I/b.2b (what is happening around me, what I may be thinking, what my body is feeling, what is experienced by whatever one calls the soul -- the self? the selves? the shelves?)? If I put a duplicating frame around my old system, then I would have to make a frame for the frame, to include what was happening while I make the frame, to include what was happening while I made the frame, and then another frame for that -- a discouragingly infinite regression: not only A I/b.2b and J: A I/b.2b but J:J:A I/b.2b and J:J:J:A I/b.2b (or A I/b.2b, "A I/b.2b," ""A I.b.2""...). [p. 191]

This is actually readable, and it is close to "Chinese." But it is the only passage of its kind. The book ends with a disjointed series of plot summaries, tying up the narrator's paranoid fantasies, making the entire book uncharacteristically, and unnecessarily, neat. I would rather have been compelled to read Chinese, all the way to the end, even if it remained, or even became, increasingly difficult, unrewarding, and incomprehensible. I agree with Lund and Knausgaard: there is something compelling in that model of a novel.