

With a Grain of Salt

Concept of Performance and Metalepsis in James Salter's *Light Years*

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It is a truth universally acknowledged that having completed a seemingly conventional novel, writers often resort to trickery to keep the readers engaged in the narrative. Whilst some authors may eavesdrop on multiple focalizers, others wallow in a shallow stream of consciousness. The subtlest, however, do neither, and yet exceed all the rest. James Salter, (1925–2015) an American novelist of moderate renown, belongs to the latter category.

In the introduction to the Penguin Modern Classics edition of *Light Years* that I own, Richard Ford wrote: “It is an article of faith among readers of fiction that James Salter writes American sentences better than anybody writing today” (Salter, v). Having for two consecutive years perused *A Sport and a Pastime* and *Light Years*, I can testify that the quality of Salter’s prose is unmistakable. Although nowadays, his austere style might not strike one as something original, nor do metafictional techniques excite the reader’s jaded appetite. However, Salter’s writing

produces the same effect as a Bresson film, and his use of metalepsis invites the reader to unravel the confusion of suppressed emotions his characters often experience.

It is not by chance that readers and reviewers alike link Salter’s style to the impressionist tradition in cinema and visual art. This fitting comparison is especially apparent in the paragraphs where he sets up a scene or concludes it. There, each of his sentences function as a precise brush stroke or a single frame. Though they often lack action verbs, the text comes to life in unity; it ripples like a Monet pond. Such a narrative technique simultaneously performs two functions: it effaces the narrator from the text and invites the reader into it. In fact, Salter’s prose also resembles a carefully directed play: it inexorably moves to a predetermined conclusion, whilst detracting nothing from the casual fluidity of action.

The overarching concept of playacting compounds this feature of his oeuvre. In *Light Years*, multiple chapters are

structured according to the same pattern: Salter uses short sentences to compose the first and last paragraphs. Like stage directions or opening and closing shots, these short sentences establish the scene and set up where the action is to take place, or fade into black along with it. For example, the first chapter of the second book begins thus:

In the morning the light came in silence. The house slept. The air overhead, glittering, infinite, the moist earth beneath – one could taste this earth, its richness, its density, bathe in the air like a stream. Not a sound. The rind of the cheese had dried like bread. The glasses held the stale aroma of vanished wine (Salter, 67).

From a broad picture embracing the scenery at large, the narrator proceeds to welcome the reader into the house, points out minute objects, makes them palpable, and almost handles them. The chapter ends like this:

She would make dinner after a while. They would dine together, something

light: a boiled potato, cold meat, the remains of a bottle of wine. Their daughters would sit numbly, the dark of fatigue beneath their eyes. Nedra would take a bath. Like those who have given everything – performers, athletic champions – they would sink into that apathy which only completion yields (Salter, 71).

This scene is also remarkable because the narrator compares the characters to actors that give their utmost to the play and impart to it a sense of reality. Nothing could better characterize the structure of the novel, the narrative technique it utilizes, or the characters that populate it. The novel bristles with words that refer to cinema and drama. “Performance”, “act”, “actor”, “actress”, “theater”, “theatrical”, “stage” – the list could go on, given that some scenes feel scripted. The narrator readily admits it, as in the following scene of the mugging:

He stumbled, trying to grapple with the rain of grunting blows that was making him wet. He was trying to run. He was blinded, he could not see, lurching along the plank of legend, ridiculous to the end, calling out, his performance faltering in the icy cold, his legs crumbling (Salter, 169).

Note that the narrator uses the word “performance” to describe what is happening. He also alludes to the inevitability of an outcome, as if the character acted according to an established “legend”, i.e., an explanation accompanying a pictorial illustration. It seems that for this novel, Salter borrowed both the structure and style from drama.

Given all that has been said before, I now turn my attention to the second salient feature of the author’s grand design – metalepsis. Modern theorists define it as a shift between the levels of the narrative, i.e., between the world the narrator inhabits and the world they describe (McHale, 120). As a concept, it originated in classical Greek drama, where gods habitually appeared onstage and the chorus directly addressed the audience, thus effectively

breaking the boundaries between the realms of fact and fiction. In the twentieth century, Gerard Genette, the narratologist responsible for the term focalization, appropriated metalepsis for his own uses. He mainly concerned himself with two types of transition between the levels of the narrative: the author either explicitly orchestrating the progression of the events or making away with the necessary time gap between what is being narrated and the act itself (Genette, 234–236). Since then, the term has been considerably refined and in 2003, Monica Fludernik distinguished four separate kinds of metalepses:

- 1) authorial, i.e., a strategy that foregrounds the inventedness of the story.
- 2) narratorial, i.e., the narrator urges the reader to take part in the story.
- 3) lectorial, i.e., the narratee’s implicit participation in the story, or the character’s implicit participation in the act of narration.
- 4) rhetorical, i.e., simultaneity of the time of the telling and the time of the told. (Fludernik 2003, 388).

Exploited fully, metalepsis allows any of the triad ‘author-reader-character’ to move between the narrative levels. It blurs their boundaries to such an extent that each of the actors acquires an agency independent of their former director.

In *Light Years*, three kinds of metalepses play a prominent part, namely authorial, rhetorical, and narratorial. In the following passage, Salter’s narrator personally intrudes upon the text, thereby creating an instance of authorial metalepsis:

“I suppose I was waiting for you, amore.’ Should one describe the act of love which united them, it may have been this night?” (Salter, 276). Making use of transposition (employing an affirmative sentence as an interrogative one) and the conditional clause, the narrator foregrounds the inventedness of the text. Reading the novel, one cannot help noticing such passages as they are indeed numerous.

The fourth book opens with a textbook example of authorial metalepsis: “They were divorced in the fall. I wish it could have been otherwise” (Salter, 203). Here, the narrator ironically implies that the events could never result in any other way. Yet the dramatic impact of this passage depends entirely on the reader’s awareness, and that it is only the narrator who determines how the story should progress. The next passage can be regarded either as a case of authorial or narratorial metalepsis:

Passing through the doors of the store she looked at those going in with her, those leaving, women buying at the handbag counters ahead. The real question, she thought, is, Am I one of these people? Am I going to become one, grotesque, embittered, intent upon their problems, women in strange sunglasses, old men without ties? Would she have stained fingers like her father? Would her teeth turn dark? (Salter, 173–174).

On the one hand, it can be argued that the passage is focalized internally. The character, then, is looking at herself, as the shift from “she” to “I” and free indirect discourse signify. However, the last two sentences seem to be focalized externally, but not by someone who knows less about her. On the contrary, this being knows her completely, and even controls her. In this case, the conditional mood in this passage produces an effect similar to what we saw in the previous extract: the narrator has not chosen how the story is to continue, and they present the reader with the thoughts of an aging woman to disguise their indecision. If this is true, then we are dealing with another case of authorial metalepsis.

As for rhetorical metalepsis, let us turn to the first chapter of the novel: “We dash the black river, its flats smooth as stone. [...] The sea birds hang above it, they wheel, disappear. We flash the wide river, a dream of the past” (Salter, 3). It should be noted that here, as in the rest of the chapter, the narrator uses the present indefinite tense. Nowhere else in the novel do they resort to it again: all the other

chapters are written in retrospect. Due to zero focalization, the narrative instance and the things narrated coincide, hence a case of rhetorical metalepsis.

The pronoun the narrator chooses in the above passage is also quite perplexing. Does it imply “the character and I”, or “you and I (the reader)”? Certainly, it can be dismissed as the writer’s laziness, but then “lazy” is the last epithet one would use to describe James Salter. The first-person point of view makes for another possible explanation. But then, it is uncharacteristic of the *Light Years* narrator to follow the character to the bathroom. Thirdly, the narrator can be diegetic, rendering the query irrelevant. But to settle it is crucial as the answer would give us a vital clue as to the author’s plan.

Let us consider the sixth paragraph of the same chapter: “We strolled in the garden, eating the small, bitter apples. The trees were dry and gnarled. The lights in the kitchen were on” (Salter, 4). For the same reason, these sentences stand out just like the ones I cited earlier. Considering the context of the chapter in question, this passage utilizes zero focalization: we as readers know that no one is strolling in the garden at that moment. The only character we have met so far comes home only in the next paragraph, and his family is inside. Consequently, we infer that only the narrator could venture the remarks above. This logical conclusion resolves the “we” ambiguity: in the absence of any other physical being that the narrator could form this duet with, only the reader can be the second component.

Narratorial metalepsis is the hardest to detect, not least because the shift occurs not between the level of narration and the reader, but between the level of the narration and the story they narrate. The following passage illustrates such a case:

Winter comes. A bitter cold. The snow creaks underfoot with a rich, mournful sound. The house is surrounded by

white. Hours of sleep, the air chill. The most delicious sleep, is death so warm, so easeful? He is barely awake; he emerges for a moment at first light as if by some instinct, buried, lost. His eyes open slightly, like an animal’s. For a moment he slips from dreams, he sees the sky, the light, nothing is moving, nothing is heard. The hour that is the last hour, the children sleeping, the pony silent in her stall (Salter, 21).

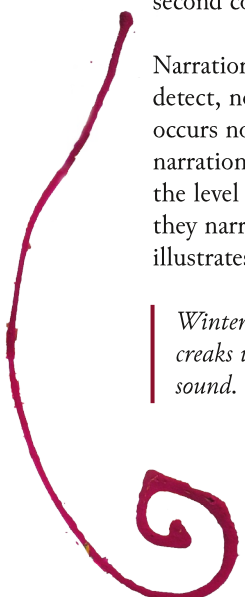
Short sentence by short sentence, the reader accompanies the narrator as they approach the scene in their customary manner. At first, the narrator is impersonal, and the reader observes the action (or lack thereof) from the wings. The third sentence already gives the narrator form, and the fourth walks us into the house. Tenderly, they observe the sleeping person; they vaguely muse whether sleep is like death. Then the shift occurs: although the narrator describes the events in the third person, one understands that the character’s and the narrator’s focalizations merge. The latter supplements the former’s perception, speaking of the sleeping man slipping from dreams. An immaculate rhetorician, the narrator develops the topic of sleep-death relationship with participles “buried” and “lost”. The last sentence, much like the first, describes the consciousness split again.

The final extract I provide below neatly summarizes what I believe to be the two most commonly used techniques that make Salter stand out from other authors:

He talked as well. He explained too much but he could not resist. One thing led to another, inspired it, the story of Stanford White, the city as it once had been, the churches of Wren. He invented nothing; it poured from him. She nodded and answered with silence, she drank the wine. She leaned with her elbows on the table; her glance made him weak. She was absorbed, hypnotized almost. She was intelligent, that was what made her extraordinary. She could learn, comprehend. Beneath her dress, he knew, she had nothing on; deBeque had told him that. [...] She

closed the door behind her and turned the lock. From that first moment, that cool and trivial act, it seemed a kind of movie started, silent, almost flickering, a movie with foolish sections which nonetheless consumed them and became real. [...] He started her bath. In the dimness he saw his reflection like that of another man, a triumphant glimpse that held him as water crashed in the tub. His body was in shadow. It seemed strong, like a fighter’s or jockey’s. He was not a city man; suddenly he was primitive, firm as a bough. He had never been so exhilarated after love. All the simple things had found their voice. It was as if he were backstage during a great overture, alone, in semi-darkness but able to hear it all (Salter, 46–48).

Almost the entire first paragraph utilizes the external focalization. What the narrator does is use the character as a lens only, as they evince a subjective inference “extraordinary”. This evidence does not give us license to argue that we are dealing with narratorial metalepsis. Such an argument can be refuted by saying that the first paragraph is focalized differently to faithfully render the character’s mounting desire. No shift occurs, nor does the reader take part in the narrative. However, the simile the narrator uses to open the second paragraph has “movie” for its vehicle. Two separate focalizations begin to freely supplement each other with the word “consumed”. Although the reader readily believes in a vain man appraising his physique in the mirror, they should not share in his exhilaration further on. One has to possess Hamlet’s capacity for self-reflection to assess oneself on the spot accurately and with as many similes. What the narrator does here is lend this capacity to the character, expand their consciousness and give them a fuller, more resonant voice. The last simile again alludes to drama as the narrator uses the words “backstage” and “overture”. Thanks to the narrator’s intrusion, the character steps aside and watches themselves as an observer would. The reader sits beside them and watches both the narrator and the character.



In conclusion, let us go back to the structure of the novel and say a few words about how it corresponds to the concept of drama and metalepsis. Gustav Freytag, the German drama critic, developed Aristotle's ideal model for a play and expanded it. What he ended up with was what is known as the "five acts structure" (Freytag, 195). *Light Years* is made up of as many books, with each performing a function identical to its respective dramatic counterpart. Thus, the novel incorporates this structure, the central concept of performance, and metalepsis into a tight single body. At first glance,

while it amounts to a mere assortment of disjointed scenes and sheer drivel, the novel morphs into an immaculately crafted work of art.

Choosing a particular concept of drama for the novel's foundation, James Salter stylizes it accordingly. With a tried set of tools and solid scaffolding, he constructs what can be duly regarded as a metafictional novel with several framing narratives. Due to metaleptic shifts, the reader becomes immersed in it. Moreover, they allow all the narrative agents to constantly exchange their roles. Perhaps that was what

Richard Ford meant when he wrote in the same introduction: "*Light Years* [...] transacts a constant negotiation with the reader to render these citizens as complex as they are, but also to exhibit the Berlands (and their friends) as types ..." (Salter, vii). Only the influence of metalepsis allows James Salter to typecast his players without making them renounce their individuality.

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