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**Abstraction at Non-verbal/ Object Level in Yann Martel's Beatrice
and Virgil**

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Abstract:

The paper is an attempt to explore the implications of General Semantics (GS) in literary works through Beatrice and Virgil a fictional work by Yann Martel, the celebrity writer of Life of Pi. General Semantics is a discipline that holds specific views on language use and its implications in Teaching/ Learning and the Media. It is a method for internalizing the mental habits recommended by Alfred Korzybski (in Science and Sanity and Manhood of Humanity) and to evaluate the role of GS in psychology and psychotherapy. Korzybski's STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIAL, the path breaking invention that brings general-semantics into being: A 3-Dimensional structure that differentiates-and-relates the event level ("what is going on"), the object level, where living beings abstract from and transform the event to construct their experience, and the label levels, where human beings construct meaning-in-language as an abstraction from and transformation of their sensory experience. Beatrice and Virgil is a good example of employing the language at Object Level--GS defines 'sanity' in terms of an 'extensional' orientation which facilitates a proper relation between the vivid particularity of the life world and the symbolizations of common-and-conventional-scientific sense. Practices of attention to the objective level disclose possibilities occluded by conceptualization. Beatrice and Virgil employs a complex narrative technique with a central character, a creative writer who happens to evaluate an allegoric play written by the reader, a taxidermist, to unfold the ghastly experience of holocaust. The study would add on more to the analysis of literary texts with the help of GS which is basically a multidisciplinary field of knowledge with an approach to reach the manhood of humanity.

Keywords: *General Semantics, non-verbal/ Object Level, abstraction, Structural Differential, sensory experience, narrative technique*

Yann Martel's *Beatrice and Virgil* is a Holocaust fiction with complex narrative that leads to multiple interpretations and lending itself to multi-disciplinary approach. It is directly the interest of Philosophers, historians, psychiatrist, psychologists, social scientists, linguists and literary critics. The book is a fertile ground for the language and literary critics with stylistic studies with its fascinating narrative techniques. *Beatrice and Virgil* employs a complex narrative technique with Henry, the central character-narrator, a creative writer who happens to evaluate an allegoric a legend and a play written by his namesake reader, a taxidermist, to unfold the ghastly experience of holocaust. The narration can simplistically be regarded as employing the allegoric presentation of the animal characters Beatrice a donkey and Virgil



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howler monkey to depict the horrors of holocaust.

The paper is an attempt to explore the application of General Semantics (GS) in literary works through the study of narrative technique employed in *Beatrice and Virgil*. GS is a discipline that holds specific views on language use and its implications in Teaching/ Learning and the Media. It is a method for internalizing the mental habits recommended by Alfred Korzybski (in *Science and Sanity* and *Manhood of Humanity*). Korzybski's Structural Differential, the path breaking invention that brings general-semantics into being: A 3-Dimensional structure that differentiates-and-relates the *event level* ("what is going on"), the *object level*, where living beings abstract from and transform the event to construct their experience, and the *label levels*, where human beings construct meaning-in-language as an abstraction from and transformation of their sensory experience. *Beatrice and Virgil* is a good example of employing the language at silent/Object Level-sensory- abstraction, GS defines 'sanity' in terms of an 'extensional' orientation which facilitates a proper relation between the vivid particularity of the life world and the symbolizations of common-and-conventional-scientific sense. Practices of attention to the objective level disclose possibilities occluded by conceptualization.

Let me begin with superfluous connection to Korzybski the man and the fictional work *Beatrice and Virgil*. Korzybski was born in Warsaw, Poland which was ground zero for holocaust and it was Korzybski's direct experience of the horrors of first world war that led him to come up with a vision that is GS to think of a sane word. *Beatrice and Virgil* also come down to pinpoint Warsaw, Poland as the ground zero to present the experience. Korzybski all his life conducted workshops to change the perception of the individuals and train them to extensional evaluation which is an important aspect of a non-Aristotelian, non-essentialist worldview.

Korzybski in his foundational work *Manhood of Humanity* give a shift to the basic definition of human beings by terming them scientifically as 'Time binders', as against plants that are chemical binders and animals who are space-binders. Time binding is the capacity of humans to pass on the accumulated knowledge from generation to generation, which is due to their use of sign and symbols or language. Thus GS is termed so to emphasize on the aspect of communication to solve all our problems at personal to global level. According to Korzybski the problems that we face are rationally evaluated as the misconceptions.



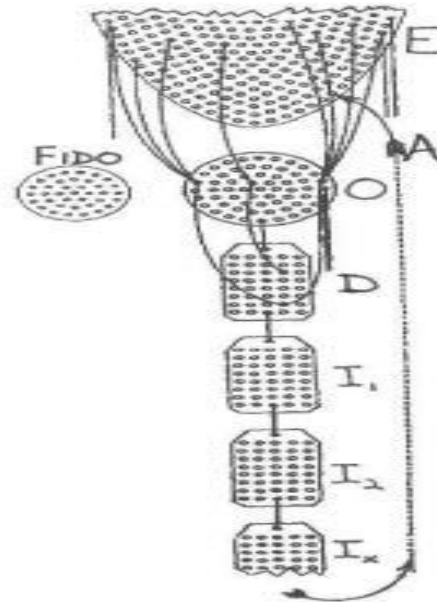
Korzybski laid emphasis on *Predictability* in his *General Semantics Seminar 1937* he regards it as crucial to explain it as: ‘If you could *predict* that an action or decision will make you unhappy, would you do it?’ (20) He further stated a prophetic statement in the same lecture for the holocaust that humanity could not avoid due its insanity. To quote his words from the same lecture: ‘There is private life. How about national and international life? How about England and America nonpredicting that their laxity is encouraging Hitler, world arrangements, and another world war?’(20) To think of the difficulty of ‘Maximum probability of predictability’ factors of predictability can be understood with the equation ‘Map \neq Territory’ and language to set the premises that 1. Map is *not* territory 2. Map is not all of territory and 3. Map is *Self-reflexive*. Interrelated as:

‘I was speaking about map-territory interrelationship. This applies to every form of representation; among others, language. That is where the important problem comes in. ... the word does *not* cover *all* the characteristics of an object or a situation. I want you to digest and absorb the three premises, for they are foundations of GS. And obviously language is *self-reflexive* in the sense that in language we can speak about language and every difficulty may happen if we don’t know about self-reflexiveness and are not conscious of it’(GSS 31)

The narrative technique of *Beatrice and Virgil* is structured on self-reflexive aspect in case of its writer-narrator’s block, pairing of the writer-reader, animal characters in the play monkey-donkey and pets cat-dog... its writing about writing. Henry the writer’s ‘flip-book’ is self-reflexive to analyse the extendedly to discuss fiction and non-fiction, fact and fiction, truth and real... to self explain/ define the attempt as ‘Art is seed, art is memory, art is vaccine.’ History as a massive tree, fiction as tiny fruit that hold seeds! Similarly the allegory can be seen as a device self-reflexive. This is an non-allness/ non-Aristotelian approach to join in an endeavor to fictionalize Holocaust which historiographers object to fictionalizing the social engineering of Hitler to assert it as a sacred region for the testimony only for direct witnesses. ‘Henry now joined the vast majority of those who had been shut up by the Holocaust.’ (BV 18) takes the liberty/ challenge to reflect on the issue of historiography.

To draw truth of horrors through fiction is not the result of research of holocaust testimonials alone the writer’s conscious use of language in the text is what leads to application of Korzybski’s STRUCTURAL DIFFERENTIAL. The diagram of structural Differential shows how infinite (etc.) labeling takes us away from WIGO. Where E- Event Level (WIGO), O – Object level, FIDO- Animal perception of

wigo, D-Discriptive level, I1- Inference Level, I2 Generalization, I3 et cetera .



GS is a general theory about how we evaluate or evaluation (Semantic) Transaction. Its takes into account the interrelations among: what is happening in ourselves and the world around us i.e. ‘what is going on’ (WIGO), how we get information about those happenings, how we talk about those information, and how we behave, an up-to-date, scientifically-based applied epistemology.(based on ‘Glossary’, DYS 23)

The application of GS is to take account of how Martel through his use of language strives to speak of WIGO of Holocaust through Beatrice and Virgil the characters of Henry, the taxidermist, with extensional orientation: at event level to construct their experiences related to non-verbal happenings and lower order descriptions and examples and references to non-verbal experiences. We can consider the description of the pear, howl or a donkey an individual’s attempt respond to in terms of ‘meanings’ one gives to words, symbols and other events; includes verbal and non verbal factors, i.e. sensing-thinking-feeling-moving-diong-etc. (based on ‘Glossary’, DYS 23) What would commonly be ascribed to ‘detailed observation’, ‘mastery of language’ etc. can also be understood as a device to express extensionally as we can see in the dialogues that run on for seven pages simply to describe a pear in Henry the taxidermist’s play where Virgil describes a pear sensing (shape, size, colour, taste, touch...)-thinking-feeling-moving-doing-etc as:



In case of appearance:

Beatrice: I've never had a pear.

Virgil: What?

Beatrice: In fact I don't think I've ever set eyes on one.

Virgil: How is it possible? It's a common fruit.

Beatrice: Describe a pear for me. What is a pear like

Virgil: (*Settling back*) I can try. Let's see... To start with a pear has an unusual shape. It's round and fat from the bottom but tapered on top.

Beatrice: Like a gourd.

Virgil: A *guard*? You know gourds but you don't know pears? How odd the things we know and don't. At any rate, no, the pear is smaller than an average gourd, its shape is more pleasing to eye. A pear becomes tapered in the symmetrical way, its upper half sitting straight and central atop its lower half. Can you see what I mean?

Beatrice: I think so.

Virgil: let us begin with the lower half. Can you imagine of a fruit that is round and fat?

Beatrice: Like an apple?

Virgil: Not quite. If you look at an apple with your mind's eye, you will notice the girth of the apple is at its widest either in the middle of the fruit or in the top third, isn't that so?

Beatrice: I can see it.

Virgil: But we must not push the comparison too far. The bottom of the pear is not like an apple's.

Beatrice: No?



Virgil: No. Most apple sit on their buttocks, so to speak, on the circular ridge or on four or five points that keep them falling over. Past the buttocks, a little ways up, there's what would be the anus of the fruit if the fruit were a beast.

Beatrice: I see precisely what you mean

Virgil: Well appear is not like that. A pear has no buttocks. Its bottom is round.

Beatrice: How does it stay up?

Virgil: It doesn't. A pear either dangles from a tree lies on its side. ... (BV 43)

In case of shape:

Beatrice: I know bananas.

Virgil: Better than a monkey. Take the end of a common banana, then, and place it on the top of an apple, taking into account the difference between apples and pears that I have just described.

Beatrice: An interesting graft.

Virgil: Now make the lines smoother, gentler. Let the banana flare out in a friendly way as it merges into the apple. Can you see it?

Beatrice: I believe I can.

Virgil: one last detail. At the very top of this apple-banana composite, add a surprisingly tough stalk, a real tree trunk of a stalk. There you have an approximation of a pear.

The colour:

Beatrice: A pear sounds like a beautiful fruit.

Virgil: it is. In colour, commonly, a pear is yellow with black spots.

Beatrice: Like a Banana again.



Virgil: No, not at all. A pear isn't yellow in so bright, lustress and opaque a way. It's a paler, translucent yellow, moving towards beige, but not creamy, more watery, approaching the visual texture of a more watery, approaching the visual texture of a more water-colour wash. And the spots are sometimes brown.

... (BV 45)

And with description of *touch*, feel and sound after contracting with the smooth and slippery of apple and bananas and coming close to the rough skin of avocados he goes on:

Beatrice: But you cannot compare their skins! An avocado's skin is as warty as a toad's. An avocado looks like a vegetable with leprosy. A pear is characterized by a thin roughness, delicate and interesting to the touch. If you could magnify it for a hundred times, do you know what it would sound like, the sound of fingertips running over the skin of a dry pear?

Virgil: What?

Beatrice: It would sound like a diamond of record player entering the groove. The same dancing crackle, like the burning of the driest, lightest kindling.

And finally the texture, the smell and the taste! To put it in fragments from the original:

Beatrice: And what does pear taste like?

Virgil: Wait you

Beatrice: Must smell it first. A ripe pear breaths a fragrance that is watery and subtle, its power lying in the lightness of its impression upon the olfactory sense. Can you imagine the smell of nutmeg or cinnamon?

Virgil: A ripe pear overflows with juiciness.

Virgil: The texture of a pear, its constituency, is yet another difficult matter to put in word. Some pears are little crunchy.

Beatrice: Like an apple?



Virgil: No, not at all like an apple! An apple resists being eaten. An apple is not eaten, it is conquered. The crunchiness of a pear is far more appealing. It is giving and fragile. To eat a pear is akin to...kissing.

Virgil: The taste of a pear is such that when you eat one, when your teeth sink into the bliss of one, it becomes a wholly engrossing activity. You want to do nothing else but eat your pear. You could rather sit than stand. You would rather be alone than in company. You would rather have silence than music. All your senses but taste fall inactive. You see nothing, you hear nothing, you feel nothing- or only if it helps you to appreciate the divine taste of your pear.

Beatrice: But what does it actually taste like?

Virgil: It tastes like, it tastes like...*(He struggles. He gives up with a shrug.)* I don't know. I can't put it into words. A pear tastes like itself.

No doubt the allegory is to depict the impossibility of putting down the horrors of Holocaust, not like conquering but giving in helplessly and the act that must have been so absorbing for the Nazis to torture where 'You see nothing, hear nothing, you feel nothing. The above dialogues are part of the play what taxidermist has written and he seeks the help of Henry, the writer, to describe a howl of the monkey with the help of the recorded howl by the scientists. Henry takes home the record and listens to it again and again to come up with a description from Beatrice's perspective as a dialogue by Beatrice: (VB 85-86) once again a description at sensory /auditory level to end the dialogue with: 'But ultimately there is only the thing itself, in its raw purity. Hearing is believing.' (VB 86) The statement asserts the premises of the awareness at, non-verbal level, the level before we start labeling down to is-ness and all-ness of the event. Korzybski in 'What I Believe' believed that it is our linguistic and grammatical structures which have added to our complexities as:

My analysis showed that happenings in the world outside our skins, and such organismal psychological reactions inside our skin as those we label 'feelings', 'hate', 'love', 'Happiness', 'unhappiness', 'anger', 'fear', 'resentment', 'pain', 'pleasure', etc. occur only on the *non-verbal*, or what I call *silent level*. (MH xlvi)



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Beartice and Virgil keeps to the non-verbal level when it comes to depict the event that is historical, the terror, through the animal character who can experience the torture, the pain and present it symbolically through set of words as shirt(the stage-Germany, Poland, Hungary), and the properties for the play: the sewing kit list[29 items- a howl, a black cat, words and occasional silence, a hand gesture (a poster with Nazi salute), a prayer...68 Nowolipki Street...games of Gustav..aukitz.] explained to fit in to play and end with the horrors of Holocaust through Gustav's games numbered one to twelve and Game Number Thirteen left blank to end the book to speak of impossibility of depicting all. The *games* of menace, 'one long word' as The pityofit all when so much was possible (VB 141), and hopeless state of the helpless Jews in the Nazi camps presented through the play write that is revealed in the end to be 'old Nazi collaborator.

Martel's hypnotic use of language can be analysed with the basic premises of GS to attempt orienting ourselves to remain at the level of non-verbal level to evaluate the event through our sensory experience. 'Thus a typical approach of those who speak about it (Holocaust), so precise and factual, 'like a stroke victim who is learning how to speak again and who starts with the simplest, clearest syllables.'(BV 18) This is a way to learn from the past and reach as close to the facts and attain the manhood of humanity. To live with the burden of Human insanity in the Events of Holocaust is impossible a task. As long as one strives to live with the awareness as close as possible to the real life experience, at silent/ object level to evaluate and abstract that would make life livable with sanity.

To conclude, the application of GS on a dense literary text as *Virgil and Beatrice* add to our stylistic reading of the author's framed narration of holocaust where such a traumatic experience of the holocaust is impossible to narrate or describe. It is the sense experience through which the writer attempts to take us as close as possible to WIGO (here: what must have gone on). More abstractions we do farther we move from reality, thus Yann Martel takes the reader to ground zero by merging the lines of verbal and the nonverbal i.e. the very dark abyss of the experience where inhuman ways are masterly narrated through the animal figures rather than human.



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