

ALSO BY JAMES WOOD

Non-fiction

*The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature  
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*The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and  
the Novel*

Fiction

*The Book Against God*

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# How Fiction Works

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## A NOTE ON FOOTNOTES AND DATES

Mindful of the common reader, I have tried to reduce what Joyce calls 'the true scholastic stink' to bearable levels. Footnotes draw attention only to obscure or otherwise hard-to-find sources; in them, I give the date of first publication but not the location or publisher (these facts being nowadays much more easily attainable than they used to be). In the text itself, I have suppressed most of the publication dates of the novels and stories I discuss; in a bibliography, I list all those novels and stories in chronological order, with dates of first publication provided.

## NARRATING

### 1

The house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors. I can tell a story in the third person or in the first person, and perhaps in the second person singular or in the first person plural, though successful examples of these latter two are rare indeed. And that is it. Anything else probably will not much resemble narration; it may be closer to poetry, or prose-poetry.

### 2

In reality, we are stuck with third- and first-person narration. The common idea is that there is a contrast between reliable narration (third person omniscience) and unreliable narration (the unreliable first-person narrator, who knows less about himself than the reader eventually does). On one side, Tolstoy, say; and on the other, Humbert Humbert or Italo Svevo's narrator, Zeno Cosini, or Bertie Wooster. Authorial omniscience, people assume, has had its day, much as that 'vast moth-eaten musical brocade' called religion has also had its. W. G. Sebald once said to me, 'I think that fiction writing which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator

himself, is a form of imposture which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable. I cannot bear to read books of this kind.' Sebald continued: 'If you refer to Jane Austen, you refer to a world where there were set standards of propriety which were accepted by everyone. Given that you have a world where the rules are clear and where one knows where trespassing begins, then I think it is legitimate, within that context, to be a narrator who knows what the rules are and who knows the answers to certain questions. But I think these certainties have been taken from us by the course of history, and that we do have to acknowledge our own sense of ignorance and of insufficiency in these matters and therefore to try and write accordingly.'<sup>1</sup>

3

For Sebald, and for many writers like him, standard third-person omniscient narration is a kind of antique cheat. But both sides of this division have been caricatured.

4

Actually, first-person narration is generally more reliable than unreliable; and third person 'omniscient' narration is generally more partial than omniscient.

<sup>1</sup> This interview can be found in *Brick* magazine, volume 10. Sebald's German accent had a way of exaggerating the already comic, miserable, Bernhard-like pleasure he took in stressing words like 'very' and 'unacceptable'.

6

The first-person narrator is often highly reliable; Jane Eyre, a highly reliable first-person narrator, for instance, tells us her story from a position of belated enlightenment (years later, married to Mr Rochester, she can now see her whole life-story, rather as Mr Rochester's eyesight is gradually returning at the end of the novel). Even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable. Think of Kazuo Ishiguro's butler in *The Remains of the Day*, or of Bertie Wooster, or even of Humbert Humbert. We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator's unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator.

Unreliably unreliable narration is very rare, actually — about as rare as a genuinely mysterious, truly bottomless character. The nameless narrator of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* is highly unreliable, and finally unknowable (it helps that he is insane); Dostoevsky's underground narrator, in *Notes from Underground*, is the model for Hamsun. Italo Svevo's Zeno Cosini may be the best example of truly unreliable narration. He imagines that by telling us his life-story he is psycho-analysing himself (he has promised his analyst to do this). But his self-comprehension, waved confidently before our eyes, is as comically perforated as a bullet-holed flag.

5

On the other side, omniscient narration is rarely as omniscient as it seems. To begin with, authorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected. Authorial style tends to draw our attention towards the writer,

7

towards the artifice of the author's construction, and so towards the writer's own impress. Thus the almost comic paradox of Flaubert's celebrated wish that the author be 'impersonal', God-like, removed, and the high personality of his very style, those exquisite sentences and details, which are nothing less than God's showy signatures on every page: so much for the impersonal author. Tolstoy comes closest to a canonical idea of authorial omniscience, and he uses with great naturalness and authority a mode of writing that Roland Barthes called 'the reference code' (or sometimes 'the cultural code'), whereby a writer makes confident appeal to a universal or consensual truth, or a body of shared cultural or scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

## 6

So-called omniscience is almost impossible. As soon as someone tells a story about a character, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking. A novelist's omniscience soon enough becomes a kind of secret sharing; this is called *free indirect style*, a term

<sup>2</sup> Barthes uses this term in his book *S/Z* (1970; trans. Richard Miller, 1974). He means the way that nineteenth-century writers refer to commonly accepted cultural or scientific knowledge, for instance shared ideological generalities about 'women'. I extend the term to cover any kind of authorial generalisation. For instance, an example from Tolstoy: at the start of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, three of Ivan Ilyich's friends are reading his obituary, and Tolstoy writes that each man, 'as is usual in such cases, was secretly congratulating himself that it was Ivan who had died and not him'. As is usual in such cases: the author refers with ease and wisdom to a central human truth, serenely gazing into the hearts of three different men.

novelists have lots of different nicknames for – 'close third person', or 'going into character'.<sup>3</sup>

## 7

a) 'He looked over at his wife. "She looks so unhappy," he thought, "almost sick." He wondered what to say.' – This is direct or quoted speech ("She looks so unhappy," he thought to himself) combined with the character's reported or indirect speech ('He wondered what to say.') The old-fashioned notion of a character's thought as a speech made to himself, a kind of internal address.

b) 'He looked over at his wife. She looked so unhappy, he thought, almost sick. He wondered what to say.' – This is reported or indirect speech, the internal speech of the husband reported by the author, and flagged as such ('he thought'). It is the most recognisable, the most habitual of all the codes of standard realist narrative.

c) 'He looked at his wife. Yes, she was tiresomely unhappy again, almost sick. What the hell should he say?' – This is free indirect speech or style: the husband's internal speech or thought has been freed of its authorial flagging; no 'he said to himself' or 'he wondered' or 'he thought'.

Note the gain in flexibility. The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to 'own' the words. The writer is free to inflect the reported thought, to bend it round the character's own words ('What the hell should he say?'). We

<sup>3</sup> I like D. A. Miller's phrase for free indirect style, from his book *Jane Austen, or the Secret of Style* (2003): 'close writing'.

are close to stream of consciousness, and that is the direction free indirect style takes in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: 'He looked at her. Unhappy, yes. Sickly. Obviously a big mistake to have told her. His stupid conscience again. Why did he blurt it? All his own fault, and what now?'

You will note that such internal monologue, freed from flagging and quotation marks, sounds very much like the pure soliloquy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels (an example of a technical improvement merely renovating, in a circular manner, an original technique too basic and useful — too real — to do without).

8

Free indirect style is at its most powerful when hardly visible or audible: 'Ted watched the orchestra through stupid tears.' In my example, the word 'stupid' marks the sentence as written in free indirect style. Remove it, and we have standard reported thought: 'Ted watched the orchestra through tears.' The addition of the word 'stupid' raises the question: whose word is this? It's unlikely that I would want to call my character stupid merely for listening to some music in a concert hall. No, in a marvellous alchemical transfer, the word now belongs partly to Ted. He is listening to the music and crying, and is embarrassed — we can imagine him furiously rubbing his eyes — that he has allowed these 'stupid' tears to fall. Convert it back into first-person speech, and we have this: "Stupid to be crying at this silly piece of Brahms," he thought." But this example is several words longer; and we have lost the complicated presence of the author.

10

9

What is so useful about free indirect style is that in our example a word like 'stupid' somehow belongs both to the author and the character; we are not entirely sure who 'owns' the word. Might 'stupid' reflect a slight asperity or distance on the part of the author? Or does the word belong *wholly* to the character, with the author, in a rush of sympathy, having 'handed' it, as it were, to the tearful fellow?

10

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language, too. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge — which is free indirect style itself — between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance.

This is merely another definition of dramatic irony: to see through a character's eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see (an unreliability identical to the unreliable first-person narrator's).

11

Some of the purest examples of this dramatic irony are found in children's literature, which often needs to allow a child — or the child's proxy, an animal — to see the world through limited eyes, while alerting the older reader to this limitation. In Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*, Mr and Mrs Mallard are trying out the Boston Public Gardens

11

for their new home, when a Swan boat (a boat made to look like a swan but actually powered by a pedal-pushing human pilot) passes them. Mr Mallard has never seen anything like this before. McCloskey falls naturally into free indirect style: 'Just as they were getting ready to start on their way, a strange enormous bird came by. It was pushing a boat full of people, and there was a man sitting on its back. "Good morning," quacked Mr Mallard, being polite. The big bird was too proud to answer.' Instead of telling us that Mr Mallard could make no sense of the swan boat, McCloskey places us in Mr Mallard's confusion; yet the confusion is obvious enough that a broad ironic gap opens between Mr Mallard and the reader (or author). *We* are not confused in the same way as Mr Mallard; but we are also being made to inhabit Mr Mallard's confusion.

## 12

What happens, though, when a more serious writer wants to open a very small gap between character and author? What happens when a novelist wants us to inhabit a character's confusion, but will not 'correct' that confusion, refuses to make clear what a state of non-confusion would look like? We can walk in a straight line from McCloskey to Henry James. There is a technical connection, for instance, between *Make Way for Ducklings* and James's novel *What Maisie Knew*. Free indirect style helps us to inhabit juvenile confusion, this time a young girl's rather than a duck's. James tells the story, from the third person, of Maisie Farrange, a little girl whose parents have viciously divorced. She is bounced between them, as new governesses, from each parental side, are thrust

upon her. James wants us to live inside her confusion, and also wants to describe adult corruption from the eyes of childish innocence. Maisie likes one of her governesses, the plain and distinctly lower-middle-class Mrs Wix, who wears her hair rather grotesquely, and who once had a little daughter called Clara Matilda, a girl who, at around Maisie's age, was knocked down on the Harrow Road, and is buried in the cemetery at Kensal Green. Maisie knows that her elegant and vapid mother does not think much of Mrs Wix, but Maisie likes her all the same:

It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing: so much, one day when Mrs Wix had accompanied her into the drawing-room and left her, the child heard one of the ladies she found there – a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes and thick black stitching, like ruled lines for musical notes on beautiful white gloves – announce to another. She knew governesses were poor; Miss Overmore was unmentionably and Mrs Wix ever so publicly so. Neither this, however, nor the old brown frock nor the diadem nor the button, made a difference for Maisie in the charm put forth through everything, the charm of Mrs Wix's conveying that somehow, in her ugliness and her poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than any one in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one couldn't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling. Mrs Wix was as safe as Clara

Marilda, who was in heaven and yet, embarrassingly, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave.

What a piece of writing this is! So flexible, so capable of inhabiting different levels of comprehension and irony, so full of poignant identification with young Maisie, yet constantly moving in towards Maisie and moving away from her, back towards the author.

13

James's free indirect style allows us to inhabit at least three different perspectives at once: the official parental and adult judgement on Mrs Wix; Maisie's version of the official view; and Maisie's view of Mrs Wix. The official view, overheard by Maisie, is filtered through Maisie's own half-comprehending voice: 'It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing.' The lady with the arched eyebrows who uttered this cruelty is being paraphrased by Maisie, and paraphrased not especially sceptically or rebelliously, but with a child's wide-eyed respect for authority. James must make us feel that Maisie knows a lot but not enough. Maisie may not like the woman with the arched eyebrows who spoke thus about Mrs Wix, but she is still in fear of her judgement, and we can hear a kind of excited respect in the narration; the free indirect style is done so well that it is *pure voice* – it longs to be turned back into the speech of which it is the paraphrase: we can hear, as a kind of shadow, Maisie saying to the kind of friend she in fact painfully lacks, 'You know, Mamma got her for very low pay because she is very

poor and has a dead daughter. I've visited the grave, don't you know!'

So there is the official adult opinion of Mrs Wix; and there is Maisie's comprehension of this official disapproval; and then, countervailingly, there is Maisie's own, much warmer opinion of Mrs Wix, who may not be as elegant as her predecessor, Miss Overmore, but who seems much more safe: the purveyor of a uniquely 'tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling'. (Notice that in the interest of letting Maisie 'speak' through his language, James is willing to sacrifice his own stylistic elegance in a phrase like this.)

14

James's genius gathers in one word: 'embarrassingly'. That is where all the stress comes to rest. 'Mrs Wix was as safe as Clara Marilda, who was in heaven and yet, *embarrassingly*, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave.' Whose word is 'embarrassingly'? It is Maisie's: it is embarrassing for a child to witness adult grief, and we know that Mrs Wix has taken to referring to Clara Marilda as Maisie's 'little dead sister'. We can imagine Maisie standing next to Mrs Wix in the cemetery at Kensal Green – it is characteristic of James's narration that he has not mentioned the place name Kensal Green until now, leaving it for us to work out – we can imagine her standing next to Mrs Wix and feeling awkward and embarrassed, at once impressed and a little afraid of Mrs Wix's grief. And here is the greatness of the passage: Maisie, despite her greater love for Mrs Wix, stands in the same relation to Mrs Wix as she stands to the lady with the arched eyebrows; both

women cause her some embarrassment. She fully understands neither, even if she uncomprehendingly prefers the former. 'Embarrassingly': the word encodes Maisie's natural embarrassment and also the internalised embarrassment of official adult opinion ('my dear, it is so *embarrassing*, that woman is always taking her up to Kensal Green!')

## 15

Remove the word 'embarrassingly' from the sentence and it would barely be free indirect style: 'Mrs Wix was as safe as Clara Mailda, who was in heaven and yet also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave.' The addition of the single adverb takes us deep into Maisie's confusion, and at that moment we become her – that adverb is passed from James to Maisie, is given to Maisie. We merge with her. Yet, within the same sentence, having briefly merged, we are drawn back: 'her little *huddled* grave.' 'Embarrassingly' is the word Maisie might have used, but 'huddled' is not. It is Henry James's word. The sentence pulsates, moves in and out, towards the character and away from her – when we reach 'huddled' we are reminded that an *author* allowed us to merge with his character, that the author's magniloquent style is the envelope within which this generous contract is carried.

## 16

The critic Hugh Kenner writes about a moment in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Uncle Charles 'repairs' to the outhouse. 'Repairs' is a pompous verb which belongs to

outmoded poetic convention. It is 'bad' writing. Joyce, with his acute eye for cliché, would only use such a word knowingly. It must be, says Kenner, Uncle Charles's word, the word he might use about himself in his fond fantasy about his own importance ('and so I *repair* to the outhouse'). Kenner names this the Uncle Charles Principle. Mystifyingly, he calls this 'something new in fiction'. Yet we know it isn't. The Uncle Charles principle is just an edition of free indirect style. Joyce is a master at it. 'The Dead' begins like this: 'Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.' But no one is *literally* run off her feet. What we hear is Lily saying to herself or to a friend (with great emphasis on precisely the most inaccurate word, and with a strong accent): 'Oi was *lit-er-rully* ron off me feet!'

## 17

Even if Kenner's example is a bit different, it is still not new. Mock-heroic poetry of the eighteenth century gets its laughs by applying the language of epic or the Bible to reduced human subjects. In Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, Belinda's make-up and dressing-table effects are seen as 'unnumbered treasures', 'India's glowing gems', 'all Arabia breathes from yonder box', and so on. Part of the joke is that this is the kind of language that the personage – 'personage' being precisely a mock-heroic word – might want to use about herself; the rest of the joke resides in the actual littleness of that personage. Well what is this but an early example of free indirect style?

In the opening of Chapter Five of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen introduces us to Sir William Lucas, once the mayor



of Longbourn, who, knighted by the King, has decided that he is too big for the town, and must move to a new pile:

Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. It had given him a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town; and quitting them both, he had removed with his family to a house about a mile from Meryton, denominated from that period Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance . . .

Austen's irony dances over this like the long-legged fly in Yeats's poem: 'where he had made a tolerable fortune'. What is, or would be, a 'tolerable' fortune? Intolerable to whom, tolerated by whom? But the great example of mock-heroic comedy resides in that phrase 'denominated from that period Lucas Lodge'. Lucas Lodge is funny enough; it is like Toad of Toad Hall or Shandy Hall, and we can be sure that the house does not quite measure up to its alliterative grandeur. But the pomposity of 'denominated from that period' is funny because we can imagine Sir William saying to himself 'and I will *denominate* the house, from *this period*, Lucas Lodge. Yes, that sounds *prodigious*.' Mock-heroic is almost identical, at this point, to free indirect style. Austen has handed the language over to Sir William; but she is still partly in control. A modern master of the mock-heroic is V. S. Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas*: 'When he got home he mixed and drank some Maclean's Brand Stomach Powder, undressed, got into bed, and began to read Epicureus.' The comic-pathetic

capitalisation of the brand name, and the presence of Epicureus — Pope himself would not have done it better. And what is the make of the bed that poor Mr Biswas rests on? It is, Naipaul deliberately tells us every so often, a 'Slumberking bed': the right name for a man who may be a king or little god in his own mind but who will never rise above 'Mr'. And Naipaul's decision, of course, to refer to Biswas as 'Mr Biswas' throughout the novel has itself a mock-heroic irony about it, 'Mr' being at once the most ordinary honorific and, in a poor society, a by no means spontaneous achievement. 'Mr Biswas,' we might say, is free indirect style in a pod: 'Mr' is how Biswas likes to think of himself; but it is all he will ever be, along with everyone else.

## 18

There is a final refinement of free indirect style — we should now just call it authorial irony — when the gap between an author's voice and a character's voice seems to collapse altogether; when a character's voice does indeed seem rebelliously to have taken over the narration altogether. 'The town was small, worse than a village, and in it lived almost none but old people, who died so rarely it was even annoying.' What an amazing opening! It is the first sentence of Chekhov's story 'Rothschild's Fiddle'. The next sentences are: 'And in the hospital and jail there was very little demand for coffins. In short, business was bad.' The rest of the paragraph introduces us to an extremely mean coffin-maker, and we realise that the story has opened in the middle of free indirect style: 'and in it lived almost none but old people, who died so rarely it was even annoying.' We are in the

midst of the coffin-maker's mind, for whom longevity is an economic nuisance. Chekhov subverts the expected neutrality of the opening of a story or novel, which might have traditionally begun with a panning shot before we narrow our focus ('The little town of N. was smaller than a village, and had two rather grubby little streets,' etc.). But where Joyce, in 'The Dead', clearly pegs his free indirect style to Lily, Chekhov begins his use of it *before* his character has even been identified. And while Joyce abandons Lily's perspective, moving first into authorial omniscience and then to Gabriel Conroy's point of view, Chekhov's story continues to narrate events from the coffin-maker's eyes.

Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that the story is written from a point of view closer to a village chorus than to one man. This village chorus sees life pretty much as brutally as the coffin-maker would – 'There were not many patients, and he did not have to wait long, only about three hours' – but continues to see this world after the coffin-maker has died. The Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga (almost exactly contemporaneous with Chekhov) used this kind of village-chorus narration much more systematically than his Russian counterpart. His stories, though written technically in authorial third person, seem to emanate from a community of Sicilian peasants; they are thick with proverbial sayings, truisms, and homely similes.

We can call this 'unidentified free indirect style'.

## 19

As a logical development of free indirect style, it is not surprising that Dickens, Hardy, Verga, Chekhov, Faulkner, Pavese, Henry

Green and others tend to produce the kinds of similes and metaphors which, while successful and literary enough in their own right, are also the kinds of similes and metaphors that their own characters might produce. When Robert Browning describes the sound of a bird singing its song twice over, in order to 'recapture/ The first fine careless rapture', he is being a poet, trying to find the best poetic image; but when Chekhov, in his story 'Peasants', says that a bird's cry sounded as if a cow had been locked up in a shed all night, he is being a fiction writer: he is thinking like one of his peasants.

## 20

Seen in this light, there is almost no area of narration not touched by the long finger of free indirect narration – which is to say, by irony. Consider the penultimate chapter of Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*: the comic Russian professor has just given a party, and has received the news that the college where he teaches no longer wants his services. He is sadly washing his dishes, and a nutcracker slips out of his soapy hand and falls into the water, apparently about to break a beautiful submerged bowl. Nabokov writes that the nutcracker falls from Pnin's hands like a man falling from a roof; Pnin tries to grasp it, but 'the leggy thing' slips into the water. 'Leggy thing' is a terrific metaphorical likeness: we can instantly see the long legs of the wayward nutcracker, as if it were falling off the roof and walking away. But 'thing' is even better, *precisely because it is vague*: Pnin is lunging at the implement, and what word in English better conveys a messy lunge, a swipe at verbal meaning, than 'thing'? Now if the brilliant 'leggy' is Nabokov's word, then the hapless 'thing' is Pnin's

word, and Nabokov is here using a kind of free indirect style, probably without even thinking about it. As usual, if we turn it into first-person speech, we can hear the way in which the word 'thing' belongs to Pnin and wants to be spoken: 'Come here, you, you . . . oh . . . you annoying *thing!*' Splash.<sup>4</sup>

## 21

It is useful to watch good writers make mistakes. Plenty of excellent ones stumble at free indirect style. Free indirect style solves much, but accentuates a problem inherent in all fictional narration: do the words these characters use seem the words they might use, or do they sound more like the author's?

When I wrote, 'Ted watched the orchestra through stupid

<sup>4</sup> Nabokov is a great creator of the kind of extravagant metaphors that the Russian formalists called 'estranging' or defamiliarising (a nutcracker has legs, a half-rolled black umbrella looks like a duck in deep mourning, and so on). The formalists liked the way that Tolstoy, say, insisted on seeing adult things – like war, or the opera – from a child's viewpoint, in order to make them look strange. But whereas the Russian formalists see this metaphorical habit as emblematic of the way that fiction does not refer to reality, is a self-enclosed machine (such metaphors are then jewels of the author's freakish, solipsistic art), I prefer the way that such metaphors, as in Pnin's 'leggy thing', refer deeply to reality: because they emanate from the characters themselves, and are fruits of free indirect style. Shklovsky wonders out aloud, in *Theory of Prose*, if Tolstoy got his technique of estrangement from French authors like Chateaubriand, but Cervantes seems much more likely – as when Sancho first arrives in Barcelona, and sees the galleys on the water, with their many oars, and metaphorically mistakes the oars for feet: 'Sancho couldn't imagine how those hulks moving about on top of the sea could have so many feet.' This is estranging metaphor as a branch of free indirect style; it makes the world look peculiar but it makes Sancho look very familiar. I return to this in paragraph 109.

tears', the reader would be likely to assign 'stupid' to the character himself. But if I had written, 'Ted watched the orchestra through viscous, swollen tears', the adjectives would suddenly look annoyingly authorial, as if I were trying to find the fanciest way of describing those tears.

Take John Updike in his novel *Terrorist*. On the third page of his book, he has his protagonist, a fervid eighteen-year-old American Muslim called Ahmad, walk to school along the streets of a fictionalised New Jersey town. Since the novel has hardly begun, Updike must work to establish the guiding of his character:

Ahmad is eighteen. This is early April; again green is sneaking into the stony city's earthy crevices. He looks down from his new height and thinks that to the insects unseen in the grass he would be, if they had a consciousness like his, God. In the year past he has grown three inches, to six feet – more materialist forces, working their will upon him. He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs. What evidence beyond the Prophet's blazing and divinely inspired words proves that there is a next? Where would it be hidden? Who would forever stoke its boilers? What infinite source of energy would maintain opulent Eden, feeding its dark-eyed houris, swelling its heavy-hanging fruits, renewing the streams and splashing fountains, in which God, as described in the ninth sura of the Qur'an, takes eternal pleasure? What of the second law of thermodynamics?

Ahmad is walking along the street, looking about, and thinking: the classic post-Flaubertian novelistic activity. The

first few lines are routine enough. Then Updike wants to make the thought theological, so he effects an uneasy transition: 'He will not grow any taller, he thinks, in this life or the next. *If there is a next*, an inner devil murmurs.' It seems very unlikely that a schoolboy thinking about how much he had grown in the last year would think: 'I shall not grow any taller, in this life or the next.' The words 'or the next' are there just to feed Updike a chance to write about the Islamic idea of heaven. We are only four pages in, and any attempt to follow Ahmed's own voice has been abandoned: the phrasing, syntax and lyricism are Updike's, not Ahmad's ('Who would forever stroke its boilers?') The penultimate line is telling: 'in which God, *as described in the ninth sura of the Quran*, takes eternal pleasure.' (My italics.) How willing Henry James was, by contrast, to let us inhabit Maisie's mind, and how much he squeezed into that single adverb, 'embarrassingly'. But Updike is unsure about entering Ahmad's mind, and crucially, unsure about *our* entering Ahmad's mind, and so he plants his big authorial flags all over his mental site. So he has to identify exactly which sura refers to God, although Ahmad would know where this appears, and would have no need to remind himself.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> As soon as we imagine a Christian version of this narration, we can gauge Updike's awkward alienation from his character. Imagine a devout Christian schoolboy walking along, and the text going something like this: 'And wouldn't His will always be done, as described in the fourth line of the Lord's Prayer?' Free indirect style exists precisely to *get around* such clumsiness.

On the one hand, the author wants to have his or her own words, wants to be the master of a personal style; on the other hand, narrative bends towards its characters and their habits of speech. The dilemma is most acute in first-person narration, which is generally a nice 'hoax: the narrator pretends to speak to us, while in fact the author is writing to us, and we go along with the deception happily enough. Even Faulkner's narrators in *As I Lay Dying* rarely sound much like children or illiterates.

But the same tension is present in third-person narration, too: who really thinks that it is Leopold Bloom, in the midst of his stream-of-consciousness, who notices 'the flabby gush of porter' as it is poured into a drain, or appreciates 'the buzzing prongs' of a fork in a restaurant – and in such fine words? These exquisite perceptions and beautifully precise phrases are Joyce's, and the reader has to make a treaty, whereby we accept that Bloom will sometimes sound like Bloom and sometimes sound more like Joyce.

This is as old as literature: Shakespeare's characters sound like themselves and always like Shakespeare, too. It is not really Cornwall who wonderfully calls Gloucester's eye a 'vile jelly' before he rips it out – though Cornwall speaks the words – but Shakespeare, who has provided the phrase.

A contemporary writer like David Foster Wallace wants to push this tension to the limit. He simultaneously writes from within his characters' voices and writes over them, and does this in order to explore larger, if more abstract, questions of

language. In this passage from his story 'The Suffering Channel', he evokes the ruined argot of Manhattan media-speak:

The other *Style* piece the associate editor had referred to concerned The Suffering Channel, a wide grid cable venture that Arwater had gotten Laurel Manderley to do an end run and pitch directly to the editor's head intern for WHAT IN THE WORLD. Arwater was one of three full time salarymen tasked to the WTTW feature, which received .75 editorial pages per week, and was the closest any of the BSG weeklies got to freakshow or tabloid, and was a bone of contention at the very highest levels of *Style*. The staff size and large font specs meant that Skip Arwater was officially contracted for one 400 word piece every three weeks, except the junior-most of the WTTW salarymen had been on half time ever since Eckleschafft-Bod had forced Mrs Anger to cut the editorial budget for everything except celebrity news, so in reality it was more like three finished pieces every eight weeks.

Here is another example of what I called 'unidentified free indirect style'. As in the Chekhov story, the language hovers around the viewpoint of the character (the journalist Arwater), but really emanates from a kind of 'village chorus' – it is an amalgam of the kind of language we might expect this particular community to speak if they were telling the story.

In Wallace's case, the language of his unidentified narration is fairly ugly, and painful for more than a page or two. NO analogous problem arose for Chekhov and Verga, because they were not faced with the saturation of language by mass media. But in America, things are different: Dreiser in *Sister Carrie* (published in 1900) and Sinclair Lewis in *Babbitt* (1923) take care to reproduce in full the advertisements and business letters and commercial fliers they want novelistically to report on.

The risky tautology inherent in the contemporary writing project has begun: in order to evoke a debased language (the debased language your character might use), you must be willing to represent that mangled language in your text; and perhaps thoroughly debase your own language. Pynchon, DeLillo, David Foster Wallace are to some extent Lewis's heirs (probably in this respect only),<sup>6</sup> and Wallace pushes to parodic extremes his full-immersion method: he does not flinch at narrating twenty or thirty pages in the style quoted above. His fiction prosecutes an intense argument about the decomposition of language in America, and he is not afraid to decompose – and decompose – his own style in the interests of making us live through this linguistic America with him. 'This is America, you live in it; you let it happen,' as Pynchon writes in *The Crying of Lot 49*. Whiteman calls America 'the greatest poem', but if this is the case then America may represent a mimetic danger to the writer, the bloating of one's own poem with that rival poem, America. Auden frames the general

<sup>6</sup> That's to say, they are to some extent old-fashioned American realists, despite their postmodern credentials: their language is mimetically full of America's language.

problem well in his poem 'The Novelist': the poet can dash forward like a hussar, he writes, but the novelist must slow down, learn how to be 'plain and awkward', and must 'Become the whole of boredom'. In other words, the novelist's job is to become, to impersonate what he describes, even when the subject itself is debased, vulgar, boring. David Foster Wallace is very good at becoming the whole of boredom.

## 25

So there is a tension basic to stories and novels: can we reconcile the author's perceptions and language with the character's perception and language? If the author and character are absolutely merged, as in the passage from Wallace above, we get, as it were, 'the whole of boredom' — the author's corrupted language just mimics an actually existing corrupted language we all know too well, and are in fact quite desperate to escape. But if author and character get too separated, as in the Updike passage, we feel the cold breath of an alienation over the text, and begin to resent the over-'literary' efforts of the stylist. The Updike is an example of aestheticism (the author gets in the way); the Wallace is an example of apparent anti-aestheticism (the character is all): but both examples are really species of the same aestheticism, which is at bottom the strenuous display of *style*.

## 26

So the novelist is always working with at least three languages. There is the author's own language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; there is the character's presumed language,

style, perceptual equipment, and so on; and there is what we could call the language of the world — the language which fiction inherits before it gets to turn it into novelistic style, the language of daily speech, of newspapers, of offices, of advertising, of the blogosphere and text messaging. In this sense, the novelist is a triple-writer, and the contemporary novelist now feels especially the pressure of this tripleness, thanks to the omnivorous presence of the third horse of this troika, the language of the world, which has invaded our subjectivity, our intimacy, the intimacy that James thought should be the proper quarry of the novel, and which he called (in a troika of his own) 'the palpable present-intimate'.<sup>7</sup>

## 27

Another example of the novelist writing over his character occurs (briefly), in Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day*. Tommy Wilhelm, the out-of-work salesman down on his luck, neither much of an aesthete nor an intellectual, is anxiously watching the board at a Manhattan commodity exchange. Next to him, an old hand, named Mr Rappaport, is smoking a cigar. 'A long perfect ash formed on the end of the cigar, the white ghost of the leaf with all its veins and its fainter pungency. It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful. Wilhelm he ignored as well.'

It is a gorgeous, musical phrase, and characteristic of both Bellow and modern fictional narrative. The fiction slows down to draw our attention to a potentially neglected surface

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, 5 October 1901.

or texture — an example of a 'descriptive pause',<sup>8</sup> familiar to us when a novel halts its action and the author says, in effect, 'now I am going to tell you about the town of N., which was nestled in the Carpathian foothills', or 'Jerome's house was a large dark castle, set in fifty thousand acres of rich grazing land'. But at the same time it is a detail apparently seen not by the author — or not only by the author — but by a character. And this is what Bellow wobbles on; he admits an anxiety endemic to modern narrative, and which modern narrative tends to elide. The ash is noticed, and then Bellow comments: 'It was ignored, in its beauty, by the old man. For it was beautiful. Wilhelm he ignored as well.' *Seize the Day* is written in a very close third-person narration, a free indirect style that sees most of the action from Tommy's viewpoint. Bellow seems here to imply that Tommy notices the ash, because it was beautiful, and that Tommy, also ignored by the old man, is also in some way beautiful. But the fact that Bellow tells us this is surely a concession to our implied objection: how and why would Tommy notice this ash, and notice it so well, in *these* fine words? To which Bellow replies, anxiously, in effect: 'Well, you might have thought Tommy incapable of such finery; but he really did notice this fact of beauty; and that is because he is somewhat beautiful himself.'

The tension between the author's style and his characters' style becomes acute when three elements coincide: when a

notable stylist is at work, like Bellow or Joyce; when that stylist also has a commitment to following the perceptions and thoughts of his or her characters (a commitment usually organised by free indirect style or its offspring, stream-of-consciousness); and when the stylist has an especial interest in the rendering of detail.

Stylisticness, free indirect style; and detail: I have described Flaubert, whose work opens up, and tries to solve, this tension, and who is really its founder.

<sup>8</sup> This is Gérard Genette's term, from *Narrative Discourse* (1980).

## FLAUBERT AND MODERN NARRATIVE

29

Novelists should thank Flaubert the way poets thank spring: it all begins again with him. There really is a time before Flaubert and a time after him. Flaubert decisively established what most readers and writers think of as modern realist narration, and his influence is almost too familiar to be visible. We hardly remark of good prose that it favours the telling and brilliant detail; that it privileges a high degree of visual noticing; that it maintains an unsentimental composure and knows how to withdraw, like a good valet, from superfluous commentary; that it judges good and bad neutrally; that it seeks out the truth, even at the cost of repelling us; and that the author's fingerprints on all this are, paradoxically, traceable but not visible. You can find some of this in Defoe or Austen or Balzac, but not all of it until Flaubert.

Take the following passage, in which Frédéric Moreau, the hero of *Sentimental Education*, wanders through the Latin Quarter, alive to the sights and sounds of Paris:

He sauntered idly up the Latin Quarter, usually bustling with life but now deserted, for the students had all gone

home. The great walls of the colleges looked grimmer than ever, as if the silence had made them longer; all sorts of peaceful sounds could be heard, the fluttering of wings in bird-cages, the whirring of a lathe, a cobbler's hammer; and the old-clothes men, in the middle of the street, looking hopefully but in vain at every window. At the back of the deserted cafés, women behind the bars yawned between their untouched bottles; the newspapers lay unopened on the reading-room tables; in the laundresses' workshops the washing quivered in the warm draughts. Every now and then he stopped at a bookseller's stall; an omnibus, coming down the street and grazing the pavement, made him turn round; and when he reached the Luxembourg he retraced his steps.

This was published in 1869, but might have appeared in 1969; many novelists still sound essentially the same. Flaubert seems to scan the streets indifferently, like a camera. Just as when we watch a film we no longer notice what has been excluded, what is just outside the edges of the camera-frame, so we no longer notice what Flaubert chooses *not* to notice. And we no longer notice that what he *has* selected is not of course casually scanned but quite savagely chosen, that each detail is almost frozen in its gel of chosenness. How superb and magnificently isolate these details are — the women yawning, the unopened newspapers, the washing quivering in the warm air.



The reason that we don't, at first, notice how carefully Flaubert is selecting his details, is because Flaubert is working very hard to obscure this labour from us, and is keen to hide the question of who is doing all this noticing: Flaubert or Frédéric? Flaubert was explicit about this. He wanted the reader to be faced with what he called a smooth wall of apparently impersonal prose, the details simply amassing themselves like life. 'An author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere,' he famously wrote in one of his letters, in 1852. 'Art being a second nature, the creator of that nature must operate with analogous procedures: let there be felt in every atom, every aspect, a hidden, infinite impassivity. The effect on the spectator must be a kind of amazement. How did it all come about?'

To this end, Flaubert perfected a technique that is essential to realist narration: the confusing of habitual detail with dynamic detail. Obviously, in that Paris street, the women cannot be yawning for the same length of time as the washing is quivering or the newspapers lying on the tables. Flaubert's details belong to different time-signatures, some instantaneous and some recurrent, yet they are smoothed together as if they are all happening simultaneously.

The effect is lifelike – in a beautifully artificial way. Flaubert manages to suggest that these details are somehow at once important and unimportant: important because they have been noticed by him and put down on paper, and unimportant because they are all jumbled together, seen as if out of the corner of the eye; they seem to come at us 'like life'. From this flows a great deal of modern story-telling, such as

war reportage. The crime writer and war reporter merely increase the extremity of this contrast between important and unimportant detail, converting it into a tension between the awful and the regular: a soldier dies while nearby a little boy goes to school.

## 31

Different time-signatures were not Flaubert's invention, of course. There have always been characters doing something while something else is going on. In Book 22 of *The Iliad*, Hector's wife is at home warming his bath though he has in fact died moments before; Auden praised Breughel, in 'Musée des Beaux Arts', for noticing that, while Icarus fell, a ship was calmly moving on through the waves, unnoticing. In the Dunkirk section of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, the protagonist, a British soldier retreating through chaos and death towards Dunkirk, sees a barge going by. 'Behind him, ten miles away, Dunkirk burned. Ahead, in the prow, two boys were bending over an upturned bike, mending a puncture perhaps.'

Flaubert differs a bit from those examples in the way he insists on driving together short-term and long-term occurrences. Breughel and McEwan are describing two very different things happening at the same time; Flaubert is asserting a temporal impossibility: that the eye – his eye, or Frédéric's eye – can witness, in one visual gulp as it were, sensations and occurrences that must be happening at different speeds and at different times. In *Sentimental Education*, when the 1848 revolution comes to Paris and the soldiers are firing on everyone and all is mayhem: 'he ran

all the way to the Quai Voltaire. An old man in his shirt-sleeves was weeping at an open window, his eyes raised towards the sky. The Seine was flowing peacefully by. The sky was blue; birds were singing in the Tuileries.' Again, the one-off occurrence of the old man at the window is dropped into the longer-term occurrences, as if they all belonged together.

32

From here, it is a small leap to the insistence, familiar in modern war reporting, that the awful and the regular will be noticed at the same time – by the fictional hero, and/or by the writer – and that in some way *there is no important difference between the two experiences*: all detail is somewhat numbing, and strikes the traumatised voyeur in the same way. Here, again, is *Sentimental Education*:

There was firing from every window overlooking the square; bullets whistled through the air; the fountain had been pierced, and the water, mingling with blood, spread in puddles on the ground. People slipped in the mud on clothes, shakos, and weapons; Frédéric felt something soft under his foot; it was the hand of a sergeant in a grey overcoat who was lying face down in the gutter. Fresh groups of workers kept coming up, driving the fighters towards the guard-house. The firing became more rapid. The wine-merchants' shops were open, and every now and then somebody would go in to smoke a pipe or drink a glass of beer, before returning to fight. A stray dog started howling. This raised a laugh.

The moment that strikes us as decisively modern in that passage is 'Frédéric felt something soft under his foot; it was the hand of a sergeant in a grey overcoat.' First the calm, terrible anticipation ('something soft'), and then the calm, terrible validation ('it was the hand of a sergeant'), the writing refusing to become involved in the emotion of the material. Ian McEwan systematically uses the same technique in his Dunkirk section, and so does Stephen Crane – who read *Sentimental Education* – in *The Red Badge of Courage*:

He was being looked at by a dead man who was seared with his back against a columnlike tree. The corpse was dressed in a uniform that once had been blue, but was now faded to a melancholy shade of green. The eyes, staring at the youth, had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish. The mouth was open. Its red had changed to an appalling yellow. Over the gray skin of the face ran little ants. One was trundling a sort of a bundle along the upper lip.

This is even more 'cinematic' than Flaubert (and film, of course, borrows this technique from the novel). There is the calm horror ('the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish'). There is the zoom-like action of the lens, as it gets closer and closer to the corpse. But the reader is getting closer and closer to the horror, while the prose is simultaneously moving further and further back, insisting on its anti-sentimentality. There is the modern commitment to detail itself: the protagonist seems to be noticing so much, recording everything! ('One was trundling a sort of bundle along the upper lip.' Would any of us actually see as much?)

And there are the different time-signatures: the corpse will be dead forever, but on his face, life goes on; the ants are busily indifferent to human mortality.<sup>9</sup>

## FLAUBERT AND THE RISE OF THE FLÂNEUR

33

Flaubert can drive together his time-signatures because French verb-forms allow him to use the imperfect past tense to convey both discrete occurrences ('he was sweeping the road') and recurrent occurrences ('every week he swept the road'). English is clumsier, and we have to resort to 'he was doing something' or 'he would do something' or 'he used to do something' – 'every week he would sweep the road' – to translate recurrent verbs accurately. But as soon as we do that in English, we have given the game away, and are admitting the existence of different temporalities. In *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, Proust rightly saw that this use of the imperfect tense was Flaubert's great innovation. And Flaubert founds this new style of realism on his use of the eye – the authorial eye, and the character's eye. I said that Updike's Ahmad, just walking along the street noticing things and thinking thoughts, was engaged in the classic post-Flaubertian novelistic activity. Flaubert's Frédéric is a forerunner of what would later be called the flâneur – the loafer, usually a young man, who walks the streets with no great urgency, seeing, looking, reflecting. We know this type from Baudelaire, from the all-seeing narrator of Rilke's autobiographical novel *The*

<sup>9</sup> The ants crawling across the face represent almost a cliché of cinematic grammar. Think of the ants on the hand in Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, or on the ear at the start of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*.