

The Nature of the Agonistic in a Pragmatics of Fiction

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They sent him to Dallas to kill a nigger pimp named Wendell Durfee. He wasn't sure he could do it.

The Casino Operators Council flew him. They supplied first-class fare. They tapped their slush fund. They greased him. They fed him six cold.

Nobody said it:

Kill that coon. Do it good. Take our hit fee.

The flight ran smooth. A stew served drinks. She saw his gun. She played up. She asked dumb questions.

He said he worked Vegas PD. He ran the intel squad. He built files and logged information.

She loved it. She swooned.

"Hon, what you doin' in Dallas?"

He told her.

A Negro shivved a twenty-one dealer. The dealer lost an eye. The Negro booked to big D. She loved it. She brought him highballs. He omitted details.

The dealer provoked the attack. The council issued the contract — death for ADW Two.

The preflight pep talk. Lieutenant Buddy Fritsch:

"I don't have to tell you what we expect, son. And I don't have to add that your father expects it too."

The stew played geisha girl. The stew fluffed her beehive.

"What's your name?"

"Wayne Tedrow."

She whooped. "You just have to be Junior!"

He looked through her. He doodled. He yawned.

She fawned. She just looooved his daddy. He flew with her oodles. She knew he was a Mormon wheel. She'd loooove to know more.

(Ellroy 2010: 1–2)¹

1. The challenge of fiction

Fiction presents unique challenges for pragmatics, the science of the verbal act, as announced by Charles Morris (see Morris 1938). Depending on one's methodological orientation, it may be approached in very different ways. The English philosopher Gillian Rose has written about the "agon of authorship"—how to consider texts, not as mere texts, but as works or struggles (see Rose 1992). This is as relevant for literary examples as it is for philosophical ones. It is from the point of view of authorship, its forms of work and struggle, and the responses of readers to its artifacts, that I approach the pragmatics of fiction.

In fiction, the difference between the character, on the one hand, and author and reader on the other, is that they belong to different ontological domains. However, it is important to mention that the difference is not always clear-cut. Napoleon, for example, can appear as an actual historical agent, but also as a fictional character, as in *Scarlet and Black* or *War and Peace*. So, if some novelist were to present us with Napoleon's inner, silent musings, this would be a *blending* of ontological levels. We might imagine the actual historical Napoleon and imagine also that we were being admitted into his inner subjective being. Such privileged access belongs only to literary fiction (see Gallagher 2006, 2011) and it is suggested here that this has become one of the most important sources of interest in the reading of fiction.

The cognitive blending of ontological levels (actual world and fictional world) applies not only to characters but also to places and historical events, so that actual ones are blended with fictional ones. But the representation of character thoughts in linguistic form is unique to fiction, whether the character is entirely fictional or not. The results of this blending on the part of a given reader cannot be predetermined from a consideration of the text itself, but one presumes that this can be empirically investigated.

¹ In the following, all quotations without any reference specified are taken from this literary excerpt.

To take one example in passing: where the crime novelist James Ellroy presents former FBI boss J. Edgar Hoover in such a relentlessly negative light (see Ellroy 2010), it may well condition one's impression of the actual historical Hoover. But regardless of the individual reader's response, this is an example of what I am calling the agon of authorship in fiction, an essentially ethical component of authorship, i.e. resulting from the ethical stance taken by the author in regard to the content of the work.

However, any attempt to bring the question of fictional communication down to essential constitutive elements faces difficult problems and even within pragmatics these have been approached in a number of different ways. Often differences within pragmatics arise from schools of thought in neighbouring disciplines such as philosophy or literary criticism, since pragmatics is by its nature an interdisciplinary field. Nevertheless, I am suggesting in the present contribution that two constitutive elements are: *revelations* of hidden or secret things (such as inner thoughts), and an agonistic stance of authors towards characters and social milieu, and also perhaps towards other authors.

2. Some approaches to fiction in pragmatics

2.1 Speech act theory and logicism

Speech act theory would not at first sight seem to offer much to the study of fiction, given that Austin regarded literature as being "not serious" and "not full normal" use of language (Austin 1975: 104). No doubt speech acts performed by characters in a novel are seen as non-serious because the characters do not exist as actual people. The way in which one might apply speech act theory to fiction then is to pretend that the characters are actual people in communication and to ask questions concerning their speech, such as "What speech act is character X performing here?" or "Is X's speech act felicitous or not?" and so on. But this alone cannot be the pragmatics of fiction, even though it may be pragmatics *within* fiction.

However, to dismiss the contribution of speech act theory altogether would be to overlook the important notion of the *intentional act*, discussed most influentially by John Searle (see Searle 1969, 1975). This intentionality can itself be split into two. Any communicator has intentions of a generic nature, in other words to perform socially recognised acts. But intention

may also have another sense, to perform an act with certain intended *consequences*. Speech act theory has prioritised the first aspect over the second, the conventional and generic over the singular and unique.

Searle writes at the end of his 1975 article: “Literary critics have explained on an ad hoc and particularistic basis how the author conveys a serious speech act through the performance of the pretended speech acts which constitute the work of fiction, but there is as yet no general theory of the mechanisms by which such serious illocutionary intentions are conveyed by pretended illocutions” (Searle 1975: 332).

“Serious speech act” is, from an agentive perspective, a highly attenuated notion of authorial intentionality. Searle may have defended the intentional nature of an author’s act, especially its conventional-generic nature, and also conceded, contra Austin, the possibility of its “seriousness”, but this is not sufficient. The notion of illocutionary act is reductionist because it does not have any bearing on questions of style or intended effect, and therefore no bearing on aesthetics or ethics. The best that this approach can be expected to yield is the intention of an author to produce a work of a certain genre or sub-genre of fiction, defined for us by “constitutive rules”. This would tell us nothing about why a reader might find one work more compelling or satisfying than another, let alone the agon of authorship.

Let us illustrate the difficulties that arise with such reductionist approaches when dealing with phenomena that have been familiar to literary scholars over the last century or more. What might speech act theory bring to the narrator question?

In an early contribution on this question, Ryan arrives at the conclusion that speech must in all cases of fiction be attributable to a narrator rather than to the author, even if this is an “impersonal” narrator — i.e. the third-person omniscient narrator of literary criticism (see Ryan 1981). If the narrator is of this impersonal kind, then this means that the text entails, logically, a speaker devoid of properties. This relieves the reader of any need to seek an answer to the question of who it is that speaks. The truism is offered that a linguistic meaning implies a speaker as origin of that meaning, but the postulate of an “impersonal” being that speaks is difficult. Such a being could not be a subject. Yet an act of narrating necessarily has subjective elements, for example in the selection of one thing to be narrated rather than another. Furthermore, the empirical question is at least as important as the logical question. Do actual readers muse upon the nature of the impersonal narrator as they do with characters? — for example wondering how it is that this narrator can

be omniscient, why he/she/it would decide to tell us these hidden things (but not others), etc. If this seems an unlikely possibility, let us rather consider the proposal that the communicating person in fiction is never *not* the author. A 'no-narrator position' could then be defended on the grounds that 'voice' or 'speaker' is better understood as a matter of alternative masks or personae donned by the author.

As Bakhtin put it: "The novelist stands in need of some essential formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public" (Bakhtin 1988: 161). In one case the mask is such that the author speaks through character's speech and in another case the author speaks in such a way as to transcend character speech. The author's discourse is thus 'refracted'. When speaking transcendentally authors have traditionally resorted to an upper register of standard language in contrast to the low or idiosyncratic speech of characters. This tendency, to separate registers for this purpose, has grown greatly in importance since the mid-nineteenth century. But, by the same token the use of character storytellers in place of the transcendent narrator has increased apace since the nineteenth century. A parallel development, and more subtle, has been the gradual incorporation of character speech into that of the third-person transcendent narrator (TTN), through the development of such techniques as free indirect discourse (FID), which will be discussed further below with a detailed analysis of the extract above. More recently there has been the phenomenon of the author presenting certain utterances as being him- or herself, as in examples by John Fowles, such as *A Maggot* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. For example in the latter work he addresses the reader, as his contemporary, directly concerning certain aspects of Victorian society. This self-representation by the author and his own general knowledge is to be taken as another, essentially non-fictional, insertion within the fictional text. This is still a relatively rare phenomenon of 'voice' in fiction.

The "impersonal" voice (i.e. The TTN) that Ryan imagines is not truly impersonal. Rather it is a literary practice that allows the author to speak in a transcendent manner at one moment while retaining the option of speaking through characters at others. The practice, it is suggested, is such that the reader grants the author the *licence* to speak in this transcendent manner so as to report on the speech of characters, their thoughts and their action, a stylistic convention that enables the enjoyment of a certain imaginative experience. It is a veritable social contract of fiction. But note that innovative techniques in narrative may be aimed at subversion of readers' expectations

of generic form and style. Such innovations may or may not themselves become generic and expected over time, as has happened with scene shifting and with FID. In this view then there arises the question of the limits of the appetites of various empirical readers to stomach the innovative techniques, a point which will be illustrated further below.

An author 'speaks' in the persona of a transcendent storyteller *or* in the personae of character storytellers. The notion of persona or mask is an ancient one, and Bakhtin's formulation emphasises that these are *generic* conventions of fiction. Readers of fiction — and not everybody who can read a little is a competent reader of fiction — are just as much accustomed to having an author donning the mask of transcendent storyteller as they are accustomed to the author performing a more ventriloquistic sort of act through a character.

However, the development of the novel has long reached the point where expectations of a consistent narrating agency across the length of the novel, distinct from the empirical author, are regularly thwarted. This can be demonstrated with reference to the work of many a recent author. In much of his novel *A Maggot* Fowles has made it quite impossible for us to postulate a technical narrator at all. There are passages where there are explicit indicators of direct authorial comment; there are insertions of authentic period documents into the text, even with the original typography ostensibly intact; there are very extensive passages of dramatic courtroom dialogue, sans external narrative comment. What we have in the courtroom passages is a series of characters that are all narrators, in the ordinary non-technical sense. Such permutations have become quite acceptable to current readerships.

What has perhaps made the figure of a 'third-person omniscient narrator' so compelling historically is that it seems to stand for something like a Lacanian "big Other", a voice that comes from a place of authority, the abode of pure language in its transcendent impersonality (see Žižek 2006, 2013). The big Other, or a similar explanatory concept, would seem to be needed for us to understand the historical ubiquity of the transcendent third-person narrative. It suggests an inverse relationship to actual subjectivity that may be a source of special satisfaction. The third-person narrative seems to put the reader in the place of the big Other, in the fascinating position of occupying precisely the perspective where direct access to someone else's inner world seems possible. What if the 'omniscient narrator' reflects nothing other than our desire for this power, a desire that authors have, over time, mastered techniques of fulfilling?

How to explain why third-person transcendent narrative (TTN) has been so ubiquitous historically (see Morreall 1994, Culler 2004, Sternberg 2007)? Instead of continuing with the fanciful notion of ‘omniscience’, it is better from the point of view of scientific pragmatics to enquire into *function*: what it is that TTN has facilitated or made possible. It has undoubtedly enabled a reader to have the enjoyment of discovering secret things, with the security of discovering these things in the language of authority, hence the traditional use of standard language in its upper registers for this purpose. In return readers license authors to continue with the practice as long as it is found satisfying. Notice, for example, how important a device such as the *scene shift* is. The author, in big Other mode, has the authority to say: “While that was happening, let us look at what was meantime happening somewhere else.” This accords with a reader’s *wish*, to know what has been happening simultaneously in two places, and what I have called the revelatory function of literary fiction. It is like the daydream of being able to fly before the invention of flying machines. The fit-for-purpose transcendent ‘voice’ has historically been able to provide such enjoyable illusions.

Thus, stories have been increasingly liberated from the ways in which non-fiction is written. It is only through these (generic) ways of revealing what is normally unknowable that fiction has been able to advance to the heights of sophistication that it has. Other narrative genres, such as an eyewitness’s oral testimony in court, a factual news report, a biography, and even non-factual examples, such as traditional folktales, legends or myths, all differ from the writing of fiction in one key respect. All of them are performances of telling a sequence of events that is somehow already in place *prior* to the telling. By contrast, a novel involves the creation of a fictional world, rather than a ‘telling about’ in any strict sense. The telling in a novel is a simulated telling. However, this fictional world must be unfolded in time and in a linear manner by reliance on certain linguistic mechanisms drawn from the *true* genres of telling: deictic references to persons and things; action descriptions; sequences of past tense reportage. These are harnessed to the fictional project from other everyday genres, the “primary genres” of which Bakhtin speaks (see Bakhtin 1986). The novel is irreducibly a “secondary genre”; it depends for many of its stylistic possibilities on the primary genres of telling.

So while one may agree with logicians and speech act theorists that there must be one who speaks (or writes), and even that there may somehow be ‘presence’ involved in the masks that the author dons in doing so, e.g. transcen-

dent storyteller, character-observer, character-participant, and so on, there is, in *actuality*, only the author.

The logicians have rightly emphasised authorial intention, but their apparent wariness of the domains of ethics and aesthetics makes it unlikely that they would help us with the question of intended effect upon a readership, and the technical innovations that drive this historically.

2.2 Post-structuralism and denialism of human agency

Narrator-denial can be logically sound if it proceeds along lines already suggested above. However, the denial of authorship is of another order altogether, one that is untenable from the standpoint of pragmatics. In literary studies there have long been attempts to diminish the importance of authorship in the reading of literature, from the arguments of Wimsatt and Beardsley against the “intentional fallacy” (see Wimsatt & Beardsley 1972), to the more radical claims of post-structuralism. Among the most influential of the latter have been those of Barthes (see Barthes 1977) and Foucault (see Foucault 1980). Barthes’ essay, in which it is claimed that readers are liberated in their reading only at the expense of the author’s “death”, has been particularly influential in literary studies. This is how Barthes concludes his famous essay:

The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader’s rights. Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes 1977: 148)

What sort of agent or subject is found to be lacking in “history, biography or psychology” (and yet described as a “someone”)? We are told that “classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader,” but what sort of atten-

tion to the reader, if any, is being proposed? Compare Bakhtin's comment: "... each epoch, each literary trend and literary-artistic style, each literary genre within an epoch or trend, is typified by its own special concepts of the addressee of the literary work, a special sense and understanding of its reader, listener, public, or people." (Bakhtin 1986: 98) What is important here is the relation between author and reader, not the championing of one over the other. The liberationist aims that are said to underlie Barthes' call for the author's demise are proclaimed and not substantiated. And the argument for the empowerment of the reader rings hollow when this reader is defined as a "space" (Barthes 1977: 148), which would seem instead to de-emphasise agency on the part of a reader.

In a similar manner, Foucault discusses critically a construct that he calls "the author-function" (see Foucault 1980). The author-function is said to be linked to modernity as a "system of ownership for texts". Without wanting to engage further with this notion, which would take us too far from the objectives of this essay, let me make two points here that I oppose to these notions, and which are more aligned to the pragmatics of fiction that I espouse.

The first is the answerability of authors for what they have done. This is an appropriate notion within "the philosophy of the act", a term which I have adopted from Bakhtin as a definition for pragmatics (see Bakhtin 1993). Answerability may be thought of in an ethical and in a legal way, so that, for example, there is a public acceptance and acknowledgment that individual x is the source of the particular text y. This notion is not entirely at variance with speech act theory: e.g. one makes a promise or commitment of some kind as a form of answerability and one is identified as having been the one to do so. One might have reason to object if the commitment had actually been made by another individual rather than by oneself. This notion of individual intentionality and answerability we can retain from speech act theory. What if it were otherwise? Without being too speculative about this — neither Barthes nor Foucault trouble themselves much with this question — one would need at least to postulate a radically different form of ethical life in which texts were not associated with the labour of individuals, and also to imagine what the advantages would be of being prevented, as a reader, from cognitively realising such associations. This brings me to the second point.

A legitimate focus for pragmatics here is how fiction (and indeed authors of fiction) *have* been found interesting to readers, and why it is that these readers' interests are consequential in the study of fiction. If, for example, works were published with titles but not with authors' names, one would be

hindered from seeking out other works by the same author. One would not have interviews with authors nor would one read authors' journals because authors would not exist. Notice too, that if texts were not associated with authors' names there would in all likelihood be no way of distinguishing different texts with the same titles. Let us not stare too far into this needless abyss here and confine ourselves rather to the actuality of culture and what it is that readers do find interesting. Many of them find authors interesting to the extent that they are prepared to read their biographies, and to compare these accounts with their literary outputs (and again, to blend the two), while others are merely interested in finding another book to read by an author that they have previously enjoyed. In all of these matters there is much to be understood in the way of agency.

2.3 Literary pragmatics as interdisciplinarity

If the logicist reductionism of speech act theory and the opacity of some of the denialist positions are not adequate, there are other ways that have been more productive for pragmatics.

There have been researchers who have instead drawn on a plurality of relevant neighbouring disciplines. Among the practitioners of such an interdisciplinary approach one might mention Jacob Mey (see Mey 1998) and Monika Fludernik (see Fludernik 1995, 2001, 2003). Rather than being dogmatically faithful to analytical philosophy or post-structuralism, such writers have sought to enrich pragmatics with a range of conceptual resources.

Let us try to keep in mind how it is that the evolving technical and stylistic expertise of authors brings new layers of functionality to the reader, whose appreciation has been prepared by centuries of literary evolution and education. On the importance of a diachronic approach to such innovation and functionality, consider the observations below from Fludernik. In her paper dealing with the evolution of *scene shifting* in English narrative literature, she concludes:

We have looked at what initially appeared to be a very minor example of historical change. Its significance became apparent in relation to the more general development of narrative structure between the late Middle Ages and the nineteenth century. In addition, the scene shift was ideally suited to demonstrate that formal analysis needs to be complemented by a functional approach. In this way I was able to demonstrate how a function can be super-

seded and its former expressions still used for new purposes. The example of the scene shift was chosen for its very mundaneness. If even such basic features of narrative have so far remained unanalyzed from a diachronic perspective, it becomes self-evident how many questions there still are to be answered, how much there is still to be done in narrative studies, particularly from a diachronic perspective. (Fludernik 2003: 344)

Let us turn, in similar manner, to the case of free indirect discourse (FID). It is more recent than the scene shift, mainly a development of the nineteenth century. To illustrate I will use a recent example from a popular genre, the crime novel, one which does require the reader to absorb innovative devices, or the innovative use of existing devices. FID is an interesting case because in a relatively short historical timespan it has become an almost indispensable stylistic feature in third-person narrative, across subgenres of fiction. Why?

While there is potentially no limit to any inventory of possible fictional techniques, there may well be limits to the reading public's rate of absorption of them and thus, if hitherto seldomly-used devices like scene shifting or FID enjoy an increased popularity among authors, we can hypothesise that these techniques fulfil a certain kind of readerly interest. We must look in all such cases at the question of readers' interests and how these have evolved, an empirical question.

The following is an example showing the kind of virtuoso use of techniques, including FID, that readers have come to expect from popular authors, the opening paragraphs of James Ellroy's novel, *The Cold Six Thousand*:

They sent him to Dallas to kill a nigger pimp named Wendell Durfee. He wasn't sure he could do it.

The Casino Operators Council flew him. They supplied first-class fare. They tapped their slush fund. They greased him. They fed him six cold.

Nobody said it:

Kill that coon. Do it good. Take our hit fee.

The flight ran smooth. A stew served drinks. She saw his gun. She played up. She asked dumb questions.

He said he worked Vegas PD. He ran the intel squad. He built files and logged information.

She loved it. She swooned.

"Hon, what you doin' in Dallas?"

He told her.

A Negro shivved a twenty-one dealer. The dealer lost an eye. The Negro booked to big D. She loved it. She brought him highballs. He omitted details.

The dealer provoked the attack. The council issued the contract—death for ADW Two.

The preflight pep talk. Lieutenant Buddy Fritsch:

“I don’t have to tell you what we expect, son. And I don’t have to add that your father expects it too.”

The stew played geisha girl. The stew fluffed her beehive.

“What’s your name?”

“Wayne Tedrow.”

She whooped. “You just have to be Junior!”

He looked through her. He doodled. He yawned.

She fawned. She just looooved his daddy. He flew with her oodles. She knew he was a Mormon wheel. She’d loooove to know more. (Ellroy 2010: 1–2)

The most remarkable feature of the style of this passage is that the third-person narrative nowhere adopts a transcendent tone. It retains the register of colloquial character-speech throughout. The first sentence is third-person narrative. Yet the use of “nigger” is startlingly far from transcendent style, indicative rather of speech and/or thought within the character’s own milieu. Thus the sentence has an aspect associated with FID (incorporation of character’s perspective into third-person narrative) *and* an affinity with direct discourse (DD) speech style. This becomes more apparent in the second paragraph and continues throughout much of the extract: “tapped, greased, six cold”. The doubled effect of these opening sentences is one of being taken into the private musings of the character during his flight, while simultaneously being supplied with the relevant background information.

The next two very short paragraphs build on the character’s recollections, thinking back on what had been said and not said. And at the same time Ellroy begins to suggest for the alert reader’s benefit one of his own abiding themes, the corrupt connections between organised crime and law enforcement.

When the dialogue with the stewardess begins, we are told that “She loved it” and “She swooned”. This is by no means transcendent narrator-speak, but rather an evaluative description from the perspective of the character to whom she is speaking. The same applies to “The stew played geisha girl”. The perspective remains Tedrow’s; we see her from his perspective.

In the sequence “A Negro shivved [...] booked to big D” there is nothing of the usual “he said ...” followed by DD or “he said that ...” followed by indirect discourse (ID) constructions. But the shift from “nigger” earlier to “Negro” nevertheless suggests a shift from private thoughts to audible speech, suggesting that “nigger” would be inappropriate in this conversation, while the slang “shivved” would be readily understood by the stewardess (and the reader) to refer to a stabbing. Note how such a construction needs to be apprehended by both the interlocutor-character and the reader for its multiple functions to be operational: (a) character replying to his interlocutor; (b) author providing more background information to the reader; (c) author creating character type and milieu.

The next paragraph supplies omitted details. We find out, but the stewardess does not, that “The dealer provoked the attack” and “The council issued the contract — death for ADW Two”. The reason for this information being withheld from the stewardess, while it represents what is on Tedrow’s mind, is that it conveys all too clearly (to us) the illicit link between police work and organised crime. The “council” can be taken to be mafia controlled, and its deadly modus operandi being the issuing of a “contract”. But note the style of language used here: “death for ADW Two”. Assault with a Deadly Weapon is the form of a charge associated with police. In other words, Tedrow does not reveal to the stewardess that his principals are both the police and the mob, but Ellroy reveals it to *us*.

This is clarified in the next two paragraphs concerning the police commission: “The preflight pep talk [...] your father expects it too”. The way this is inserted, however, is not just for our clarification, but it also gives the impression of Tedrow recalling his briefing, even while in conversation with the stewardess.

The sequence of “She fawned [...] She’d loooove to know more” is a case of FID that includes elements of DD, which, on a general level, is characteristic of the extract as a whole. Verbatim character expressions are blended into third-person narration.

Let us assess this example against this account of the syntactic constraints for an FID reading:

What therefore are the minimal syntactic conditions for an FID reading to become operative? There are only two: the deictic (that is, anaphoric) alignment of “personal” referential expressions to the deictic center of the reporting discourse, and the ex negativo syntactic condition that contenders for FID

must not be phrased in a verb-plus-complement clause structure. (Fludernik 1995: 95)

In the Ellroy passage, pronouns outside of quotation marks remain in the third person despite the character language found there. The “*ex negativo condition*” also holds throughout most of the extract. There is only one instance of the verb-plus-complement clause structure (“He said he worked [...]”) and thus FID provides for the general form of the extract as a whole.

For a public to have absorbed this technique, means that such syntactic features have become functionally relevant, rather than merely being features of an author’s singular style. They have become *generic*, and they are available to an author for serving his or her purposes (while possibly also shaping those purposes). It is in regard to the evocation of another’s consciousness that FID has been such an important development. As we have seen, the third-person narrative need not be disrupted at all by direct character speech in order for a character’s thoughts or mentality to be evoked.

A second functional aspect is also the fact that this technique enables a certain harmonious stylistic flow of language to be maintained. In the Ellroy extract the language of social milieu is maintained rather than interrupted by transcendent narrator speech. This particular aesthetic function will be discussed further below.

3. Technique and agonistic forms

3.1 Character, milieu and social perspective

We have different modes in which the word of the author may be discerned within the word of the character. What is the substance of this authorial voice as it manifests itself in the creation of characters? The following may help in understanding it.

From a literary critical perspective fictional worlds theories need to do more than address philosophical and linguistic concerns about reference: they must also offer an alternative account of the *rhetorical use* of fiction. Readers cannot be content merely to construct fictional worlds, as if this in itself were endlessly satisfying; they must also be concerned to evaluate them, to bring them into relation with the larger context of their own experience and understanding. (Walsh 2003: 114 [emphasis added])

One common way for a reader to be prompted into this sort of evaluation is for the voice of the author to be identified with certain characters, or character types, contra others, as we shall see. This is the way of realism wherein social types are exposed to authorial criticism through linking those types to (actual social milieux) and exposing them to such techniques as irony and satire. This is one way, perhaps so far the most pervasive, in achieving an author's evaluative purposes mentioned by Walsh above.

There are of course other possibilities, and one might mention in passing Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, a decidedly more allegorical treatment of disaffection. The character who suddenly finds himself turned into non-human vermin, and is thereby irrevocably separated from family and all familiarity, represents the ultimate outsider. To a reader — this reader in particular — the relevant authorial image here is of one who has himself experienced despised otherness, and who wishes to express it in its universal or most dystopian aspect rather than in any realistic particularity. I am not suggesting here that satire and irony are impossible within an allegorical mode — consider Orwell's *Animal Farm*, for example — but what one does *not* get is a stylistic of naturalistic or empirical detail, for example the manners or mentalities of social milieux dramatically juxtaposed against one another.

Thus the novel has been formed between two stylistic poles. Perhaps the clearest way of distinguishing the two, is to point in the first case (realism) to the influence historically of biography. When the narrative is constructed through the provision of detail in such a way that it presents a plausible biography of persons who have actually lived, or, who *could* have lived in a manner recognisable in the experience of a reader, then we have to do with the stylistic pole of realism. The detail supplied is sufficiently naturalistic in the evocation of a world, so that the latter is perceived as no different *in kind* to the actual world. The fictional aspect to this, as I have mentioned, lies in the provision of impossible knowledge — especially the 'interiors' of subjectivity of fictional or fictionalised characters — which of course does separate it from works of actual biography, history and so on, and which has led to the development of stylistic techniques adequate for this purpose, such as FID.

The second stylistic pole, which I have associated strongly with allegory, may well be described as the evocation of impossible worlds, impossible, that is, from the natural experiences of actual readers. Fantasy, horror and science fiction are generally closer to this pole, but let it not be suggested that this possibility excludes the kinds of evaluation, even social evaluation, mentioned by Walsh above. The example of *Metamorphosis* suffices here. The details of char-

acter and plot are presented in such a way that certain value elements emerge in a kind of ethical parallel with the actual world. It is in the very dystopian strangeness of the fictional world that makes its resemblance on this *ethical* plane as striking as it is. The actual world is defamiliarised in comparison, and is open to an evaluation in which otherness and repulsion are as conceivable as they are in the allegorical fiction. This requires descriptive detail of a different order from the more realistic work.

Naturally a great many works are located between these two extremes, having characteristics of both. But let us focus for the moment on the question of an author's relations with character types and milieux in instances that are closer to the pole of realism.

Fiction very often tends to impart a sense of social milieu. In a novel such as *The Ambassadors* or *The Golden Bowl* the speech of James's characters, together with the descriptions of the objects and events that surround them, evokes a milieu of sophisticated manners and refined aestheticism. In other examples, the sense of milieu is created by the naming of actual persons likely to be known to a reader, thereby bringing actual-world associations into the reading. In Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Glamorama*, there are literally hundreds of famous persons mentioned, interspersed with fictional characters, thereby bringing about in an immediate way the recognition of American celebrity culture.

A milieu provides the ground for plausible characters to emerge and to display agonistic relations with one another. A social tableau is required against which the character/figure is silhouetted, just as a scenic tableau is required against which the coup de theatre is silhouetted (see Brown 1981). Often characters and their agonistic relations with one another represents a milieu *problematically*, so as to manifest its instabilities or tensions. But more than this, it may be that such characterisation is also likely to be suggestive of an author's own, more or less fraught relationships to the milieu in question. This is an important way in which the agon of literary authorship arises and manifests itself to a reader, as an 'image' of the author posited by the reader.

The struggle of the author in this view is such that one carries one's origins (milieu, background, typicality) around as a problem to be overcome, just as one's fictional characters must do. This is perhaps the agon of fictional authorship in its purest form. Characterisation becomes an act of judgment on a milieu or a social type. Consider the following from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*.

"You related to Adam J. Patch?" he inquired of Anthony, emitting two slender strings of smoke from nostrils over-wide.

Anthony admitted it with the ghost of a smile.

"He's a fine man," pronounced Bloeckman profoundly. He's a fine example of an American."

"Yes," agreed Anthony, "he certainly is."

— I detest these underdone men, he thought coldly. Boiled looking! Ought to be shoved back in the oven; just one more minute would do it.

Bloeckman squinted at his watch.

"Time these girls were showing up ..."

— Anthony waited breathlessly; it came —

"...but then," with a widening smile, "you know how women are." (Fitzgerald 1974: 81)

This dialogue between Bloeckman and Anthony Patch is presented from Anthony's perspective — Bloeckman's thoughts are effectively non-existent. But the passage also indicates something of the perspective of the author. Consider the mock description *pronounced ... profoundly* contrasted with the banality of Bloeckman's expressed sentiments. This intentional irony stereotypes the character and invites the reader to share momentarily the tedium of conversing with someone seemingly incapable of anything other than obtuse platitudes. One imagines the author as someone who has himself been afflicted by the company of the Bloeckman type. Bakhtin offers an important general formulation concerning this: "The author's reaction to what he depicts always enters into the image. The author's relationship is a *constitutive* aspect of the image" (Bakhtin 1986: 115 [emphasis added]).

The greater the distance that authors wish to put between themselves and a character or milieu, the greater the temptations of caricature and stereotyping. Such a character as a Bloeckman is viewed externally for purposes of expressing distaste. A refusal to present the inner world of the character becomes in this and similar cases a form of judgment.

3.2 Revelation and readers' interests

Reading is as subjective as writing is. No two readings of a work can be exactly alike — interest, attention span, competence and background knowledge all play a role in a subjective reading. Yet the discourse strategy adopted by an author must be based on some apprehension, some calculation, concerning these readership factors.

Much of what constitutes fiction is the directing of a reader's attention towards putative secrets of the actual world. What sorts of unknown things might lie behind the actual objects and events that we know about? Or how might things have turned out in the actual world under certain counterfactual conditions? What sort of alternative history might then be revealed?

If a reader has been drawn into a fictional world, he or she may not only be intent on satisfying something akin to curiosity, but also interested in considering and evaluating the author's perspective on the actual world — an actual milieu, for example. A competent reader of fiction understands the generic convention whereby he or she is invited by an author to share things that are normally private or hidden. The involvement of the reader on this premise is a *minimum* for comprehension of fiction to take place. But an author does not necessarily write only in order to create faux revelations for a reader's enjoyment, but also to draw the reader into the author's own relationship to the world — a risky endeavour, no doubt, because critical readers will make of this opportunity what they will. The author is answerable for the text in a way that the reader is not, and it is part of an author's task to pique a reader's curiosity about what is to come for fiction to work. Let us bear in mind that fiction is always a movement in *time*, in this case from the unknown to the known. Often an author will signal to a reader that a mystery or question is being posed that will be answered later. Consider the following from an early short story by Jean Rhys, *Illusion*: "We had been dining and lunching together, now and then, for two years, yet I only knew the outside of Miss Bruce — the cool sensible, tidy English outside" (Rhys 2017: 4).

It would be an obtuse reader indeed who did not begin to anticipate a revelation concerning the inner life of Miss Bruce. It turns out that she is a secret hoarder of beautiful and glamorous dresses. The whole story is only four pages long, but it illustrates, at a micro level, a principle that plays itself out across many more pages in novels, that of revelation and anticipation thereof.

4. Suggestions for further research

From the perspective of pragmatics, a competent reader of fiction understands him- or herself to be a joint participant in an intentional act. It is only in this way that a text can achieve full coherence for a reader. This coherence as *telos* is such that we understand the complexities of character, plot, perspective, etc., as authorial purposiveness, whether we know the identity of the author empirically or not. Yet the author can only be posited on the basis of the individual reader's cognitive powers, and the various contents of such positings remain a matter for empirical research.

It is from the point of view of pragmatics that one is in the best position to fully appreciate how the worlds of simulated persons might relate to the actual worlds of authors and readers. I have tried to outline what the agonistic substance of these relations might be, as a basis for further studies. Considering characters in depth leads us to a concern with the world they inhabit, and its relationship to the world that readers and authors inhabit.

Another specific research question concerns how and why it is that readers of literature are interested in companion genres such as interviews with authors, literary biographies and authors' published journals. The intertextuality here would seem to bring together information concerning the empirical author and the author posited in a reading of his or her work. There seems to be a certain fascination in this particular form of blending. In this context, research concerning author's self-staging or self-presentation could be of value.

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