

CHAPTER 3

Narrative

Some narrators in fiction are known as omniscient, meaning that they are assumed to know everything about the story they tell and that the reader is not expected to question what they say. If a novel begins ‘Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed,’ it would be futile for the reader to exclaim, ‘No, he didn’t!’, ‘How do you know?’ or ‘Don’t give me that!’ The fact that we have just read the words ‘A Novel’ on the title page rules out these questions as invalid. We are supposed to bow to the authority of the narrator. If he tells us that Mulligan was carrying a bowl of lather, then we obediently collude in the illusion that he was, rather as we collude in the illusion that a toddler is the President of the International Monetary Fund if this yields him some momentary pleasure.

Bowing to the narrator’s authority, however, is not much of a risk, since we are not signing on for very much. We are not really being asked to believe that there was someone called Buck Mulligan who carried a bowl of lather. It would be truer to say that we are being asked to make-believe it. We know from reading the words ‘A Novel’, or simply from knowing that this text is intended as fiction, that the author is not trying to fool us into imagining that

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this actually took place. He is not offering the statement as a proposition about the real world. It is said that an eighteenth-century bishop who read Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* threw the book into the fire, indignantly declaring that he didn't believe a word of it. He obviously thought that the story was meant to be true, but suspected that it was invented. Which, of course, is just what it is. The bishop was dismissing the fiction because he thought it was fiction.

If the statement about Mulligan is not meant to fool us, it can be claimed rather oddly that it is neither true nor false. This is because only assertions about reality can be true or false, and this sentence does not count as one of them. It just looks as though it does. It has the form of one, but not the content. So we are not expected to believe it, but neither are we expected to shout, 'Come off it!' or 'What a load of nonsense!' To do so would be to imply that the author intended to make a genuine claim about the world, which is clearly not the case. In the same way, 'Good morning' sounds like a proposition about reality ('It's a good morning'), but is in fact the expression of a wish ('I trust you have a good morning'). And this cannot be true or false, any more than 'Give me a break!', 'Who are you staring at?' or 'You disgusting little two-timer' can be. It is not true that there was a murderous Russian student called Raskolnikov or a down-at-heel salesman named Willy Loman. However, to say so in a work of literature is not false either, since the work is not claiming that there was.

Omniscient narrators are disembodied voices rather than locatable characters. In their anonymous, unidentifiable fashion, they act as the mind of the work itself. Even so, we should not assume that they express a real-life author's thoughts and sentiments. We have seen an example of this already in the opening lines of

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E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, which are spoken by an omniscient narrator but which register attitudes that may or may not be Forster's own. The town of Chandrapore does not exist, so Forster cannot have any opinions about it. He can hold views about India in general, but what he writes in this passage may be as much for literary effect as a reflection of them. There is rarely any simple relation between authors and their works. Sean O'Casey's play *The Plough and the Stars* pokes merciless fun at a character called the Covey, who spouts Marxist jargon and insists that the workers' struggle must take precedence over national liberation. Yet O'Casey was himself a Marxist, and believed precisely what the Covey preaches. Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* concludes with its hero producing a long, erudite argument about aesthetics, some of which we can be fairly sure Joyce himself did not accept. But the novel does not tell us so.

There are times when who exactly is doing the narrating in a piece of fiction is not entirely clear. Take, for example, this passage from Saul Bellow's novel *Henderson the Rain King*:

Daylight came from a narrow opening above my head; this light was originally yellow but became gray by contact with stones. In the opening two iron spikes were set to keep even a child from creeping through. Examining my situation I found a small passage cut from the granite which led downward to another flight of stairs, which were of stone too. These were narrower and ran to a greater depth, and soon I found them broken, with grass springing and soil leaking out through the cracks. 'King, I called, 'King, hey, are you down there, Your Highness?' But nothing came from below except drafts of warm air that lifted up the spider webs. 'What's the guy's hurry?', I thought . . .

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The passage is supposedly spoken by Henderson, the book's hero. Yet Henderson is a rough-and-ready American who might well exclaim 'King, hey' or 'What's the guy's hurry?'; but would hardly speak in poetic vein of the yellow light becoming grey by contact with the stones. Nor is he likely to write prose as relatively formal as 'Examining my situation I found a small passage cut from the granite . . .' This is a hybrid narration, in which Henderson's own voice is woven into the more sophisticated tones of the author himself. The novel's linguistic scope would be too limited if it could not reach beyond the consciousness of its main character. Yet it needs to let his own style of speaking come through as well.

I have said that omniscient narrators are assumed to know everything there is to know about their stories, but there are occasional exceptions to this rule. A narrator, for example, may feign ignorance of something in his tale. In a mediocre detective story entitled *The Footsteps at the Lock*, one of the characters lights up a cheap cigarette, and the rather snobbish author pretends not to know what brand it is. I say 'pretends', but it is not as though he really knows but is concealing the fact. If the reader is not told the brand, there isn't one. We have here a species of that rare phenomenon, a brandless cigarette (I leave aside the knotty question of roll-ups). You can have cigarettes of this kind in literature, just as you can have a grin without a cat, an Albanian-speaking ostrich or someone who is simultaneously drinking whisky in Birmingham, England and performing brain surgery in Birmingham, Alabama. Real life is less pleasantly diverse in this respect. As Oscar Wilde remarked, art is a place where one thing can be true, but also its opposite. It is more economical than everyday life. One thinks of the final sentences of Samuel Beckett's novel *Molloy*: 'It is midnight. The rain is beating on the window. It was not midnight. It was not raining.'

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There are unreliable narrators as well as omniscient ones. The governess who narrates Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* is almost certainly insane. James is playing a devious game with the reader, providing us with enough grounds to credit the governess's account while dropping sufficient sly hints to suggest that it is not to be trusted. We have seen already that Nelly Dean's narrative in *Wuthering Heights* is not entirely dependable. *Jane Eyre* delivers a tale tinged with pride, resentment, envy, anxiety, aggression and self-interest. Some of Joseph Conrad's narrators draw attention to the limited nature of their own powers of interpretation. They may have only a fitful, confused sense of what is going on in the stories they tell. The narrator of Conrad's *Under Western Eyes* is a case in point, as are the storytellers of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*. It is possible that such narrators grasp less of the significance of the story than the reader does herself. We can see what they cannot see, and perhaps why they cannot see it.

A notoriously unreliable storyteller is the hero of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Gulliver, who never seems to learn anything from his travels, is a boneheaded narrator as well as an unreliable one. All boneheaded narrators are unreliable, but not all unreliable narrators are boneheaded. Gulliver acts as the focus of the book's satire, but in a neat double-tactic he is also the target of it. He can be pathetically keen to identify with the outlandish creatures he finds himself among. In Lilliput, for example, he takes on the standards of this nation of tiny creatures far too eagerly. At one point, he hotly denies the charge of having had sex with a female Lilliputan who is only a few inches high. He also fails to raise the obvious impossibility of this in his own defence. He is also foolishly proud of the title these midgets bestow on him. Gulliver, in short, is something of a gull.

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Swift himself was Anglo-Irish, and as such felt fully at home in neither Ireland nor Britain. One way to resolve this dilemma, as Oscar Wilde was to discover, is to become more English than the English themselves, a strategy reflected in Gulliver's obsequious behaviour. By the close of the novel, having lived for a while with the horse-like Houyhnhnms, he is trotting around the place whinnying. Not many narrators are shown going off their heads within their own narratives. At other times, however, Gulliver is too out of touch with local customs, as a chuckleheaded Englishman complacently blind to his own cultural prejudices. He is always either too far out, or in over his head. Swift uses his narrator to expose the cruelty and corruption of others, but also heaps ridicule on him within his own tale.

If you tell your story from the standpoint of a specific character, it may not be easy to step outside this perspective. A literary work written from the viewpoint of a frog risks imprisoning itself in a froglike world. It is hard for it to rise above the consciousness of its own narrator. Not many narrators are frogs, but quite a few are children. This may have its charms, as with the much loved teenage narrator of *The Catcher in the Rye*, but it can also have its drawbacks. To see the world from a child's viewpoint can make it seem revealingly unfamiliar. It may be to perceive objects with a peculiar freshness and immediacy, as Wordsworth is aware. Yet a child's way of seeing is naturally restricted. (A notable exception to this rule is Maisie Farange of Henry James's novel *What Maisie Knew*, a little girl who seems to be almost as omniscient as her author.) Dickens's David Copperfield tells us that as a boy he was able to see in pieces, but not in the round. Ironically, this is the way Dickens himself tends to perceive. A child's vision of reality may be vivid but fragmentary, and so, often enough, is Dickens's own way of looking.

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There is thus something peculiarly appropriate about the fact that he so often gazes at the world through the eyes of a child.

The limited vision of child narrators means that they cannot always make coherent sense of their experience. This can lead to some amusing or alarming situations. But it also means that a character like Oliver Twist can have no understanding of the system under which he suffers. All he wants is some immediate help, an impulse with which we naturally sympathise. Yet without some sense of how the system works, and how to change it, there will be many more children gazing up past Mr Bumble's ample belly in search of extra gruel. In this early novel, Dickens himself seems unable to grasp that there is more at issue here than the cruelty of individuals or the question of raw need. What is at stake is the heartless logic of a whole society, as the later Dickens would come to recognise. We shall be investigating this later in the case of *Great Expectations*.

Some narrators are unreliable to the point of being outright cheats. The narrator of Agatha Christie's detective thriller *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is actually the murderer, but the authority with which he is invested by the act of telling the story throws us off the scent. The murderer in a detective story is usually hidden, but hidden by the plot, not concealed behind the act of narrating. We learn at the end of Flann O'Brien's *The Third Policeman* that the narrator has been dead for most of the novel, just as we are shocked to discover at the end of William Golding's novel *Pincher Martin* that Martin, who tells the story, was drowned on the first page.

The speaker of Andrew Marvell's poem 'To His Coy Mistress', a man apparently haunted by the fear of death, urges his mistress to overcome her maidenly modesty and make love to him before they both land up in the grave. He is not exactly an unreliable narrator,

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but it is certainly prudent for both mistress and reader to mistrust his motives. Is he really distraught by the brevity of life and love, or is he just trying to get her to sleep with him? Is this the most intellectual attempt to bed a woman on human record? Is the speaker in earnest in his musings about mortality, or is this simply an artful device to persuade his mistress that she might as well indulge the pleasures of the flesh while she still has some flesh to indulge? The poem does not allow us to choose between these alternatives. Instead, it allows them to co-exist in a kind of ironic tension, playful and pressing at the same time. Maybe the narrator himself has no idea of how serious he is intending to be.

There has been some argument among critics over whether Thady Quirk, the narrator of Maria Edgeworth's novel *Castle Rackrent*, is an unreliable narrator or not. Thady is a servant of the Irish aristocratic Rackrent family, and to all outward appearances a faithful old retainer. He recounts the history of his drunken, black-hearted employers with obsequious affection. Throughout the book, he displays a genial indulgence of the vices of his superiors, which include such endearing little foibles as Sir Kit Rackrent imprisoning his wife in her bedroom for seven years. One can thus read the novel as a satire of the way servants can be conned into complicity with their masters, a complicity which is more in their masters' interests than their own. In this sense, the novel is a fable of misplaced loyalties.

Yet this is not the only reading possible. We can also see Thady as a type of the rebellious Irish peasantry, craftily concealing his disaffection beneath a mask of servility. Perhaps he is secretly working for the overthrow of the landlords, and thus seeking to promote the old Gaelic dream of the common people reclaiming the land. There are clues in the novel to suggest such a scheme.

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Thady commits a number of self-serving blunders and oversights which might well be more intentional than they seem. By the end of the story, his son Jason has managed to lay his hands on the Rackrent estates, perhaps with his father's secret connivance. In which case Thady is fooling not only his masters but the reader as well, who is never for a moment allowed into his confidence. Seen from this angle, he is a stereotype of the cringing, duplicitous Irish peasantry, who swear loyalty to their landowner during the day while creeping out to hamstring his cattle at night. On yet another reading, however, Thady is fooling himself rather than the reader. In a classic act of self-deception, he believes he is faithful to the Rackrents but is unconsciously plotting their downfall. However much his narrative seeks to temper their appalling conduct, it blackens them unwittingly in the very act of doing so. There are thus several possible versions of what Thady is up to. The reader is not allowed to decide among them.

A third-person, omniscient narration is a kind of meta-language, meaning that in realist fiction at least it cannot be an object of criticism or commentary within the narrative itself. Since this is the voice of the story itself, it seems impossible to call it into question. The only way this might happen is when a narrative pauses to reflect on itself. A renowned example of this occurs when George Eliot holds up the story of *Adam Bede* to insert a chapter in which she ponders certain questions of realism, the nature of character, the fictional presentation of low-life men and women and so on. This, so to speak, is the novel reflecting on the novel. There can be no such meta-language or authorial voice-over in so-called epistolary novels, which consist of letters written by the characters to each other. Neither can there be in most forms of drama, where what we hear is the speech of the characters rather than of the work

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itself. Ben Jonson cannot intervene to tell us what to make of Volpone, as Thackeray speaks up in *Vanity Fair* to point out that one of the book's most lovable characters is a halfwit.

This can make it hard to know what viewpoints a play itself endorses, and which it rejects. Take as an example Portia's celebrated speech about mercy in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*:

*The quality of mercy is not strain'd;
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown . . .*

It is hard not to be persuaded by such eloquence. Yet Portia's speech is considerably more self-interested than it may seem. She is intent on rescuing one of her own kind, the Venetian Christian Antonio, from the clutches of Shylock, an odious Jew. The Christians of the city have not been notable for showing mercy to this contemptible outsider, and will penalise him harshly when he loses his lawsuit against them. Now, however, they are begging Shylock through Portia, their self-appointed spokeswoman, to let the viscerally anti-Semitic Antonio off the hook. If they want Shylock to show mercy, it is because they are not prepared to grant him justice. Shylock has a legal document in his hand which states that he may carve a pound of flesh from Antonio's body; and though this may be a barbarous bargain, the pound of flesh is his due under law. Antonio, moreover, agreed to the deal. He even reckoned it a reasonable one in the circumstances.

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If Shylock's stubborn clinging to the letter of the law seems legalistic, so is the ruse by which Portia triumphs over him, by pointing out that his bond permits him to take flesh but not blood. No actual court would allow such an outrageous quibble. The law must work according to common understandings, not duplicitous nitpicking. In any case, mercy may not be strained (constrained), but justice surely is. Punishments, for example, must be proportionate to crimes. To be merciful is indeed a virtue, but it must not be allowed to make a mockery of justice. There are several reasons for suspecting that there is more to this affair than Portia's setpiece speech would suggest. Yet because we have no voice-over to tell us what to think, we are left to draw our own conclusions.

There is a similar problem with Polonius' advice to his son Laertes in *Hamlet*, which ends with the much quoted lines 'This above all – to thine own self be true, / And it must follow, as the night the day, / Thou canst not then be false to any man.' Is this really sage counsel? What if you are a natural-born con man and decide to be true to your nature? There is no way of knowing what Shakespeare himself thought about this piece of paternal guidance. It has a sententious air about it that may strike some readers as authoritative. On the other hand, Polonius sometimes comes up with portentous statements which are of dubious value. Perhaps the play is simply poking fun at him, as it so often does. Or perhaps for a precious moment he swerves from his customary self-importance into a genuine moral insight. It is also possible that Shakespeare did not stop to ask himself whether he thought this advice was sound, or that he thought it was sound but was mistaken. Perhaps the case of the natural-born twister did not occur to him. We should not be afraid to impute failings to the Bard. His comedy, after all, hardly leaves us rolling in the aisles. We do not generally

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need to be carried out of *Twelfth Night* convulsed with hysterical laughter.

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Omniscient narrators need not go unchallenged. We may suspect that they have their own biases and blind spots. Take, for example, the relations between narratives and their characters. A novel might unduly idealise one of its characters, just as it might angle its storyline unduly in favour of a certain standpoint. Works of fiction can reveal attitudes to the characters and events they portray, either explicitly or implicitly, which a reader might want to question. An astute critic once commented that Scobie, the protagonist of Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*, is both more and less admirable than the novel itself seems to think. We do not have to take a piece of fiction's own word as gospel, even though we have no words but its own. If a novel tells us that its heroine has green-flecked eyes, it is hard to quarrel with the claim. If it also suggests that she is the most black-hearted female since Lucretia Borgia, we might want to query this on the basis of what it shows of her, as opposed to what it says. A work of fiction may seem to believe that its characters are thick skulled, tender hearted or downright despicable, but it might always be mistaken. Unknown to itself, it might provide us with evidence against these judgements.

D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* may serve as an example. The novel contains some tacit criticism of its protagonist Paul Morel, but nonetheless sees the world largely from his point of view. There is a secret complicity between the narrative and its central figure. In fact, there are times when the story seems to think more highly of its hero than we do. Since the world is seen largely in Paul's own terms, his lover, Miriam, is not handed enough of the

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script. We would be intrigued to learn more of her view of Paul, but are allowed no access to it. The narrative, so to speak, is stacked against her. It is prejudiced in its very structure, as the real-life Miriam was not slow to point out. The same might be said of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which refuses to hand the microphone to the cold-blooded Clifford Chatterley. Instead, he is presented almost entirely from the outside. We might contrast this with Tolstoy's sensitive treatment of the unappetising figure of Karenin in *Anna Karenina*. It also differs sharply from Lawrence's treatment of Gerald Crich in *Women in Love*. Gerald represents much that his author finds abhorrent, but he is superbly well realised all the same. He is shown from the inside, in so far as he has any spiritual inside to be shown. Clifford Chatterley, by contrast, is reduced to a stereotype so that the novel may write him off with a minimum of effort. He is also disabled, and Lawrence is not at his most admirable when dealing with people in wheelchairs.

George Eliot's *Adam Bede* allows the reader some access to the inner life of Hetty Sorrel, a young working woman who is seduced by the lascivious local squire, has an illegitimate child as a result, kills the baby and ends up having to be rescued from the gallows. A good deal of this high drama is presented from the outside, as though Hetty lacks the kind of inner depths that might prove worth plumbing. She is more an object of pity than a full-blooded tragic figure. Her surname 'Sorrel' suggests sorrow, but it also means a kind of horse, which is not quite as respectful. The narrative finally packs Hetty off into exile, thus clearing the way for Adam, the hero of the piece, to choose a rather more high-minded wife than this empty-headed milkmaid. There is no such one-sidedness in Eliot's finest novel, *Middlemarch*, in which the narrator behaves like a judicious chairperson in a public debate, ensuring

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that all the characters have their say. Even the bloodless Casaubon must be shown as a feeling, suffering creature. There is no hogging the microphone here.

There is a parallel to Eliot's treatment of Casaubon in *Jude the Obscure*. The novel encourages us to feel a degree of distaste for the staid, conventionally minded Phillotson, to whom, as we have seen, the free-thinking Sue Bridehead is miserably married. Sue begs her husband for her freedom, yet just as we are expecting this eminently respectable citizen to refuse her, he surprises us by conceding that she is free to go. He does this despite his regard for public opinion, and despite his deep personal dismay at the loss of the woman he loves. The result of his selfless action is that he also loses his job as a schoolmaster. It is part of the novel's own rebuff to convention that it refuses to make a bogeyman out of this unprepossessing figure. Instead, it allows him a dignified, generous response to his wife's unhappiness. Lawrence would probably have granted him no such magnanimity. He might scarcely have allowed him an inner life at all.

In this sense, Hardy's characters can surprise us, in a way that Austen's or Dickens's rarely do. They can leap suddenly out of windows, marry a man they physically detest, sit motionless for long periods up a tree, unravel their underwear to rescue someone trapped on a cliff, sell their wife at a fair on a sudden whim, or engage in a virtuoso exhibition of sword fighting for no very obvious reason. Jude drunkenly recites the Nicene creed in an Oxford pub, hardly a regular occurrence in one's local cocktail bar. Hardy's novels do not seem particularly embarrassed by the lack of realism of such events, or even particularly to notice it. They are content to allow different kinds of fiction, realist and non-realist, to sit cheek by jowl within their covers, without trying to force them into a single mode.

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Hardy's treatment of Tess Durbeyfield in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* makes a telling contrast with George Eliot's handling of Hetty Sorrel. Hardy is clearly in love with his heroine, rather in the way that Samuel Richardson is in love with Clarissa, and aims to do justice to this much abused young woman. In this sense, the narrative can be seen as making loving amends to Tess for the way some of its own characters shamefully exploit her. It tries to present her as a whole woman, rather than idealise her like Angel Clare or sensualise her like Alec D'Urberville.

It is a generous-spirited effort, though not without its problems. If the book tries to depict Tess from the inside, it also makes her the object of its own amorous gaze, exhibiting her for the reader's similar inspection. As critics have pointed out, the story finds it hard to bring its heroine into focus. It tries to make her transparent, but finds itself shifting from one voice or viewpoint to another in its effort to see her clearly. There is something about her sexuality which defeats representation. At critical points in the narrative, such as the moment of her seduction, Tess's consciousness is inaccessible to the reader. She resists the way the (implicitly male) narrator tries to appropriate her. Conflicting, even contradictory views of her overlap, without being resolved into a coherent whole. In trying to display her character, the novel succeeds only in destabilising our sense of her. The book is full of images of pricking, piercing and penetrating, as though the narrator has erotic fantasies of possessing his protagonist to the full. In the end, however, she is not to be pinned down.

Entire novels can treat their subject-matter with notable bias. Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*, for example, paints a partisan view of Coketown, the north-of-England industrial town in which the novel's action is set. The place itself is viewed impressionistically,

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as though by a south-of-England observer glimpsing it from a train. The novel's hero is Stephen Blackpool, a deferential, morally conscientious working man. We are invited to admire the way he refuses to cave in to trade union pressure during a strike, but the truth is that Stephen has very little political consciousness at all. He is remote from his fellow workers for personal reasons, not political ones. He dies in solitude, and the general impression is that he ends his life as a martyr to the bigotry of organised labour. Yet his death actually has no political significance whatsoever.

The novel portrays the labour movement as loud mouthed, sectarian and potentially violent. In doing so, it writes off one of the few forces in Victorian Britain which challenged the very social injustices it is so indignant about. The strike in the novel is based on a real-life one, and Dickens paints a far more sympathetic portrait of the event in his journalism than he does in his novel. In fact, he commends what he sees as the self-restraint of the striking workers. *Hard Times* also delivers a savage caricature of Utilitarianism, a creed which was actually responsible for some vital social reforms in Dickens's England. The founder of the movement, Jeremy Bentham, was opposed to the criminalisation of homosexuality, an astonishingly enlightened position for someone of his time. Utilitarianism involved a lot more than making a fetish out of facts, which is the way the book crassly presents it. Since some of Dickens's best friends were Utilitarians, it is hard to believe that he could not have been aware of this distortion.

A story may take up no attitude to its subject-matter even when we might expect it to. This is true of Evelyn Waugh's satirical novel *Decline and Fall*, which uses its hero, Paul Pennyfeather, as a focus for the antics of English high society. Because he is simply a point of entry into this world, Pennyfeather is not meant to be a

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well-rounded character. He is just a kind of blank at the novel's centre, as lightweight as the name Pennyfeather would suggest. He does not seem able to evaluate his own experience at all. In a superb piece of black comedy, he is sentenced to seven years' penal servitude as a scapegoat for someone else's crimes of prostitution and white slave traffic. Yet he fails to voice anything remotely approaching a protest against this grotesque piece of injustice.

Paul's blankness is one way in which he belongs to the shallow high society world around him. It thus reflects on that world rather badly. But it also serves to stop Paul from criticising it. The fact that its hero is little more than a cipher is part of the rich comedy of the book, but it also prevents him from questioning the behaviour of his upper-class cronies. The novel's attitude to these characters is scrupulously neutral, and this deadpan treatment adds to its funniness. It is a kind of literary equivalent of the stiff upper lip, as the most shocking, surreal occurrences are reported with off-hand indifference. Yet this neutrality of tone is also highly convenient for a writer like Waugh, a man with strong upper-class sympathies.

Waugh's comedy works partly by emptying people of their inner lives. Yet it may be his characters do not have much inner life to be emptied of in the first place. This serves to show up their moral flimsiness, and thus counts against them. If they are really as vacuous as they appear, however, it is hard to see how they can be held responsible for their scandalous behaviour, which counts in their favour. Paradoxically, what is most to be criticised about these drones and loungers – that they are mere paper-thin personalities – is also what makes them most immune to criticism.

There are various ways in which narratives can load the dice in their own favour. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is about a group of

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animals who take over their farm and try to run it themselves, with disastrous results. As such, the novel is meant to be an allegory of the collapse of socialist democracy in the early Soviet Union. Yet the fact is that animals are incapable of running farms. It is hard to sign cheques or ring up your suppliers when you have hoofs rather than hands. It is true that this is not why the animals' experiment fails, but it has an unconscious influence on the reader's response to it. So the story is slanted from the outset. The way it sets up its terms helps to prove its point. The allegory might also imply, no doubt against its leftist author's intentions, that working people are too stupid to manage their own affairs. The title of the book, incidentally, can be read as ironic. 'Animal' and 'Farm' go naturally together. But they do not go together here.

The cards are similarly stacked in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, which shows a bunch of schoolboys on a desert island gradually reverting to barbarism. Among other things, this is supposed to illustrate the case that civilisation is only skin-deep. As in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, we are all barbarians under the skin, a view which effectively puts paid to any hope of social progress. Scratch a schoolboy and you find a savage. Yet choosing children for your characters helps to make the point rather too conveniently. Children are only semi-socialised in any case. They are not yet capable of such complex operations as running their own communities. In fact, some of them are not much more advanced in this respect than Orwell's pigs. It is not surprising that the social order they try to build on the island rapidly breaks down. *Lord of the Flies* thus makes things rather too easy for itself. The way it sets up its case makes it more plausible than it might otherwise appear. It may be that men and women are fallen, corrupted creatures, as Golding himself believed; but you cannot prove the point by showing a

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group of frightened schoolchildren failing to evolve the equivalent of the United Nations.

There may be discrepancies between what a narrative shows and what it says. A particularly blatant example of this can be found in John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, when Adam decides to share Eve's fate by sharing the death-dealing apple. From the way the poem presents the event, there is no doubt that he makes his decision out of love for his partner:

*no. no! I feel
The link of nature draw me: flesh of flesh,
Bone of my bone thou art, and from thy state
Mine never shall be parted, bliss or woe.*

Adam is ready to risk his own life out of loyalty to Eve. Yet when he himself comes to eat the apple, the tone of the verse changes sharply:

*he scrupled not to eat,
Against his better knowledge, not deceived,
But fondly overcome with female charm.*

'Fondly overcome with female charm' is a flagrant distortion of Adam's state of mind, as the poem itself has just portrayed it. ('Fondly' here means 'foolishly'.) It reduces his courageous self-sacrifice to the lure of a pretty face. As Adam takes the apple, ready to lay down his life alongside his lover, the poem abruptly abandons all sympathy for him. Instead, it adopts a severely juridical tone. It insists that he is performing this action freely, without self-deception, in full knowledge of its catastrophic consequences.

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Milton the theologian takes over from Milton the humanist, as doctrine gets the better of drama.

There are similar conflicts between what we see and what we are told in the fiction of Daniel Defoe. Defoe's novels are fascinated by the workaday material world. What we find in his writing is a kind of pure narrativity, in which the overriding question is always 'What comes next?' Events are important in so far as they lead to other events. These restless narratives plunge forward without much sense of overall design. There is no logical conclusion or natural closure to Defoe's tales. They accumulate narrative for its own sake, as a capitalist accumulates profit for its own sake. It is as though the desire to narrate is insatiable. In a world where to stop is to stagnate, you settle down only to take off again, and with Defoe this is true both of the narrative and of the characters themselves. Robinson Crusoe is no sooner home from his island than he is off on his travels once more, stockpiling further adventures which he promises to share with us in the future. Characters like Moll Flanders move so fast, swapping one husband for another and hopping from one form of petty crime to the next, that they seem to have no continuous identity. Instead, they live off the top of their heads, by the skin of their teeth and (literally in Moll's case) by the seat of their pants.

Defoe clearly relishes realism for its own sake. As James Joyce once said of himself, he has the mind of a grocer. In fact, the English novel takes off at the point where everyday existence begins to seem endlessly enthralling. This was hardly true of the literary forms which preceded it: tragedy, epic, elegy, pastoral, romance and the like. Genres like this deal in deities, high-born characters and extraordinary events. They are not much interested in prostitutes and pickpockets. The idea of allowing a whore like

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Moll Flanders to tell the story would be as unthinkable as allowing a giraffe to narrate it. For a Christian Dissenter like Defoe, however, savouring everyday life for its own sake is not morally acceptable, even though his fiction does just that. The material world is supposed to point to the spiritual one. It is not to be treated as an end in itself. Real events must be scanned for a moral or religious meaning. So Defoe assures us in the style of a tabloid journalist that he is reporting these sensational happenings (theft, bigamy, fraud, fornication and so on) only so that we can learn a moral lesson from them. Yet this is conspicuously not the case. The story and the moral are absurdly at odds with each other. We are invited to believe that human history is guided by divine Providence, but nothing could be more implausible. History is just a chapter of accidents. It is driven by voracious self-interest, not shaped by some moral design. Virtue is for those who can afford it. What the novels say does not fit with what they show.

D.H. Lawrence objected to writers who, as he comments in his *Study of Thomas Hardy*, 'put their thumb in the pan.' He meant by this that a work of fiction is a balance of forces with a mysteriously autonomous life of its own, and an author should not disturb this delicate equilibrium by forcing his own purposes upon it. Tolstoy, he thought, had done just this, unforgivably, in killing off his own great creation Anna Karenina. This 'Judas' of an author, as Lawrence calls him, had taken fright at the magnificent flourish of life that was his heroine, and had cravenly disposed of her by pushing her under a train. Writers who allowed their protagonists to go under were in Lawrence's eyes simply 'doing dirt on life'. It followed for him that tragedy was something of a cop-out. In fact, he stands out among the major modernist authors in his aversion to it. Characters in Lawrence who cannot attain fulfilment are not generally to be

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seen as tragic. They are to be swept out of the way so that others may find their own fulfilment unimpeded.

Lawrence may be wrong about Tolstoy and tragedy, but he is right to see that authors quite often rig their narratives to suit their fictional purposes. Just when Dorothea Brooke, the heroine of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, seems trapped in a loveless marriage with a withered old pedant, the novel itself steps in and polishes him off with a fatal heart attack. The modern form of Providence, in other words, is known as fiction. *Jane Eyre* is anxious to marry its heroine off to Rochester, who is already married; so it topples his mad wife off a blazing rooftop to her death. If characters themselves are reluctant to commit murder, the narrative itself may always step in and oblige. Narratives are like hired assassins, ready to do the dirty work that their characters may flinch from. David Copperfield's childish, rather vacant-headed wife Dora is clearly an unsuitable partner for him, and so is obviously not going to make it to the end of the novel. She is as doomed as the domineering businessman who rides roughshod over his fellow characters at the start of a detective story, and who is clearly going to end up with a knife in his guts.

A story may step in to save the day with a timely legacy, the arrival of an eligible bachelor in the district, or the discovery of a long-lost, seriously rich relative. It is the task of realist narratives of this kind to grant the virtuous their reward and the villains their comeuppance. They must rectify the blunders of reality. Sometimes, as in the work of Henry Fielding, this is done with an ironic sense of its artifice. In real life, a novel may slyly intimate, the hero would probably have been hanged; but since this is fiction it is obligatory to hand him an adoring wife and a sizeable landed estate. If he himself is shown actively working for such things, this will diminish

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our sense of his virtue. Virtue is not supposed to be self-regarding. So the plot has to go to work on his behalf. Fielding allows Tom Jones to achieve happiness, while warning us that such felicitous outcomes are untypical of real life. There is, he remarks in the course of the novel, a worthy moral doctrine that the good will receive their reward in this world – a doctrine, he adds, which has only one defect, namely that it is not true.

In a similar way, the depraved and black-hearted are usually worsted by the end of the story. Their schemes are foiled, their fortunes are snatched from their hairy paws, and they are packed off to prison or married off to monsters. The poor are filled with good things, while the rich are sent empty away. Yet in real life, so it is discreetly hinted, the villains would probably have ended up as judges and cabinet ministers. There is a similar sense of irony at the end of some of Shakespeare's comedies, which make us wryly aware that this is probably not how things would have panned out in reality. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concludes with the 'right' couples being married off to each other, but not before the play has called into question the whole idea of rightness when it comes to sexual attraction. Instead, it demonstrates how anyone can desire anyone else – how there is an anarchic quality about desire which is a threat to an orderly plot. The queen of the fairies even falls in love with a donkey, which is not the only time that a royal personage has done so. In *The Tempest*, Prospero can be reconciled with his enemies only by deploying magical devices. Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* supplies us with alternative endings, one comic and one tragic. 'Here's your happy ending if you insist on one,' it seems to murmur to the reader, 'but don't imagine that it's necessarily the truth of the matter.'

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Henry James, who was unafraid of tragic outcomes, writes sardonically in his essay 'The Art of Fiction' of the 'distribution at the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks' which we find in the final pages of so many realist novels. The point of such conclusions is to console, whereas the effect of many a modernist ending is to unsettle. The Victorians believed that one of the functions of art was to raise the reader's spirits. Gloom was regarded as morally debilitating. It could even be seen as politically dangerous. A dispirited people was a disaffected one. This is one reason why almost all Victorian novels end on an affirmative note. Even the work that sails nearest to outright tragedy, *Wuthering Heights*, manages to pull off a tentatively positive conclusion. These happy endings are really fantasies, and fantasy, as Freud remarked, is 'a correction of an unsatisfying reality'. We know that in the real world the distribution of benefits leaves something to be desired. Admirable women get loutish husbands, crooked bankers stay out of prison and cute little babies are born to white supremacists. So a spot of poetic justice does not come amiss. Perhaps the novel is one of the few remaining places where such justice is possible. It is not a particularly consoling thought.

In an essay on Henry James in his *Notes on Life and Letters*, Joseph Conrad speaks of conventional fictional endings in terms of 'solution by rewards and punishments, by crowned love, by fortune, by a broken leg or a sudden death'. 'These solutions,' he continues, 'are legitimate inasmuch as they satisfy the desire for finality, for which our hearts yearn, with a longing greater than a longing for the loaves and fishes of this earth. Perhaps the only true desire of mankind, coming thus to light in its hours of leisure, is to be set at rest.' This hunger for closure, this constant cry of 'What happens

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in the end?’, keeps us eagerly reading. It is one reason we are so entranced by thrillers, mysteries, cliff-hangers and Gothic horror stories. Not long after Conrad wrote these words, Sigmund Freud would call our craving for finality the death drive.

Yet if we want our curiosity to be satisfied, we are also wary of such fulfilment. If the pleasures of closure come too soon, they ruin the delights of suspense. We long for assurance, but we also desire to defer it. We need to be gratified, but we also revel in the anxiety of not knowing. Unless a solution is temporarily withdrawn, there can be no story. It is its absence which keeps the narrative going. Yet we hanker for it to be restored, like a lost puppy or the Garden of Eden. When the narrator of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* meets Kurtz’s bereaved mistress at the end of the tale, he tells her a consoling untruth. It is as though she is treated by the story as a traditional audience in search of a happy ending. Conrad himself, however, suspects not only that endings are rarely happy, but that there are no definitive endings in any case.

* * *

We have seen already that stories are possible because some initial order is disrupted. A snake sidles into the happy garden, a stranger arrives in town, Don Quixote sallies forth on the open road, Lovelace takes a fancy to Clarissa, Tom Jones is pitched out of his patron’s country mansion, Lord Jim makes a fatal jump and Josef K is arrested for a nameless crime. In a good many realist novels, the point of the ending is to restore this order, perhaps in an enriched form. The original sin results in a state of conflict and chaos, but this will finally be redeemed. Like the Fall from Eden, it is a *felix culpa* or fortunate fault, since without it there would be no story. The reader is accordingly consoled and uplifted. He is assured that

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there is a logic implicit in reality, and that the task of the novel is to bring it patiently to light. We are all part of a stupendous plot, and the good news is that this plot has a comic outcome.

It may be helpful in this respect to think of narrative as a kind of strategy. Like any strategy, it mobilises certain resources and deploys certain techniques to achieve specific goals. A good many realist novels can be seen as problem-solving devices. They create problems for themselves which they then seek to resolve. Human beings who do this may find themselves being referred to psychiatrists, but it is the kind of thing we expect of realist fiction. If there is to be narrative suspense, however, difficulties must not be cleared up too quickly. Emma Woodhouse must end up in Mr Knightley's arms, but not in the second paragraph. In resolving one kind of problem, however, literary works may simply succeed in throwing up another, which needs to be tackled in its turn. Modernist and postmodernist literary works are generally less interested in solutions. Their aim is rather to lay bare certain problems. They do not typically end with fast-living fraudsters being hung upside down from lamp posts, or a set of blissful marriages. And in this, one might suggest, they are more realistic than most realism.

For classical realism, the world itself is story-shaped. In a lot of modernist fiction, by contrast, there is no order apart from what we ourselves construct. And since any such order is arbitrary, so are fictional openings and endings. There are no divinely ordained origins or natural closures. Which is to say that there are no logical middles either. What may count as an end for you may serve as an origin for me. You can make a start or call a halt wherever you want. Ends and origins are not inherent in the world. It is you, not the world, who calls the shots in this respect. Wherever you make a

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start, however, you may be sure that an enormous amount will have happened already. And wherever you call a halt, a great deal will carry on regardless.

Some modernist works are thus sceptical of the whole notion of narrative. Narrative suggests that there is a shapeliness to the world, an orderly procession of causes and effects. It is sometimes (though by no means always) bound up with a faith in progress, the power of reason and the forward march of humanity. It would not be too fanciful to claim that narrative of this classical kind fell to pieces on the battlefields of the First World War, an event which scarcely fostered a faith in human reason. It was around these years that the great modernist works were produced, from *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* to Yeats's *The Wild Swans at Coole* and Lawrence's *Women in Love*. For the modernist mind, reality does not evolve in a tidy fashion. Event A may lead to event B, but it also leads to events C, D, E and countless others. It is the product of countless factors as well. Who is to decide which of these storylines should take priority? Whereas realism views the world as an unfolding, modernism tends to see it as a text. The word 'text' here is akin to 'textile', meaning something spun of many interwoven threads. On this view, reality is less a logical development than a tangled web, in which every component is intricately caught up with every other. There is no centre to such a web, and no foundation on which it rests. You cannot pinpoint where it begins or ends. There is no event A or Z. The process can be unravelled back endlessly and unfolds infinitely. In the beginning was the word, as St John's Gospel declares; but a word is only a word because of its relations to other words. So for the first word to be a word, there must have been at least one other word already. Which is to say that there was no first word. If it makes sense to speak of language being born,

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then, as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has put it, it must have been born 'at a stroke'.

So the idea of narrative is thrown into crisis. For modernism, knowing where something began, even if this were possible, will not necessarily yield you the truth about it. To assume so is to be guilty of what has been called the genetic fallacy. There is no one grand narrative, simply a host of mini-narratives, each of which may have its partial truth. One can give any number of accounts of even the most humble aspect of reality, not all of which will be mutually compatible. It is impossible to know what trifling incident in a story might prove momentous in the end, rather as for the biologists it is hard to know which lowly form of life might evolve in the fullness of time into something exceptional. Who, contemplating a slimy, self-involved little mollusc billions of years ago, would have imagined the emergence of Tom Cruise? Stories try to foist some design on this weblike world, but in doing so they succeed only in simplifying and impoverishing it. To narrate is to falsify. In fact, one might even claim that to write is to falsify. Writing, after all, is a process which unfolds in time, and in this respect resembles narrative. The only authentic literary work, then, would be one which is conscious of this falsification, and which tries to tell its tale in a way that takes it into account.

This is to say that all narratives must be ironic. They must deliver their accounts while keeping their own limitations constantly in mind. They must somehow incorporate what they do not know into what they know. The limits of the story must become part of the story. This is one reason why some of Conrad's narrators, or the storyteller of Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*, are at pains to acknowledge their own blind spots. It is as though the nearest one can come to the truth is a confession of one's

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inevitable ignorance. Narratives must find a way of suggesting that there could be many versions of their subject-matter beside their own. If they are not to appear deceptively absolute, they must point to their own arbitrariness. Samuel Beckett sometimes sets out on one tall tale, aborts it almost as soon as it is off the ground, then launches an equally pointless one in its place.

Modern storytelling, in other words, has lost the kind of necessity it had in the days when poets would recount the mythical origins of the tribe or sing its military victories. Now, telling a tale has become gratuitous. It has no foundation in reality, as the origins of the tribe or the history of the nation are supposed to have. So stories have to be self-sustaining. They can appeal to no authority but their own, unlike the author of Genesis or Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This gives the storyteller a lot more room to manoeuvre. But it is a negative kind of freedom. We live in a world in which there is nothing that cannot be narrated, but nothing that needs to be either.

There are narratives which have stringent limits but which do not seem aware of the fact. Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *Mary Barton* is a case in point. Its male protagonist, John Barton, is a down-at-heel industrial worker in Victorian Manchester who becomes a political militant. When he does so, however, he seems to disappear beyond the horizon of the story, or at least beyond its comprehension. He can be felt lurking on its margins, but is no longer seen head-on. The novel even seems uncertain as to what kind of activist he is, whether a Chartist, a communist or otherwise. And if the book itself does not know, then nobody does. Barton has entered a shadowy world into which the story he appears in, with its own more conventional political views, simply cannot follow him. It is significant in this respect that Gaskell originally intended

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to call the novel after its protagonist, but changed her mind and called it after his less disreputable daughter Mary instead.

With the advent of modernism, then, it is becoming increasingly difficult to tell even the simplest of tales straight. Take the case of Joseph Conrad, who as a former seaman is renowned for his ability to spin a rattling good yarn. *Heart of Darkness* is among other things a gripping detective story. Yet as the fable unfolds, it begins to blur, dissolve and crumble at the edges. The story is told in a vividly concretising style, but there is an aura of mistiness about it which no degree of meticulous detail can dispel. Marlow, the protagonist, does not seem to be getting anywhere. As he moves upriver into the centre of Africa he is also journeying deeper inside himself, into some timeless realm of myth and the unconscious. So his journey is more inward than forward. At the same time, as he sails away from civilisation towards so-called savagery, he is travelling into the primeval past. To push forward into the heart of Africa is to revert to the 'primitive' origins of humanity. So the narrative moves forward and backward at the same time. Progress is purely illusory. There is no hope in history. History, to adapt the words of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, is a nightmare from which modernism is trying to awaken. If Conrad's narrative is in trouble, it is partly because the nineteenth-century belief in progress – of a continuous upward trek from barbarism to civilisation – has taken an almighty battering.

It therefore comes as no surprise that Kurtz, the monstrously depraved figure whom Marlow is in search of, first came to Africa as 'an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, and devil knows what else'. (One might expect that last phrase to read 'and *the* devil knows what else', but English was not Conrad's native language, and his prose sometimes reminds us of the fact.) Kurtz, a colonial

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official, arrived in Africa as a champion of progress and enlightenment, and has now degenerated into a man who performs certain 'unspeakable rites' and secret abominations. Having come to enlighten the inhabitants of the Belgian Congo, he now wants to exterminate them. So the progressive reverts to the primitive in the content of the story, as well as in its form.

Neither history nor narrative seems to get you anywhere any more. Joyce's Leopold Bloom gets up, potters rather pointlessly around Dublin and returns home. Linear notions of history give way to cyclical ones. Stories are forever trying to net down truths that prove elusive. To tell a tale is to try to shape the void. It is as futile as ploughing the ocean. Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* is literally telling his story in the dark, unsure whether he has an audience as he squats on the ship's deck at night. As we have seen already, his final spoken words are a lie. George Eliot and Thomas Hardy are convinced that the truth is essentially narratable, whereas Conrad and Woolf have no such faith. For them, truth lies beyond representation. It can be shown but not stated. Perhaps Kurtz has had a terrifying glimpse of it, but it cannot be crammed into the straitjacket of a story. There is a heart of darkness at the centre of every yarn.

It may be that Marlow can recite his tale only because he has failed to arrive at the truth, and never will. A piece of fiction that managed to pronounce the final word about the human condition would have nothing left to say. It would simply trail off into silence. It would perish of the truth it presented. 'Are not our lives too short,' Marlow asks, 'for that full utterance which through all our stammering is of course our only and abiding intention?' What keeps narrative on the move is its sheer impossibility. The truth that (modernist) stories pursue lies beyond the limits of language;

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yet they refuse to give up on it all the same, and it is this refusal that keeps storytelling in business. One is always nearer by not standing still. Marlow speaks in *Heart of Darkness* of travelling to 'the farthest point of navigation and the culminating point of my experience.' The only question is whether, having arrived at this stark extremity, one has the courage like Kurtz to peer over the edge into the abyss. Kurtz has journeyed beyond language and narrative into an obscene reality far beyond their frontiers; and this is presented by the story as a kind of horrific triumph. He has stared the Medusa's head in the face without flinching, and this, perhaps, is a more admirable achievement than suburban middle-class virtue. It is a familiar modernist case, as audacious as it is dangerous.

This, at least, is what Marlow himself believes about Kurtz, a man who hardly makes an appearance in the book. But he might always be falsely idealising him. Conrad himself may have other opinions. Some of his other works, like *Lord Jim* and *Nostromo*, are equally shy of telling a story straight. Instead, their accounts loop back on themselves, start off halfway through, run several storylines at the same time, exchange one narrator for another or recount the same events from different standpoints. The reader is forced to slice into the story at one angle and then another, skating backward and forward in time and relying on someone's record of someone's account of someone else's report.

Some of this is reminiscent of one of the greatest of English comic masterpieces, the eighteenth-century author Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Garbling one's storytelling is not confined to modernism. Sterne's novel is really a narrative about the impossibility of narrative, at least of a realist kind. What it has seen is that realism, strictly speaking, is beyond our power. No piece of writing can simply tell it as it is. All so-called realism is an angled, edited

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version of reality. There is no 'complete' account possible of a tiny stain on one's fingernail, let alone of a human life. The realist novel is meant to reflect existence as it is, in all its unruly detail; but it is also supposed to mould this formless stuff into a shapely narrative. And these two aims are really incompatible. Any story is bound to select, revise and exclude, and so fail to give us the unvarnished truth. If it tried to do that, it would have to go on for ever. One thing would lead to another and that to another, in a series of digressions upon digressions. Which is exactly what happens in *Tristram Shandy*.

For Sterne (or so at least he pretends), selecting and excluding is a way of cheating the reader. Design is really deceit. So Tristram, the book's narrator, sets out to tell us everything he possibly can about his birth and upbringing. The result of this apparently reader-friendly gesture is that the narrative rapidly stalls and the reader is utterly bamboozled. We suspect that what may look reader-friendly may be secretly mischief-making. By trying to tell us everything about himself, all the way back to the moment of his conception, Tristram ends up spinning such an unwieldy mass of text that we risk being completely flummoxed. The whole enterprise is hilariously self-undoing. It is not long before we begin to suspect that the hero is out of his mind, and feel ourselves being dragged in much the same direction.

Realism appears to give us the world in all its delightful or alarming dishevelledness, but it actually does no such thing. If a telephone rings in a realist novel or a naturalistic drama, it is almost certain to be a move in the plot rather than a wrong number. Realist works choose the kind of characters, events and situations which will help to build up their moral vision. In order to conceal this selectivity, however, and thus to preserve their air of reality,

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they usually supply us with a lot of detail that really is pretty random. They might tell us that a brain surgeon who puts in a brief appearance has huge, hairy hands, whereas she might easily have been equipped with smooth, dainty ones with no loss to the storyline. The detail is entirely arbitrary. It is there simply to fabricate a sense of the real. A realist novel may have its heroine hail a maroon-coloured taxi, whereas an experimental novel might make the taxi maroon on one page, no colour at all on another, and with a driver made entirely out of marzipan on a third. In doing so, it would deliberately let the realist cat out of the bag. It would expose to view what the realist novel gets up to behind our backs. This, in effect, is the aim of *Tristram Shandy*. No sooner had the novel form emerged in Britain than it was deviously deconstructed.

Tristram's purpose is to write his autobiography. Yet if he is not to deceive the reader he must leave nothing out, with the result that he never gets his story beyond childhood. After completing two sizeable volumes of the work, he has still not got himself born. After nine volumes, we do not even know what he looks like. To recount his life-history, he is forever having to nip from one time-stream to another, double back to clarify a point, or hold up one part of narrative while he gets on with another bit. His history, he remarks, 'is digressive, and it is progressive too – and at the very same time'. He must also keep a vigilant eye on what one might call the reader's time-stream, urging us to slow down or speed up as the case may be. Strictly speaking, the hero would need to stop living while he was writing, otherwise he would never be able to catch up with himself. The more he writes, the more he will have to write, since the more living he will have done in the meanwhile. For the sake of completeness, he would also have to include the act of writing his life-history in his life-history.

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As Tristram scribbles busily away, the whole novel gradually comes apart in his hands. The narrative logjams, bits fall off, characters are left standing at doors for the duration of several chapters, details begin to spawn uncontrollably, a Preface and a Dedication get displaced, and the author himself threatens to sink without trace under his potentially infinite pile of text. Storytelling is an absurd enterprise. It is an attempt to put in sequential form a reality which is not sequential at all. So is language itself. To say one thing necessarily means excluding another, even for *Finnegans Wake*. The very medium in which Tristram tries to grasp the truth of his identity – words – succeeds only in obscuring it.

Exorbitant claims are sometimes made for narrative. Historically speaking, it goes a long way back. Storytelling would seem as ancient as humanity itself. It is sometimes said that we speak, think, love, dream and act in narrative. This is true in one sense, since we are all creatures of time. Yet not all men and women experience their existence in this way. Some see their lives as a coherent story, while others do not. The same applies to different cultures. One thinks of the old joke ‘My life contains some wonderful characters, but I can’t work out the plot.’ The hackneyed metaphor of life as a journey implies a sense of purpose and continuity which not everyone finds illuminating. Where exactly do people think they are going? A life can be significant without having a goal, just as a work of art can be. What is the purpose of having children or wearing shocking pink tights? Works of fiction like *Tristram Shandy*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Ulysses* and *Mrs Dalloway* can serve to free us from seeing human life as goal-driven, logically unfolding and rigorously coherent. As such, they can help us to enjoy it more.

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What, finally, of the difference between narrative and plot? One way to distinguish between the two is to think of the novels of Agatha Christie. Christie's crime thrillers are almost all plot. Other features of narrative – scene-setting, dialogue, atmosphere, symbolism, description, reflection, in-depth characterisation and so on – are ruthlessly stripped away to leave little but the bare bones of the action. The books differ in this respect from the detective fiction of Dorothy L. Sayers, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell and Ian Rankin, authors who have embedded their plots in a much richer narrative context.

Plot, then, is part of narrative, but it does not exhaust it. We generally mean by it the significant action of a story. It signifies the way in which characters, events and situations are interconnected. Plot is the logic or inner dynamic of the narrative. For Aristotle's *Poetics*, it represents 'the combination of the incidents, or things done in the story'. A summary of it is what we tend to come up with when someone asks us what a story is about. The plot of *The Sound of Music* includes the Von Trapp family's flight from the Nazis, but not Julie Andrews warbling away on a mountain top or the fact that she has slightly prominent front teeth. The murder of Banquo is part of the plot of *Macbeth*, but not the speech 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . .'.

There are plenty of plotless narratives, such as *Waiting for Godot*, 'Thirty Days Hath September' or Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. There are also narratives which may or may not have plots, in the sense that we cannot be sure whether some significant action is afoot or not. This is sometimes the case in the fiction of Franz Kafka. It is also occasionally true of Henry James. Paranoiacs and conspiracy theorists are inclined to detect plots where there are none. They 'overread' stray details and random events, finding in

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them the signs of some sinisterly concealed narrative. Othello does this with Desdemona's handkerchief, which he misreads as a token of her sexual infidelity. It also happens in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan Kundera, who lived for some years under a Communist regime in Eastern Europe. Since such regimes are constantly spying on their citizens, perpetually on the look-out for the slightest flicker of dissidence, they qualify as paranoid. As with paranoia, nothing that happens can happen by accident. Everything must have some portentous significance. In Kundera's story, a character is being sick in the centre of communist Prague, and another character strolls up and gazes down at him. 'I know exactly what you mean,' he murmurs sympathetically.