

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 1 (1984)  
  
**Artikel:** Mimesis and diegesis in modern fiction  
**Autor:** Lodge, David  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-99832>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 13.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction

David Lodge

How does one begin to map a field as vast, as various modern fiction? It seems a hopeless endeavour, and, in an absolute sense, it *is* hopeless. Even if one could hold all the relevant data in one's head at one time – which one cannot – and could formulate a typology into which they would all fit – some novelist would soon produce a work that eluded all one's categories, because art lives and develops by deviating unpredictably from aesthetic norms. Nevertheless the effort to generalise, to classify, has to be made; for without some conceptual apparatus for grouping and separating literary fictions criticism could hardly claim to be knowledge, but would be merely the accumulation of opinions about one damn novel after another. This is the justification for literary history, particularly that kind of literary history which has a generic or formal bias, looking for common conventions, strategies, techniques, beneath the infinite variety of subject matter. Such literary history breaks up the endless stream of literary production into manageable blocks or bundles, called “periods” or “schools” or “movements” or “trends” or “subgenres”.

We are all familiar with a rough division of the fiction of the last 150 years into three phases, that of classic realism, that of modernism and that of postmodernism (though, it hardly needs saying, these phases overlap both chronologically and formally). And we are familiar with various attempts to break down these large, loose groupings into more delicate and discriminating subcategories. In the case of postmodernist fiction, for instance: transfiction, surfiction, metafiction, new journalism, nonfiction novel, faction, fabulation, *nouveau roman*, *nouveau nouveau roman*, irrealism, magic realism, and so on. Some of these terms are synonyms, or nearly so. Most of them invoke or imply the idea of the new. British writing rarely figures on such maps of postmodern fiction. Our postmodernism, it is widely believed, has consisted in ignoring, rather than trying to go beyond, the experiments of modernism, reviving and perpetuating the mode of classic realism which Joyce, Woolf and Co. thought they had despatched for good.

This kind of map-making usually has an ideological and, in the Pop-

perian sense of the word, historicist motivation. The mode of classic realism, with its concern coherence and causality in narrative structure, for the autonomy of the individual self in the presentation of character, for a readable homogeneity and urbanity of style, is equated with liberal humanism, with empiricism, commonsense and the presentation of bourgeois culture as a kind of nature. The confusions, distortions and disruptions of the postmodernist text, in contrast, reflect a view of the world as not merely subjectively constructed (as modernist fiction implied) but as absurd, meaningless, radically resistant to totalising interpretation.

There is a certain truth in this picture, but it is a half-truth, and therefore a misleading one. The classic realist text was never as homogenous, as consistent as the model requires; nor do postmodern novelists divide as neatly as it implies into complacent neorealist sheep and dynamic deconstructionist goats. (It hardly needs to be said that the ideology of the postmodernist avant garde, reversing proverbial wisdom, prefers goats to sheep, John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* being one of its canonical texts.) Perhaps I have a personal interest in this issue, since I write as well as read, contemporary fiction. I am dissatisfied with maps of contemporary fiction which take into account only the most deviant and marginal kinds of writing, leaving all the rest white space. But equally unsatisfactory is the bland, middlebrow, market-oriented reviewing of novels in newspapers and magazines which not only shies away from boldly experimental writing, but makes what one might call mainstream fiction seem technically less interesting and innovative than it often is.

Take, for example, the case of the contemporary British novelist, Fay Weldon. She is a successful and highly respected writer, in Britain at least, but her work rarely figures in any discussion of postmodernism in the literary quarterlies. Fay Weldon has been pigeonholed as a feminist novelist, and the criticism of her work is almost exclusively thematic. Now there is no doubt that she is a feminist writer, but her handling of narrative is technically very interesting and subtly innovative, and her feminism gets its force precisely from her ability to defamiliarise her material in this way. Typically, her novels follow the fortunes of a heroine, or a group of women, over a longish time span, from childhood in the 30s and 40s to the present. The narrator is usually revealed at some point to be the central character, but the narrative discourse mostly uses a third-person reference, typical of traditional anauthorial narration, often claiming the privileged insight into the interiority of several

characters that belongs to that kind of narration, and not to the confessional autobiographical mode. The tense system is similarly unstable, switching erratically between the narrative preterite and the historical present. There is very artful use of condensed duration, that is, the summary narration of events which would have occupied a considerable length of time in reality, and which would be sufficiently important to the people involved to be worth lingering over in a more conventional kind of fiction. This creates a tone of comic despair about the follies and contradictions of human relations, and especially the fate of women. Here is a specimen from Fay Weldon's novel, *Female Friends* (1975). Oliver is being promiscuously unfaithful to his wife Chloe and she complains.

"For God's sake," he says, irritated, "go out and have a good time yourself. I don't mind."

He lies in his teeth, but she doesn't know this. She only wants Oliver. It irks him (he says) and cramps his style. He who only wants her to be happy, but whose creativity (he says) demands its nightly dinner of fresh young female flesh.

Gradually the pain abates, or at any rate runs underground. Chloe gets involved in Inigo's school: she helps in the library every Tuesday and escorts learners to the swimming pool on Fridays. She helps at the local birth control clinic and herself attends the fertility sessions, in the hope of increasing her own.

Oh, Oliver! He brings home clap and gives it to Chloe. They are both soon and simply cured. His money buys the most discreet and mirthful doctors; Oliver himself is more shaken than Chloe, and her patience is rewarded: he becomes bored with his nocturnal wanderings and stays home and watches television instead.<sup>1</sup>

The first paragraph of this passage is a familiar kind of combination of direct speech and narrative, deviant only in the use of the present tense for the narrative. The second paragraph exerts the privilege of authorial omniscience somewhat paradoxically, since we know that Chloe is herself narrating the story. It also uses a deviant style of representing speech, apparently quoting Oliver in part, and reporting him in part. The effect of direct quotation arises from the congruence of tense between Oliver's speech and the narrator's speech ("it irks...he says"); the effect of reported speech arises from the use of the third person pronoun ("it irks *him*"). This equivocation between quoted and reported speech allows the narrator to slide in a very loaded paraphrase of Oliver's stated

<sup>1</sup> Fay Weldon, *Female Friends* [1975] Picador edn. (1977) pp. 163-4.



need for young women – it is highly unlikely that he himself used that cannibalistic image, the “nightly dinner of fresh young female flesh.” The penultimate paragraph uses a summary style of narration that seems quite natural because it is describing routine, habitual actions of little narrative interest. But summary is foregrounded in the last paragraph because applied to events which are full of emotional and psychological pain, embarrassment and recrimination – the sort of thing we are used to having presented scenically in fiction.

One way of describing this mode of writing would be to say that it is a mode of telling rather than showing, or, to use a more venerable terminology, of diegesis rather than mimesis. It seems to me a distinctively postmodern phenomenon in that it deviates from the norms of both classic realism and of modernism, as do, more spectacularly, the writers of the postmodernist avantgarde in America. Indeed, if we are looking for a formal, as distinct from an ideological, definition of postmodernism, we could, I believe, look profitably at its foregrounding of diegesis. The simple Platonic distinction between mimesis and diegesis, however, is inadequate to cope with all the varieties and nuances of novelistic discourse. In what follows I want to combine it – or refine it – with the more complex discourse typology of the Russian postformalists (who may have been one and the same person in some writings) Valentin Vološinov and Mikhail Bakhtin. In Book III of the *Republic*, Plato distinguishes between diegesis, the representation of actions in the poet’s own voice, and mimesis, the representation of action in the imitated voices of the character or characters. Pure diegesis is exemplified by dithyramb, a kind of hymn. (Later poetics put lyric poetry into this category – a serious mistake according to Gérard Genette,<sup>2</sup> but one which need not concern us here). Pure mimesis is exemplified by drama. Epic is a mixed form, combining both diegesis and mimesis, that is, combining authorial report, description, summary and commentary on the one hand, with the quoted direct speech of the characters on the other. To make his distinction clearer, Plato cites the opening scene of Homer’s *Iliad*, in which the confrontation of Chryses and Agamemnon is introduced diegetically by the authorial narrator and then presented mimetically in the speech of the two men. Chryses asks to ransom his daughter, and Agamemnon refuses. To make his point still clearer, Plato rewrites the whole scene diegetically, which entails turning direct speech into reported speech, e.g.:

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Genette, *Introduction à l’architexte*, Paris, 1979, pp. 14–15.

"Let me not find thee, old man, amid the hollow ships, whether tarrying now or returning again hereafter, lest the staff and fillet of the god avail thee naught. And her will I not set free; nay, ere that shall old age come on her in her own house, in Argos, far from her native land, where she shall ply the loom and serve my couch. But depart, provoke me not, that thou mayest rather go in peace."

Agamemnon fell into a rage, telling him to go away now and not to come back, or his staff and wreathings of the god might not help him; before he would give her up, he said she should grow old with him in Argos, told him to be off and not to provoke him, if he wanted to get home safe.<sup>3</sup>

It is evident that, though there is a clear difference between the two passages, the individuality of Agamemnon's speech is not wholly obliterated by the narrator's speech in the Platonic rewriting, and could be obliterated only by some much more drastic summary, such as Gérard Genette suggests in his discussion of this passage: "Agamemnon angrily refused Chryses' request."<sup>4</sup> Plato conceived of the epic as a mixed form in the sense that it simply alternated two distinct kinds of discourse – the poet's speech and the characters' speech – and this is in fact true of Homer; but his own example shows the potential within narrative for a much more complex mixing, more like a fusing, of the two modes, in reported speech. This potential was to be elaborately exploited by the novel, which uses reported speech extensively – not only to represent speech, but to represent thoughts and feelings which are not actually uttered aloud. This is where Vološinov and Bakhtin are useful, because they focus on the way the novelistic treatment of reported speech tends towards an intermingling of authorial speech and characters' speech, of diegesis and mimesis; Vološinov calls this phenomenon "speech interference". Bakhtin regards it as constitutive of the novel as a literary form:

One of the essential peculiarities of prose fiction is the possibility it allows of using different types of discourse, with their distinct expressiveness intact, on the plane of a single work, without reduction to a single common denominator.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *The Iliad*, I, 11.26–32. trans. Laing, Leaf & Myers; *The Republic*, Book III, trans. Paul Shosey. (I have taken these translations from Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane E Lewin, Oxford, 1980, pp. 169–70.)

<sup>4</sup> Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 170.

<sup>5</sup> *Readings in Russian Poetics* ed. Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomovska, Cambridge Mass. 1979, p. 193. All citations of Bakhtin and Vološinov are taken from the extracts from Bakhtin's *Problems in Dostoevsky's Poetics* and from Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* included in this anthology.

Vološinov distinguishes between what he calls (borrowing the terms from Wölfflin's art history) the linear style of reporting, and the pictorial style. The linear style preserves a clear boundary between the reported speech and the reporting context (that is, the author's speech) in terms of information or reference, while suppressing the textual individuality of the reported speech by imposing its own linguistic register, or attributing to the characters exactly the same register as the author's. The linear style is characteristic of prenovelistic narrative, and is associated by Vološinov especially with what he calls authoritarian and rationalistic dogmatism in the medieval and Enlightenment periods. I suggest that *Rasselas* affords a late example of what Vološinov calls the linear style:

"...I sat feasting on intellectual luxury, regardless alike of the examples of the earth and the instructions of the planets. Twenty months are passed. Who shall restore them?"

These sorrowful meditations fastened upon his mind; he passed four months in resolving to lose no more time in idle resolves, and was awakened to more vigorous exertion by hearing a maid, who had broken a porcelain cup, remark that what cannot be repaired is not to be regretted.

This was obvious; and Rasselas reproached himself that he had not discovered it – having not known, or not considered, how many useful hints are obtained by chance, and how often the mind, hurried by her own ardour to distant views, neglects the truths that lie open before her. He for a few hours regretted his regret, and from that time bent his whole mind upon the means of escaping from the Valley of Happiness.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the quoted direct speech of Rasselas at the beginning of the extract, there are two kinds of reported speech here: the reported utterance of the maid, and the reported inner speech, or thoughts, of Rasselas. All are linguistically assimilated to the dominant register of the authorial discourse – author, Rasselas, and even the maid all seem to speak the same kind of language – balanced, abstract, polite; but the referential contours of the reported speech are very clearly demarcated and judged by the authorial speech. This is typical of Vološinov's linear style and Plato's diegesis: linguistic homogeneity – informational discrimination. It is one of the reasons why we hesitate to describe *Rasselas* as a novel, even though it postdates the development of the English novel. From a novel we expect a more realistic rendering of the individuality and variety of human speech than we get in *Rasselas* – both in

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), Chap. 4.

direct or quoted speech and in reported speech or thought – “different types of discourse with their distinct expressiveness intact.” (But note that there is a kind of tonal resemblance between the passage from *Rasselas* and the passage from Fay Weldon’s *Female Friends* – the cool, confident, detached ironic tone that is generated by the *summary* nature of the narrative discourse – summary being characteristic of diegesis, or what Vološinov calls the linear style.) For Vološinov, naturally influenced by Russian literary history, the rise of the novel virtually coincides with the development of the *pictorial* style of reported speech, in which author’s speech and character’s speech, diegesis and mimesis interpenetrate. The evolution of the English novel was more gradual. The Rise of the English novel in the eighteenth century began with the discovery of new possibilities of mimesis in prose narrative, through the use of characters as narrators – the pseudo-autobiographers of Defoe, the pseudo-correspondents of Richardson – thus making the narrative discourse a mimesis of an act of diegesis, diegesis at a second remove. These devices brought about a quantum leap in realistic illusion and immediacy, but they tended to confirm Plato’s ethical disapproval of mimesis, his fears about the morally debilitating effects of skilful mimesis of imperfect personages. However highminded the intentions of Defoe (which is doubtful) or of Richardson (which is not) there is no way in which the reader can be prevented from delighting in and even identifying with Moll Flanders or Lovelace in even their wickedest actions. Fielding, his mind trained in a classical school, restored the diegetic balance in his comic-epic-poem-in-prose: the individuality of characters is represented, and relished, in the reproduction of their distinctive speech – Fielding, unlike Johnson in *Rasselas*, does not make all the characters speak in the same register as himself – but the author’s speech (and values) are quite clearly distinguished from the characters’ speech and values; mimesis and diegesis are never confused. The same is true of Scott, in whose work there is, notoriously, a stark contrast between the polite literary English of the narrator’s discourse, and the richly textured colloquial dialect speech of the Scottish characters – a disparity that becomes particularly striking in the shift from direct to reported speech or thought:

“He’s a gude creature creature,” said she, “and a kind – it’s a pity he has sae willyard a powny.” And she immediately turned her thoughts to the important journey which she had commenced, reflecting with pleasure, that, according to her habits of life and of undergoing fatigue, she was now amply



or even superfluously provided with the means of encountering the expenses of the road, up and down from London, and all other expenses whatever.<sup>7</sup>

The classic nineteenth century novel followed the example of Fielding and Scott in maintaining a fairly even balance between mimesis and diegesis, showing and telling, scene and summary; but it also broke down the clear distinction between diegesis and mimesis in the representation of thought and feeling, through what Vološinov called the "pictorial style" of reported speech. In this, the individuality of the reported speech or thought is retained even as the author's speech "permeates the reported speech with its own intentions – humour, irony, love or hate, enthusiasm or scorn."<sup>8</sup> Let me illustrate this with a passage from *Middlemarch*:

She was open, ardent, and not in the least self-admiring; indeed, it was pretty to see how her imagination adorned her sister Celia with attractions altogether superior to her own, and if any gentleman appeared to come to the Grange from some other motive than that of seeing Mr Brooke, she concluded that he must be in love with Celia: Sir James Chettam, for example, whom she constantly considered from Celia's point of view, inwardly debating whether it would be good for Celia to accept him. That he should be regarded as a suitor for herself would have seemed to her a ridiculous irrelevance. Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker, if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony: or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable handsome baronet, who said 'Exactly' to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty, – how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father, and could teach you even Hebrew, if you wished it.<sup>9</sup>

Up to, and including, the sentence "Dorothea...retained very childlike ideas about marriage", this passage is diegetic: the narrator describes the character of Dorothea authoritatively, in words that Dorothea could not use about herself without contradiction (she cannot, for instance, acknowledge that her ideas are childlike without ceasing to hold them). Then the deixis becomes more problematical. The tag, "she felt" is an ambiguous signal to the reader, since it can introduce either an objective report by the narrator or subjective reflection by the character. Collo-

<sup>7</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Heart of Midlothian*, (1819), Chapt. 26.

<sup>8</sup> V. N. Vološinov, in *Readings in Russian Poetics*, p. 155.

<sup>9</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–2), Chapt. 1.

quial phrases in the sequel, such as “that wretched mistake” and “when his blindness had come on” seem to be the words in which Dorothea herself would have articulated these ideas, though the equally colloquial “odd habits” does not. Why does it not? Because, in unexpected collocation with “great men” (“great men whose odd habits”) it seems too rhetorical an irony for Dorothea – it is a kind of oxymoron – and so we attribute it to the narrator. But that is not to imply that Dorothea is incapable of irony. “Who said ‘Exactly’ to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty” – do we not infer that Sir James’s illogicality has been noted by Dorothea herself in just that crisp, dismissive way? Then what about the immediately succeeding phrase – “how could he affect her as a lover?” If the immediately preceding phrase is attributed to Dorothea, as I suggest, then it would be natural to ascribe this one to her also – but a contradiction then arises. For if Dorothea can formulate the question “How can Sir James affect me as a lover?” her alleged unconsciousness of her own attractions to visiting gentlemen is compromised. Is the question, then, put by the narrator, appealing directly to the reader, over the heroine’s head to acknowledge the plausibility of her behaviour, meaning, “You do see, gentle reader, why it never crossed Dorothea’s mind that Sir James Chettam was a possible match for her?” There is such an implication, but the reason given – that Sir James said ‘Exactly’ when Dorothea expressed uncertainty – seems too trivial for the narrator to draw the conclusion, “How could he affect her as a lover?” – The fact is that diegesis and mimesis are fused together inextricably here – and for a good reason: for there is a sense in which Dorothea knows what the narrator knows – namely, that Sir James is sexually attracted to her – but is repressing the thought, on account of her determination to marry an intellectual father figure. When Celia finally compels Dorothea to face the truth of the matter, the narrator tells us that “she was not less angry because certain details asleep in her memory were now awakened to confirm the unwelcome revelation.” One of these details was surely that very habit of Sir James of saying ‘Exactly’ when she expressed uncertainty – a sign of his admiration, deference and anxiety to please rather than of his stupidity. Here, then, the character’s voice and the author’s voice are so tightly interwoven that it is impossible at times to disentangle them; and the author’s irony, consequently, is affectionate, filled by a warm regard for Dorothea’s individuality – very different from Johnson’s judicial irony in the passage from *Rasselas*.

In the next stage of the novel’s development, Vološinov observes,



the reported speech is not merely allowed to retain a certain measure of autonomous life within the auctorial context, but actually itself comes to dominate auctorial speech in the discourse as a whole. "The auctorial context loses the greater objectivity it normally commands in comparison with reported speech. It begins to be perceived and even recognizes itself as if it were subjective." Vološinov notes that this is often associated with the delegation of the auctorial task to a narrator who cannot "bring to bear against [the] subjective position [of the other characters] a more authoritative and objective world."<sup>10</sup> In the Russian novel, it seems, Dostoevsky initiated this second phase in the development of the pictorial style. In the English novel I think we would point to the work of James and Conrad at the turn of the century: James's use of unreliable first person narrators (*The Turn of the Screw*) or sustained focalization of the narrative through the perspective of characters whose perceptions are narrowly limited, with minimal authorial comment and interpretation ("In the Cage", *The Ambassadors*); Conrad's use of multiple framing via multiple narrators, none of whom is invested with ultimate interpretative authority (*Lord Jim*, *Nostromo*).

At this point it is useful to switch to Bakhtin's typology of literary discourse. There are three main categories:

1. *The Direct speech of the author*. This corresponds to Plato's diegesis.
2. *Represented speech*. This includes Plato's mimesis – i.e. the quoted speech of the characters; but also all reported speech in the pictorial style.
3. *Doubly oriented speech*, that is, speech which not only refers to something in the world but refers to another speech act by another addresser.

Bakhtin subdivides this third type of discourse into four categories, stylization, parody, *skaz* (the Russian term for oral narration) and what he calls "dialogue". Dialogue means here, not the quoted direct speech of the characters, but discourse which alludes to an *absent* speech act. In stylization, parody and *skaz*, the other speech act is "reproduced with a new intention"; in "dialogue" it "shapes the author's speech while remaining outside its boundaries." An important type of dialogic discourse in this sense is "hidden polemic" in which a speaker not only refers to an object in the world but simultaneously replies to, contests, or makes concessions to some other real or anticipated or hypothetical statement about the same object.

<sup>10</sup> V. N. Vološinov, *op. cit.* p. 155–6.

These categories all have their subcategories which can be combined and shifted around in the system in a somewhat bewildering way, but the basic distinctions are clear, and I think useful. Let me try and illustrate them with reference to *Ulysses*, a text as encyclopaedic in this respect as in all others.

1. The direct speech of the author. This is the narrator who speaks in, for instance, the first lines of the book:

Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and razor lay crossed.<sup>11</sup>

This is the purely diegetic plane of the text. In *Ulysses* its function is purely descriptive – not interpretative. Since most description is focalised through character in *Ulysses*, the author's speech as a distinct medium of communication is very muted, scarcely perceived as such.

2. Represented speech. This includes all the dialogue in the usual sense of that word – the quoted direct speech of the characters, introduced by the dash. It also includes all the passages of interior monologue: mimesis in Plato's terms, but used to represent thought not speech. "Penelope" is the purest example. The presentation of the thought of Stephen and Bloom combines authorial report, free indirect speech and interior monologue – in short, a mixture of mimesis and diegesis in which mimesis is dominant. For example, here is Bloom in the pork-butcher's shop in "Calypso":

A kidney oozed bloodgouts on to the willowpatterned dish: the last. He stood by the nextdoor girl at the counter. Would she buy it too, calling the items from a slip in her hand. Chapped: washing soda. And a pound and a half of Denny's sausages. His eyes rested on her vigorous hips. Woods his name is. Wife is oldish. New blood. No followers allowed. Strong pair of arms. Whacking a carpet on the clothes lines. She does whack it, by George. The way her crooked skirt swings at each whack.<sup>12</sup>

We may classify the various kinds of speech here as follows:

*A kidney oozed bloodgouts on to the willowpatterned dish. Narrative.*  
*the last.* Interior monologue.

*He stood by the nextdoor girl at the counter.* Narrative.

*Would she buy it too, calling the items from a slip in her hand.* Free indirect speech.

*Chapped: washing soda.* Interior monologue.

<sup>11</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* [1922] Penguin edn., Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

*And a pound and a half of Denny's sausages.* Free direct speech (i. e., the girl's words are quoted but not marked off typographically from Bloom's).

*His eyes rested on her vigorous hips.* Narrative.

*Woods his name is, etc.* (to end of paragraph). Interior monologue.

3. Doubly-oriented discourse. In the later episodes of *Ulysses*, the authorial narrator who, however self-effacing, was a stable, consistent and reliable voice in the text, disappears; and his place is taken by various manifestations of Bakhtin's doubly-oriented discourse. "Stylization" is well exemplified by "Nausicaa", in which Joyce borrows the discourse of cheap women's magazines and makes it serve his own expressive purpose:

Gerty was dressed simply but with the instinctive taste of a votary of Dame Fashion for she felt there was just a might that he might be out. A neat blouse of electric blue, self-tinted by dolly dyes (because it was expected in the *Lady's Pictorial* that electric blue would be worn) with a smart vee opening down to the division and kerchief pocket (in which she always kept a piece of cottonwool scented with her favourite perfume because the handkerchief spoiled the sit) and a navy three-quarter skirt cut to the stride showed off her slim graceful figure to perfection.<sup>13</sup>

Who speaks here? Clearly it is not the author – he would not use such debased, cliché-ridden language. But we cannot take it, either, to be the author's report of Gertie's thought in free indirect speech. FIS can always be transposed into plausible direct speech (first person, present tense) and clearly that would be impossible in this case. It is a written, not a spoken style, and a very debased one. It is neither diegesis nor mimesis, nor a blend of the two, but a kind of pseudodiegesis achieved by the mimesis not of a character's speech but of a discourse, the discourse of cheap women's magazines at the turn of the century. It is essential to the effect of "Nausicaa" that we should be aware of the style's double reference – to Gertie's experience, and to its own original discursive context. We are not to suppose that Gertie literally thinks in sentences lifted from the *Lady's Pictorial*. But the style of the *Lady's Pictorial* subtly manipulated, heightened, "objectified" (Bakhtin's word) vividly communicates a sensibility pathetically limited to the concepts and values disseminated by such a medium. The author, like a ventriloquist, is a silent presence in the text, but his very silence is the background against which we appreciate his creative skill.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 348.

This is stylization – not the same thing as parody. Parody, as Bakhtin points out, borrows a style and applies it to expressive purposes that are in some sense the reverse of the original purpose, or at least incongruous with it. The headlines in “Aeolus”, would furnish examples of parody.

SOPHIST WALLOPS HAUGHTY HELEN  
SQUARE ON PROBOSCIS. SPARTANS GNASH  
MOLARS. ITHACANS VOW PEN IS CHAMP

– You remind me of Antisthenes, the professor said, a disciple of Georgias, the sophist. It is said of him that one could not tell if he were bitterer against others or against himself. He was the son of a noble and a bondwoman. And he wrote a book in which he took away the palm of beauty from Argive Helen and handed it to poor Penelope.<sup>14</sup>

The anonymous narrator of “Cyclops” provides an example of Irish *skaz* – the anecdotal chat of pubs and bars:

I was just passing the time of day with old Troy of the D. M. P. at the corner of Arbour Hill there and be damned but a bloody sweep came along and he near drove his gear into my eye. I turned around to let him have the weight of my tongue when who should I see dodging along Stony Batter only Joe Hynes.

– Lo, Joe, say I. How are you blowing? Did you see that bloody chimney-sweep near shove my eye out with his brush?<sup>15</sup>

We never discover who this narrator is, or to whom he is talking, or in what context. But clearly it is oral narration – *skaz*. There is no perceptible difference, either in syntax or type of vocabulary, between the discourse before and after the dash that in *Ulysses* introduces direct or quoted speech.

Of all the many styles in *Ulysses*, perhaps the most baffling to critical analysis and evaluation has been that of “Eumaeus”, a style which Stuart Gilbert classified as “Narrative: old”. Rambling, elliptical, cliché-ridden, it is, we are told, meant to reflect the nervous and physical exhaustion of the two protagonists. As with “Nausicaa”, we cannot read the discourse either as author’s narration or as representation of Blom’s consciousness though it does seem expressive of Bloom’s character in some respects: his friendliness bordering on servility, his fear of rejection, his reliance on proverbial wisdom. Bakhtin’s definition of “hidden polemic” seems to fit it very well: “Any speech that is servile or overblown, any speech that is determined beforehand not to be itself,

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 290.

any speech replete with reservations, concessions, loopholes, and so on. Such speech seems to cringe in the presence, or at the presentiment of, some other person's statement reply, objection."

*En route*, to his taciturn, and, not to put too fine a point on it, not yet perfectly sober companion, Mr Bloom, who at all events, was in complete possession of his faculties, never more so, in fact disgustingly sober, spoke a word of caution re the dangers of nighttown, women of ill fame and swell mobsmen, which, barely permissible once in a while, though not as a habitual practice, was of the nature of a regular deathtrap for young fellows of his age particularly if they had acquired drinking habits under the influence of liquor unless you knew a little juijitsu for every contingency as even a fellow on the broad of his back could administer a nasty kick if you didn't look out.<sup>16</sup>

Let me return to the simple tripartite historical scheme with which I began, – classic realism, modernism, postmodernism, – and see what it looks like in the light of the discourse typology of Plato, Vološinov and Bakhtin. The classic realist text, we may say, was characterised by a balanced and harmonised combination of mimesis and diegesis, reported speech and reporting context, authorial speech and represented speech. The modern novel evolved through an increasing dominance of mimesis over diegesis. Narrative was focalised through character with extensive use of 'pictorial' reported speech or delegated to narrators with mimetically objectified styles. Diegesis, to be sure, does not completely disappear from the modernist novel, but it does become increasingly intractable. One can see the strain in those novelists who could least easily do without it: in Hardy, Forster and Lawrence. Hardy hedges his bets, equivocates, qualifies or contradicts his own authorial dicta, uses tortuous formulae to avoid taking responsibility for authorial description and generalization. Forster tries to accommodate diegesis by making a joke of it:

To Margaret – I hope that it will not set the reader against her – the station of King's Cross had always suggested Infinity [...] if you think this is ridiculous, remember that it is not Margaret who is telling you about it.<sup>17</sup>

At other times in *Howards End*, with less success, Forster tries to smuggle in his authorial comments as if they were his heroine's.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 534–5.

<sup>17</sup> E. M. Forster, *Howards End* [1910], Penguin edn., Harmondsworth, 1953, p. 13.



Margaret greeted her lord with peculiar tenderness on the morrow. Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the grey, sober against the fire.<sup>18</sup>

It is not just the rather purple diction, but the slide from narrative preterite to “gnomic present” that gives away the author’s voice.

Lawrence uses the same technique pervasively – for example in the famous passage where Lady Chatterley drives through Tevershall. She passes the school where a singing lesson is in progress:

Anything more unlike song, spontaneous song, would be impossible to imagine: a strange bawling yell that followed the outlines of a tune. It was not like savages: savages have subtle rhythms. It was not like animals: animals mean something when they yell. It was like nothing on earth and it was called singing.<sup>19</sup>

The gnomic present tense – “savages *have*”, “animals *mean*” – indicate that this is not just a transcription of Connie Chatterley’s thoughts – that the author is with her, speaking for her, lecturing us over her shoulder. It has been often enough observed that Lawrence did not live up to his own prescription that the novelist should keep his thumb out of the pan; but the prescription itself is very much in the spirit of modernism. Impersonality, “dramatization”, “showing” rather than “telling”, are the cardinal principles of the modernist fictional aesthetic, as variously formulated and practiced by James, Conrad, Ford, Woolf and Joyce. This aesthetic required either the suppression or the displacement of diegesis: suppression by the focalization of the narrative through the characters; displacement by the use of surrogate narrators, whose own discourse is stylized or objectified – that is, deprived of the author’s authority, made itself an object of interpretation. In James, Conrad, Ford, these narrators are naturalised as characters with some role to play in the story, but in *Ulysses* they do not have this validation: as I have tried to show they are conjured out of the air by the author’s ventriloquism. This was the most radically experimental aspect of *Ulysses*, the aspect which even sympathetic friends like Pound and Sylvia Beach found hard to accept. They found it difficult to accept, I suggest, be-

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>19</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, [1928], Heinemann edn., The Hague, 1956, p. 139.



cause these elaborate exercises in stylization and parody and dialogic discourse could not be justified, unlike the fragmentary, allusive passages of interior monologue, as a mimesis of character. The same problem was raised in a much more acute form in *Finnegans Wake*, which completely defies discourse analysis of the kind I am applying here, since it is impossible to identify discrete speakers or referents in that text.

For most of Joyce's contemporaries, the central achievement of *Ulysses* was its mimetic rendering of the stream of consciousness within individual subjects, and this is what other novelists, like Virginia Woolf and Faulkner, tended to learn from him. "Let us present the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness,"<sup>20</sup> exhorted Virginia Woolf in 1919, when the early episodes of *Ulysses* were first appearing in print. In principle, it was through interior monologue – the unvoiced, fragmentary, associative inner speech of the subject – that this programme could be most completely fulfilled. Yet Virginia Woolf herself never used sustained interior monologue, except in *The Waves*, where it is so artificial as to have very little mimetic force. In her most characteristic work an impersonal but eloquent authorial narrator hovers over the characters and links together their streams of consciousness by a fluid blend of authorial report, free indirect speech and fragments of free direct speech and interior monologue. Joyce himself, as, I have already remarked, uses undiluted interior monologue only in "Penelope", and that to a large extent is what Dorrit Cohn calls a memory monologue<sup>21</sup> – that is, Molly is recalling past events rather than recording the atoms of experience in the order in which they fall upon her mind. *The Sound and the Fury* is also made up of memory monologues. The characters are narrating their stories to themselves, and we, as it were, overhear their narrations. The effect is not in essence very different from an old-fashioned epistolary or journal novel, though of course much more flexible and interiorised. In this way, mimesis turns back into a second order diegesis – as it can hardly fail to do in Narrative.

<sup>20</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Modern Fiction" [1919], reprinted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism: a Reader*, ed. David Lodge, (1972), p. 89.

<sup>21</sup> Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness*, Princeton, N. J., 1978, pp. 247–55.

In pursuing mimetic methods to their limits, modernist fiction discovered that you cannot abolish the author, you can only suppress or displace him. Postmodernism says, in effect: so why not let him back into the text? The reintroduction of the author's speech, the revival of diegesis, has taken many forms. There is a conservative form – a return to something like the balanced combination of mimesis and diegesis of the nineteenth century novel. The novels of Mauriac and Greene would be examples. "The exclusion of the author can go too far", said Greene in his 1945 essay on Mauriac. "Even the author, poor devil, has a right to exist, and M. Mauriac reaffirms that right."<sup>22</sup> The note is defensive, however, and Greene's own use of diegesis has been discreet. Very often in this kind of neorealist postmodern fiction the narrator is a character, but with little or no stylization of his discourse in Bakhtin's sense. The distance between the authorial norms and the character's norms is hardly perceptible. The narrator's perspective is limited, but, as far as it goes, reliable. C. P. Snow's novels might be cited as an example.

More obviously continuous with modernism are those novels in which the discourse of the characterised narrator is doubly-oriented in Bakhtin's sense: for example, stylized *skaz* in *The Catcher in the Rye*, parodic *skaz* in Mailer's *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, hidden polemic in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Some postmodernist novels combine a whole spectrum of stylized, parodic, and dialogic narrative discourses – e. g., John Barth's recent *Letters*, or Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*.

How, then, does the postmodernist use of narrators differ from the modernist use of narrators? I would suggest that one difference is the emphasis on narration as such in postmodernist fiction. The narrators of modernist novels – e.g. the teacher of languages in Conrad's *Under Western Eyes*, or Dowell in Ford's *The Good Soldier*, must pretend to be *amateur* narrators, disclaiming any literary skill even while they display the most dazzling command of time shift, symbolism, scenic construction, etc. The narrators of postmodernist fiction are more likely to be explicit about the problems and processes involved in the act of narration, and very often the narrators are themselves writers with a close, sometimes incestuous relationship to the author. I find particularly interesting those postmodernist works in which diegesis is foregrounded by the explicit appearance in the text of the author as maker of his own fiction, the fiction we are reading. There is an instance of this towards the end of Margaret Drabble's recent novel *The Middle Ground* which

<sup>22</sup> Graham Greene, *Collected Essays* (1969), p. 116.

brings out the distinction between modernist and postmodernist writing by reminding us of one of the great exponents of the former, Virginia Woolf:

[...] how good that it should end so well, and even as she was thinking this, looking round her family circle, feeling as she sat there a sense of immense calm, strength, centrality, as though she were indeed the centre of a circle, in the most old-fashioned of ways, a moving circle – oh, there is no language left to describe such things, we have called it all so much in question, but imagine a circle even so, a circle and moving spheres, for this is her house and there she sits, she has everything and nothing, I give her everything and nothing [...].<sup>23</sup>

Here Margaret Drabble evokes a Woolfian epiphany (the allusion to Mrs Ramsey's dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*, whether conscious or not, is inescapable) but at the same time wryly admits the arbitrariness of its construction. In this she shows herself to be not a neorealist, (as she is usually categorised, and as her early work certainly encouraged one to think) but a postmodernist.

About threequarters of the way through Joseph Heller's novel, *Good as Gold*, one of its unnumbered chapters begins:

Once again Gold found himself preparing to lunch with someone – Spotty Weinrock – and the thought arose that he was spending an awful lot of time in this book eating and talking. There was not much else to be done with him. I *was* putting him into bed a lot with Andrea and keeping his wife and children conveniently in the background. For Acapulco, I contemplated fabricating a hectic mixup which would include a sensual Mexican television actress and a daring attempt to escape in the nude through a stuck second-story bedroom window, while a jealous lover crazed on American drugs was beating down the door with his fists and Belle or packs of wild dogs were waiting below. Certainly he would soon meet a schoolteacher with four children with whom he would fall madly in love, and I would shortly hold out to him the tantalising promise of becoming the country's first Jewish Secretary of State, a promise I did not intend to keep.<sup>24</sup>

Up to this point, Heller's novel, though its satirical comedy about Jewish family life and Washington politics is mannered and stylized, has consistently maintained an illusion of referring to the real world – it has, so to speak, challenged us to deny that the real world is as crazy as Heller represents it. But this passage violates the realistic code in two very obvious, and for the reader disconcerting, ways: firstly, by admit-

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Drabble, *The Middle Ground* (1980), pp. 246–7.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Heller, *Good as Gold* [1979], Corgi edn. (1980), p. 321.

ting that Gold is a character, in a book, and not a person, in the world; and secondly by emphasising that this character has no autonomy, but is completely at the disposition of his creator, who is not (or rather once was not) sure what to do with him. Two simple words have a powerful shock effect in this passage, because they have been hitherto suppressed in the narrative discourse in the interests of mimesis: *book* (referring to the novel itself) and *I*, (referring to the novelist himself). The same words occur with similar, but even more startling effect in Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse – Five*.

An American near Billy wailed that he had excreted everything but his brains. Moments later he said, "There they go, there they go." He meant his brains.

That was I. That was me. That was the author of this book.<sup>25</sup>

Erving Goffman has designated such gestures, "breaking frame". The Russian Formalists called it "exposing the device". A more recent critical term is "metafiction". It is not, of course, a new phenomenon in the history of fiction. It is to be found in Cervantes, Fielding, Sterne, Thackeray, and Trollope, among others – but not, significantly, in the work of the great modernist writers. At least, I cannot think off-hand of any instance in the work of James, Conrad, Lawrence, Woolf and Joyce (up to and including *Ulysses*) where the fictitiousness of the narrative is exposed as blatantly as in my last few examples. The reason, I believe, is that such exposure foregrounds the existence of the author, the source of the novel's diegesis, in a way which ran counter to the modernist pursuit of impersonality and mimesis of consciousness. Metafictional devices are, however, all-pervasive in postmodernist fiction. I think for example of John Fowles' play with the authorial persona in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, of Malcolm Bradbury's introduction of himself into *The History Man* as a figure cowed and dispirited by his own character, of B. S. Johnson's sabotage of his own fictionalising in *Albert Angelo*. I think of the disconcerting authorial footnotes in Beckett's *Watt*, the flaunting of authorial omniscience in Muriel Spark, John Barth's obsessive recycling of his own earlier fictions in *Letters*, and the way the last page of Nabokov's *Ada* spills over onto the book jacket to become its own blurb. Perhaps, to conclude a list which could be much longer, I might mention my own last novel *How Far Can You Go?* in which the authorial narrator frequently draws attention to the fictitiousness of the characters and their actions, while at other times presenting

<sup>25</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse – Five*, New York, 1969 p. 109.

them as a kind of history, and inviting the sort of moral and emotional response from the reader that belongs to traditional realistic fiction. For me, and I think for other British novelists, metafiction has been particularly useful as a way of continuing to exploit the resources of realism while acknowledging their conventionality. And need one say that the more nakedly the author appears to reveal himself in such texts, the more inescapable it becomes, paradoxically, that the author is only a function of his own fiction, a rhetorical construct, not a privileged authority but an object of interpretation?

To conclude: what we see happening in postmodernist fiction is a revival of diegesis: not smoothly dovetailed with mimesis as in the classic realist text, and not subordinated to mimesis as in the modernist text, but foregrounded against mimesis. The stream of consciousness has turned into a stream of narration – which would be one way of summarising the difference between the greatest modernist novelist, Joyce, and the greatest post-modernist, Beckett. When the Unnamable says to himself, “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on”, he means, on one level at least, that he must go on narrating.

(The place of publication of works cited is London unless otherwise indicated. When an edition other than the first edition is cited, the date of first publication is given in square brackets.)