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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
New York
The Position of the Narrator
in the Contemporary Novel

The task of compressing some remarks on the current status of the novel as form into the space of a few minutes forces me to select, albeit by doing violence, one aspect of the problem. The aspect I have chosen is the position of the narrator. Today that position is marked by a paradox: it is no longer possible to tell a story, but the form of the novel requires narration. The novel was the literary form specific to the bourgeois age. At its origins stands the experience of the disenchanted world in Don Quixote, and the artistic treatment of mere existence has remained the novel's sphere. Realism was inherent in the novel; even those that are novels of fantasy as far as their subject matter is concerned attempt to present their content in such a way that the suggestion of reality emanates from them. Through a development that extends back into the nineteenth century and has become accelerated in the extreme today, this mode of proceeding has become questionable. Where the narrator is concerned, this process has occurred through a subjectivism that leaves no material untransformed and thereby undermines the epic precept of objectivity or material concreteness [Gegenständlichkeit]. Nowadays, anyone who continued to dwell on concrete reality the way Stifter, for instance, did, and wanted to derive his impact from the fullness and plasticity of a material reality contemplated and humbly accepted, would be forced into an imitative stance that would smack of arts and crafts. He would be guilty of a lie: the lie of delivering himself over to the world with a love that presupposes that the world is meaningful; and he would end up with insufferable kitsch along the lines of a local-color commercialism. The difficulties are just as great when considered from the point of view of the subject matter. Just as painting lost many of its traditional tasks to photography, the novel has lost them to reportage and the media of the culture industry, especially film. This would imply that the novel should concentrate on what reportage will not handle. In contrast to painting, however, language imposes limits on the novel's emancipation from the object and forces the novel to present the semblance of a report: consistently, Joyce linked the novel's rebellion against realism with a rebellion against discursive language.

To oppose what Joyce was trying to do by calling it eccentric, individualistic, and arbitrary would be unconvincing. The identity of experience in the form of a life that is articulated and possesses internal continuity—and that life was the only thing that made the narrator's stance possible—has disintegrated. One need only note how impossible it would be for someone who participated in the war to tell stories about it the way people used to tell stories about their adventures. A narrative that presented itself as though the narrator had mastered this kind of experience would rightly meet with impatience and skepticism on the part of its audience. Notions like “sitting down with a good book” are archaic. The reason for this lies not merely in the reader's loss of concentration but also in the content and its form. For telling a story means having something special to say, and that is precisely what is prevented by the administered world, by standardization and eternal sameness. Apart from any message with ideological content, the narrator's implicit claim that the course of the world is still essentially one of individuation, that the individual with his impulses and his feelings is still the equal of fate, that the inner person is still directly capable of something, is ideological in itself; the cheap biographical literature one finds everywhere is a byproduct of the disintegration of the novel form itself.

The sphere of psychology, in which such projects take up residence, though with little success, is not exempt from the crisis of literary concreteness. Even the subject matter of the psychological novel is snapped up from under its nose: it has been rightly observed that at a time when journalists were constantly waxing enthusiastic about Dostoevski's psychological achievements, his discoveries had long since been surpassed by science, and especially by Freud's psychoanalysis. Moreover, this kind of overblown praise of Dostoevski probably missed the mark: to the extent to which there is any psychology in his work at all, it is a psychology of intelligible character, of essence, and not a psychology of empirical character, of human beings as we find them. It is precisely in
the respect that Dostoevski is advanced. It is not only that communications and science have seized control of everything positive and tangible, including the faculty of inwardness, that forces the novel to break with the psychology of empirical character and give itself over to the presentation of essence [Was] and its antithesis [Unwas]; it is also that the tighter and more seamless the surface of the social life process becomes the more it veils essence. If the novel wants to remain true to its realistic heritage and tell how things really are, it must abandon a realism that only aids the facade in its work of camouflage by reproducing it. The reification of all relationships between individuals, which transforms their human qualities into lubricating oil for the smooth running of the machinery, the universal alienation and self-alienation, needs to be called by name, and the novel is qualified to do so as few other art forms are. The novel has long since, and certainly since the eighteenth century and Fielding's Tom Jones, had as its true subject matter the conflict between living human beings and rigidified conditions. In this process, alienation itself becomes an aesthetic device for the novel. For the more human beings, individuals and collectivities, become alienated from one another, the more enigmatic they become to one another. The novel's true impulse, the attempt to decipher the riddle of external life, then becomes a striving for essence, which now for its part seems bewildering and doubly alien in the context of the everyday estrangement established by social conventions. The anti-realistic moment in the modern novel, its metaphysical dimension, is called forth by its true subject matter, a society in which human beings have been torn from one another and from themselves. What is reflected in aesthetic transcendence is the disenchantment of the world.

The novelist's conscious deliberations are hardly the place for all this, and there is reason to suppose that where such considerations do enter the novelist's reflections, as in Hermann Broch's very ambitious novels, it is not to the advantage of the work of art. Instead, historical changes in the form are converted to idiosyncratic sensibilities on the part of authors, and the extent to which they function as instruments for registering what is required and what is forbidden is a crucial determinant of their rank. No one surpasses Marcel Proust in aversion to the report form. His work belongs to the tradition of the realistic and psychological novel in the branch that leads to the novel's dissolution in extreme subjectivism, a line of development extending through works like Jacobsen's Niels Lyhne and Rilke's Malte Laurids Brigge but having no empirical historical connection with Proust. The more strictly the novel adheres to realism in external things, to the gesture that says "this is how it was," the more every word becomes a mere "as if," and the greater becomes the contradiction between this claim and the fact that it was not so. The immanent claim that the author cannot avoid making—that he knows precisely what went on—requires proof, and Proust's precision, which is taken to the point where it becomes chimerical, his micrological technique through which the unity of the living is ultimately split into its atoms, is an endeavor on the part of the aesthetic sensorium to provide that proof without transgressing the limits of form. He could not have brought himself to begin by reporting something unreal as though it had been real. For this reason, his cyclical work begins with the memory of what it was like to fall asleep, and the whole first book is nothing but an exposition of the difficulties one has in falling asleep when the beautiful mother has not given the boy his goodnight kiss. The narrator establishes an interior space, as it were, which spares him the false step into the alien world, a faux pas that would be revealed in the false tone of one who acted as though he were familiar with that world. The world is imperceptibly drawn into this interior space—the technique has been given the name "interior monologue"—and anything that takes place in the external world is presented the way the moment of falling asleep is presented on the first page: as a piece of the interior world, a moment in the stream of consciousness, protected against refutation by the objective order of time and space which Proust's work is committed to suspending. The novel of German Expressionism—Gustav Sack's Ein verbummelter Student [A Student Vagabond], for instance—aimed at something similar, although with completely different presuppositions and in a different spirit. The epic enterprise of depicting only those concrete things which can be given in their fullness ultimately cancels out the fundamental epic category of concreteness.

The traditional novel, whose idea is perhaps most authentically embodied in Flaubert, can be compared to the three-walled stage of bourgeois theater. This technique was one of illusion. The narrator raises a curtain: the reader is to take part in what occurs as though he were physically present. The narrator's subjectivity proves itself in the power to produce this illusion and—in Flaubert—in the purity of the language, which, by spiritualizing language, removes it from the empirical realm to which it is committed. There is a heavy taboo on reflection: it becomes the cardinal sin against objective purity. Today this taboo, along
with the illusionary character of what is represented, is losing its strength. It has often been noted that in the modern novel, not only in Proust but also in the Gide of the Faux-Monnayeurs, in the late Thomas Mann, or in Musil's The Man Without Qualities, reflection breaks through the pure immanence of form. But this kind of reflection has scarcely anything but the name in common with pre-Flaubertian reflection. The latter was moral: taking a stand for or against characters in the novel. The new reflection takes a stand against the lie of representation, actually against with the illusionary character of what is represented, is losing its strength.

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fall outside the controversy over committed art and _Part pour Part_, outside the choice between the philistinism of art with a cause and the philistinism of art for enjoyment. Karl Kraus once formulated the idea that everything that spoke morally out of his works in the form of physical, non-aesthetic reality had been imparted to him solely under the law of language, thus in the name of _Part pour Part_. It is a tendency inherent in form that demands the abolition of aesthetic distance in the contemporary novel and its capitulation thereby to the superior power of reality—a reality that cannot be transfigured in an image but only altered concretely, in reality.

The announcement of a lecture on lyric poetry and society will make many of you uncomfortable. You will expect a sociological analysis of the kind that can be made of any object, just as fifty years ago people came up with psychologies, and thirty years ago with phenomenologies, of everything conceivable. You will suspect that examination of the conditions under which works are created and their effect will try to usurp the place of experience of the works as they are and that the process of categorizing and relating will suppress insight into the truth or falsity of the object itself. You will suspect that an intellectual will be guilty of what Hegel accused the “formal understanding” of doing, namely that in surveying the whole it stands above the individual existence it is talking about, that is, it does not see it at all but only labels it. This approach will seem especially distressing to you in the case of lyric poetry. The most delicate, the most fragile thing that exists is to be encroached upon and brought into conjunction with bustle and commotion, when part of the ideal of lyric poetry, at least in its traditional sense, is to remain unaffected by bustle and commotion. A sphere of expression whose very essence lies in either not acknowledging the power of socialization or overcoming it through the pathos of detachment, as in Baudelaire or Nietzsche, is to be arrogantly turned into the opposite of what it conceives itself to be through the way it is examined. Can anyone, you will ask, but a man who is insensitive to the Muse talk about lyric poetry and society?

Clearly your suspicions will be allayed only if lyric works are not abused by being made objects with which to demonstrate sociological