shade over-written, weighed down with too many adjectives and adverbs, that is all part of Frayn's purpose. The narrator must vividly convey the comedy of his plight, but he cannot be allowed true eloquence, for that would contradict his inability to master the "trick of it".

Writing, strictly speaking, can only faithfully imitate other writing. Its representation of speech, and still more of non-verbal events, is highly artificial. But a fictional letter is indistinguishable from a real letter. A reference to the circumstances in which a novel is being written, in the text itself, would normally draw attention to the existence of the "real" author behind the text, and thus break the fictional illusion of reality, but in the epistolary novel it contributes to the illusion. I do not, for example, incorporate telephone calls from my agent into the text of my novel-in-progress, but the call from the student which interrupts Frayn's academic in mid-sentence is both realistic and character-revealing (he is so self-obsessed that he ignores his pastoral responsibilities).

The pseudo-documentary realism of the epistolary method gave the early novelists an unprecedented power over their audiences, comparable to the spell exerted on modern television audiences by certain soap-operas. While the enormously long *Clarissa* was being published, volume by volume, Richardson was frequently begged by readers not to allow the heroine to die, and many of the first readers of *Pamela* supposed it was an actual correspondence, of which Richardson was merely the editor. Modern readers of literary fiction will not be thus taken in, of course; but it is a neat trick on Frayn's part to make his academic complain of the way novelists turn fact into fiction ("That's what they do, these people. They embroider, they improve on the truth – they tell lies") in a kind of novel originally designed to make fiction look like fact.

6 Point of View

It must not be supposed that her ladyship's intermissions were not qualified by demonstrations of another order – triumphal entries and breathless pauses during which she seemed to take of everything in the room, from the state of the ceiling to that of her daughter's boot-toes, a survey that was rich in intentions. Sometimes she sat down and sometimes she surged about, but her atttitude wore equally in either case the grand air of the practical. She found so much to deplore that she left a great deal to expect, and bristled so with calculation that she seemed to scatter remedies and pledges. Her visits were as good as an outfit; her manner, as Mrs Wix once said, as good as a pair of curtains; but she was a person addicted to extremes – sometimes barely speaking to her child and sometimes pressing this tender shoot to a bosom cut, as Mrs Wix had also observed, remarkably low. She was always in a fearful hurry, and the lower the bosom was cut the more it was to be gathered she was wanted elsewhere. She usually broke in alone, but sometimes Sir Claude was with her, and during all the earlier period there was nothing on which these appearances had had so delightful a bearing as on the way her ladyship was, as Mrs Wix expressed it, under the spell. "But *isn't* she under it!" Maisie used in thoughtful but familiar reference to exclaim after Sir Claude had swept mamma away in peals of natural laughter. Not even in the old days of the convulsed ladies had she heard mamma laugh so freely as in these moments of conjugal surrender, to the gaiety of which even a little girl could see she had at last a right – a little girl whose thoughtfulness was now all happy selfish meditation on good omens and future fun.

HENRY JAMES *What Maisie Knew* (1897)

A REAL EVENT may be – and usually is – experienced by more than one person, simultaneously. A novel can provide different perspectives on the same event – but only one at a time. And even if it adopts an "omniscient" narrative method, reporting the action from a God-like altitude, it will usually privilege just one or two of the possible "points of view" from which the story could be told, and concentrate on how events affect *them*. Totally objective, totally impartial narration may be a worthy aim in journalism or historiography, but a fictional story is unlikely to engage our interest unless we know whose story it is.

The choice of the point(s) of view from which the story is told is arguably the most important single decision that the novelist has to make, for it fundamentally affects the way readers will respond, emotionally and morally, to the fictional characters and their actions. The story of an adultery, for instance – any adultery – will affect us differently according to whether it is presented primarily from the point of view of the unfaithful person, or the injured spouse, or the lover – or as observed by some fourth party. *Madame Bovary* narrated mainly from the point of view of Charles Bovary would be a very different book from the one we know.

Henry James was something of a virtuoso in the manipulation of point of view. In *What Maisie Knew* he presents a story of multiple adulteries – or adulteries thinly legitimized by divorce and re-marriage – exclusively through the eyes of a child who is affected by, but largely uncomprehending of them. Maisie's parents divorce when her father has an affair with her governess, whom he marries. Maisie's mother, Ida, marries a young admirer, Sir Claude, and puts Maisie in the charge of another governess, Mrs Wix. Before long, the step-parents become lovers. Maisie is used by these selfish and unscrupulous adults as a pawn in their quarrels and an intermediary in their amorous intrigues. While they pursue their selfish pleasures, she is confined to a dreary schoolroom with the frumpish Mrs Wix, who is herself infatuated with Sir Charles, and mature only in years.

The passage quoted comes early in the book, and concerns Ida's empty promises, in the honeymoon period of her second marriage, to improve the quality of Maisie's life. It is narrated from Maisie's

point of view – but not in her own voice, nor in a style that in any way attempts to imitate a child's discourse. James explained his reason in the Preface he wrote to the New York Edition: "Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them: their vision is at any moment richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary." Stylistically, then, *What Maisie Knew* is antithetical to *The Catcher in the Rye*. A naive viewpoint is articulated in a mature style: elegant, complex, subtle.

Nothing is described which Maisie could not plausibly perceive and, in her own childish terms, understand. Her mamma makes exciting, energetic proposals for redecorating the schoolroom and renewing Maisie's wardrobe. Ida's visitations are sudden and brief, her behaviour volatile and unpredictable. She is usually glamorously dressed, and on her way to some social engagement. She seems to be much in love with her new husband, and in good spirits. Maisie observes all these things accurately, but innocently. She still trusts her mamma, and looks forward hopefully to "future fun". The reader, however, is under no such illusions, because the highly sophisticated language in which these observations are communicated is devastatingly ironic at Ida's expense.

The very first sentence of this paragraph contains most of the features that place its style at the opposite pole from the language of a child. It begins with a passive verbal construction ("It must not be supposed"), proceeds to a double negative ("were not qualified"), prefers polysyllabic abstract nouns ("intermissions", "demonstrations", "intentions") to concrete or homely words, and favours elegantly symmetrical pairings ("triumphal entries and breathless pauses", "from . . . ceiling . . . to . . . boot-toes"). The structure of the whole sentence is what grammarians call periodic – in other words, you have to wait till the end, holding the accumulating information in your head, for the clinching clause that delivers the main point (which is, that Ida's apparent concern is all show). This makes reading James a strenuous, but rewarding experience: nod in mid-sentence, and you are lost.

His fondness for parallelism and antithesis is particularly marked, and particularly effective, in this excerpt. "Sometimes she

sat down and sometimes she surged about." "She found so much to deplore that she left a good deal to expect." "Her visits were as good as an outfit; her manner, as Mrs Wix once said, as good as a pair of curtains." These deftly balanced structures underline the contradictions between Ida's promises and her performance, her pretensions to generosity and her actual selfishness.

One of the commonest signs of a lazy or inexperienced writer of fiction is inconsistency in handling point of view. A story – let us say it is the story of John, leaving home for the first time to go to University, as perceived by John – John packing his bag, taking a last look round his bedroom, saying goodbye to his parents – and suddenly, for just a couple of sentences, we are told what his mother is thinking about the event, merely because it seemed to the writer an interesting bit of information to put in at that point; after which the narrative carries on from John's point of view. Of course, there is no rule or regulation that says a novel may not shift its point of view whenever the writer chooses; but if it is not done according to some aesthetic plan or principle, the reader's involvement, the reader's "production" of the meaning of the text, will be disturbed. We may wonder, consciously or subliminally, why, if we have been told what John's mother was thinking at one point in the scene, we haven't been given the same access to her mind at other moments. The mother, who was up to that point an object of John's perception, has suddenly become a subject in her own right, but an incompletely realized one. And, if we are given access to the mother's point of view, why not the father's too?

There is in fact a certain enhancement of intensity and immediacy to be gained by restricting the narrative to a single point of view – or so James certainly believed. But how artfully he uses Mrs Wix to convey adult judgments on Ida, judgments of which Maisie would be incapable, without deviating from Maisie's perspective. Maisie assimilates the comment about Ida's manner being as good as a pair of curtains as a kind of compliment, whereas the reader interprets it as a tart criticism. Likewise Mrs Wix's observation of Ida's décolletage is motivated by jealousy and moral disapproval, whereas Maisie, seeing no erotic significance in the exposure of

the female bosom, is struck only by the ratio between the lowness of the necklines and the duration of her mother's visits.

Later in the story, as Maisie moves from childhood to adolescence, such innocence yields to a dawning awareness of what her adult relations are up to, but the gap between language and point of view is never closed, and the question of what Maisie knew never entirely resolved. "Beauty is truth," said Keats. "Beauty is information," says the great Russian semiotician, Juri Lotman, a formula more in tune with the modern mind. Henry James, the first truly modern novelist in the English language, did not believe that the ultimate truth about human experience could ever be established, but developed a fictional technique that loaded every rift with the ore of information.