

account is given of it. The idea of receiving a baby as a Christmas present does not seem out of order to the recipients, and the donor's statement that he got it "from the bank" is merely "puzzling" to them. They calmly consume mulled wine without pursuing the question.

In the next, one-line paragraph it is curtly reported that "Eric was born" — we are not told, to whom, or in what temporal relationship to the arrival of Paul.

The third paragraph describes an affair between Hubert and Irene. There is a good deal of information about the couple's bed — indeed, rather more than we need — but little about their emotions, sexual pleasure, means of deceiving Charles, and all the other details that we expect of an adultery story. We don't know whether Hubert's gift of Paul preceded or followed his amorous interest in Irene. We infer that she took the infant along with her to their assignments, because "Paul regarded Hubert and Irene thoughtfully." Then we are told that "the affair lasted for twelve years and was considered very successful" — a judgment more usually applied to a marriage than an affair. The sequence of a sentence describing a particular moment in time, followed immediately by one summarizing the experience of twelve years, is highly disconcerting.

Another character, Hilda, is introduced in a one-word paragraph. From the next paragraph we infer that she is a child living nextdoor to Charles and Irene. Her growth from infancy to adolescence is summarized in a single sentence of stunning obviousness. If the adults act like children, the children seem disturbingly precocious: while Charles tritely registers that Hilda is a pretty girl, Paul has already "bitten the tips of Hilda's pretty breasts". In twenty-odd lines we have covered enough events to fill an entire novel in the hands of another writer. This kind of writing does indeed depend on the reader's familiarity with a more conventional and realistic fictional discourse to make its effect. Deviations can only be perceived against a norm.

42 Implication

"Don't you think you ought to come away from the window, darling?"

"Why?"

"You've got nothing on."

"All the better . . ." Out of respect for her delicacy I closed the window with a bang that drowned the end of my remark.

She was smiling at me. I went over and stood beside her. She looked appealing, resting on one elbow, with her dark hair sweeping over her smooth naked shoulder. I looked down on the top of her head.

Suddenly she blew.

"Wonderful Albert," she said.

I may say that my name is not Albert. It is Joe. Joe Lunn.

Myrtle looked up at me in sly inquiry.

I suppose I grinned.

After a while she paused.

"Men are lucky," she said, in a deep thoughtful tone. I said nothing: I thought it was no time for philosophical observations.

I stared at the wall opposite.

Finally she stopped.

"Well?" I looked down just in time to catch her subsiding with a shocked expression on her face.

"Now," I said, "you'll have to wait again for your tea."

"Ah . . ." Myrtle gave a heavy, complacent sigh. Her eyes were closed.

In due course we had our tea.

WILLIAM COOPER *Scenes from Provincial Life* (1950)

A TRULY EXHAUSTIVE description of any event is impossible; from which it follows that all novels contain gaps and silences which the reader must fill, in order to "produce the text" (as poststructuralist critics say). But in some cases these gaps and silences are the result of unconscious evasions or suppressions on the writer's part (and no less interesting for that) while in others they are a conscious artistic strategy, to imply rather than state meaning.

Implication is a particularly useful technique in the treatment of sexuality. The novel has always been centrally concerned with erotic attraction and desire, but until recently the explicit description of sexual acts in literary fiction was prohibited. Innuendo was one solution.

"Pray, my Dear," quoth my mother, "have you not forgot to wind up the clock?" ... "Good God!" cried my father ... "Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question." Pray, what was your father saying? ... Nothing.

From this exchange between Tristram Shandy and his invented reader we may infer that his father was *doing* something, namely, begetting Tristram.

In the notoriously prudish Victorian period sex was treated with much greater reticence. Novels were for family reading, and could contain nothing that might, in the words of Dickens's Mr Podsnap, "bring a blush into the cheek of the young person." The scene in a recent BBC television adaptation of *Adam Bede*, depicting Arthur Donnithorne entwined on a couch with the half-naked Hetty Sorrel, has no equivalent in George Eliot's novel, the more innocent readers of which might well have assumed that Hetty was impregnated by a kiss. The non-consummation of Dorothea's marriage to Casaubon in *Middlemarch* is conveyed to the alert reader by the subtlest of hints, many of them metaphorical. As late as 1908, in *The Old Wives' Tale*, Arnold Bennett passes over Sophia's wedding night in silence, but suggests that it was an unpleasant and disillusioning experience by presenting it in a displaced form: the degrading spectacle of a public guillotining, all

blood and phallic symbolism, which Gerald forces her to witness on their honeymoon.

By the time William Cooper published *Scenes from Provincial Life*, the boundaries of the permissible had been considerably extended, but it is unlikely that the particular activity in which his lovers are engaged here could have been plainly described in 1950 without attracting prosecution. Cooper goes to the very edge of explicitness, teasing his reader into the inferential construction of a scene that is both witty and erotic.

The narrator and his girlfriend have gone to bed in the country cottage that he shares with his friend Tom. He is just about to offer to make a cup of tea when he hears what he supposes to be the sound of Tom's car, and gets out of bed to check. Myrtle's remark tells us that he is naked. We can complete his reply, "All the better ..." easily enough, since it seems to have the same structure as the Wolf's remarks to Red Riding Hood and we are told that the missing verbal phrase is indelicate. The next paragraph allows us to picture the naked narrator standing above his reclining, and also naked, mistress. "Suddenly she blew." With human subjects this verb usually takes an object, sometimes after a preposition like "on", but we must guess what it is. "Wonderful Albert," she said." Since the next paragraph eliminates the most obvious candidate for the identity of Albert, we are left in little doubt that it must be the familiar nickname of the object of "blew". (That this also provides an occasion for the narrator to introduce himself formally by name is an additional source of amusement.) We are not told what activity Myrtle "paused" from, but, as with Mr Shandy, it was not speaking, since she speaks after pausing. And so on. The abnormally short paragraphs emphasize the fact that much more is going on than is being said, or described.

Like Sterne's, Cooper's use of implication is not just an expedient: it carries a creative bonus of humour. A decade or so later, however, the *Lady Chatterley* trial swept away all the taboos that made such artful indirection mandatory, to the regret of many readers, and some writers. Kingsley Amis, for instance, though his stories are much concerned with sexual behaviour, has made something of a fetish of not attempting to describe the act itself.

IMPLICATION

There is a passage in his recent novel, *The Folks That Live on the Hill*, which makes the point and at the same time illustrates how implication is used in casual speech to refer to sex:

"Let's have a nice early night tonight," said Desirée. This apparently straightforward proposal had several levels of meaning. An early night and no more meant something like what it said, was basically a temporal expression, advertised that there would be no later part to the evening, no social extension or excursion . . . a *nice* early night meant not merely the exclusion of anything in the way of company but the inclusion of what it would be only fair, what it is indeed inescapable, to call sexual activity. This is . . . better, much better, guessed at than described.

The explicit treatment of sexual acts is certainly another challenge to the novelist's artistry — how to avoid reiterating the language of pornography, how to defamiliarize the inherently limited repertoire of sexual acts — but not one that I propose to tackle in this book.

43 The Title

The last volume was written in fourteen days. In this achievement Reardon rose almost to heroic pitch, for he had much to contend with beyond the mere labour of composition. Scarcely had he begun when a sharp attack of lumbago fell upon him; for two or three days it was torture to support himself at the desk, and he moved about like a cripple. Upon this ensued headaches, sore throat, general enfeeblement. And before the end of the fortnight it was necessary to think of raising another small sum of money; he took his watch to the pawnbroker's (you can imagine that it would not stand as security for much), and sold a few more books. All this notwithstanding, here was the novel at length finished. When he had written "The End" he lay back, closed his eyes, and let time pass in blankness for a quarter of an hour.

It remained to determine the title. But his brain refused another effort; after a few minutes' feeble search he simply took the name of the chief female character, Margaret Home. That must do for the book. Already, with the penning of the last word, all its scenes, personages, dialogues had slipped away into oblivion; he knew and cared nothing more about them.

GEORGE GISSING *New Grub Street* (1891)

THE TITLE of a novel is part of the text — the first part of it, in fact, that we encounter — and therefore has considerable power to attract and condition the reader's attention. The titles of the earliest English novels were invariably the names of the central characters, *Moll Flanders*, *Tom Jones*, *Clarissa*. Fiction was modeling itself on, and sometimes disguising itself as, biography and