

too eager, as people sometimes are, from, I believe, no very good principle, to relate ill news, and having seen him fall into the river, instead of running to his assistance, directly ran to acquaint his father of a fate which he had concluded to be inevitable," leaving him to be rescued by somebody else. This explanation is acceptable partly because it belongs to a series of examples of human folly and spitefulness that run through the novel; and partly because *it comes very quickly after the event*. If the character of the messenger had been filled in in more detail, and his speech describing the incident given in direct form, the whole tempo of the scene would have been more "lifelike" and its emotive effect quite different. The circumstances of the drowning of the little boy would have acquired a distressing particularity, and the comic mood of the novel would have been destroyed irremediably. When the report was shown to be false we might, as readers, have felt that we had been exploited. Fielding avoids these unwanted effects by a judicious use of summary.

27 Telling in Different Voices

Christie is that year's Bachelor Catch. While the winter snow lies impacted month after month, and half Europe starves, and the bombers overhead carry food for Germany instead of bombs, and the gas dwindles to a flicker and the electric lights waver, and strangers stand close to each other for comfort — Christie shines before Grace like a beacon of hope and promise. He is all clear-cut, up-standing (but only in marriage) masculinity. Christie is Grace's ambition. Not a diploma, not a career, nor the world's recognition, not any more. Just Christie.

She loves him. Oh, indeed she does. Her heart quickens at the sight of him, her bowels dissolve with longing. But she will not, she cannot, succumb to his embraces. He takes her on his boat, well chaperoned (yes, he sails) and up mountains, rather less chaperoned (yes, he climbs). He offers to buy her a flat (yes, he can afford to) but no she will not. No diamonds, thank you, Christie. No wrist watches. No gifts, no bribes, my dearest. Chocolates, yes, oh thank you! And orchids, and invitations to dinner and a taxi ride home, and yes, a kiss, and yes, you may touch my breast (how wicked we are!) and quickly, quickly, goodnight, Christie. My own, my love, my dearest dear. I would die for you but I will not sleep with you.

Christie stops off at Soho on the way home and spends an hour with a tart. How else will he survive?

She loves him. She means to marry him. How else will she survive?

FAY WELDON *Female Friends* (1975)

IN THE PRECEDING SECTION, discussing the balanced alternation of telling and showing in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews*, I suggested that a novel written entirely in summary form would be almost unreadable. But a number of contemporary novelists have deliberately gone a long way in that direction, without paying such a heavy price. The summary narrative method seems to suit our modern taste for irony, pace and pithiness. It's a particularly effective way of handling a large cast of characters and a story that spreads itself over a long period of time, without getting bogged down in the slow temporal rhythms and dense detail of the classic novel. (I used it myself, for those reasons, in a novel called *How Far Can You Go?*) Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the summary style doesn't become monotonously uniform in vocabulary and syntax. Fay Weldon's novels, which use summary extensively, are notable for both their hectic narrative tempo and their stylistic vivacity.

Female Friends traces the fortunes of three women through the nineteen-forties, fifties and sixties, focusing on their sexual and marital experiences, against a background of rapidly changing social mores. It portrays women as on the whole helpless victims of their wombs and hearts, craving husbands and lovers even while being abused and betrayed by them. Men are portrayed as equally helpless victims of their own egotism and sexual appetites; but being naturally promiscuous, they get more fun out of the advent of the Permissive Society than do the female characters. The passage quoted here, however, deals with an earlier period, the nineteen-forties, when Nice Girls Didn't, and could use this assumption as a bargaining counter in the war between the sexes. Grace is not in fact a virgin, but pretends that she is, knowing that Christie "feels virginity to be essential in the woman he loves, while doing his damndest to dispose of it." Thus both characters are comically compromised by contradiction and hypocrisy.

The first paragraph evokes the period context — austerity, shortages, the Cold War — in a brisk sequence of images, like a cinematic montage, then ironically juxtaposes Grace's private emotional obsession with these public miseries and anxieties. While half Europe starves, Grace can think only of how to persuade

Christie to marry her. Her ambitions to be a painter (she is a student at the Slade at this point in the story) are forgotten. "Christie is Grace's ambition. Not a diploma, not a career, nor the world's recognition. Just Christie." The discourse here begins to shift from a précis of events to a précis of Grace's thoughts, an effect that becomes still more marked towards the end of the next paragraph.

In fact what we have here is not a single uniform style, like Fielding's authorial voice in the passage from *Joseph Andrews*, but a polyphonic medley of styles, or voices, through which the serio-comic skirmishing of Grace and Christie's courtship is vividly but concisely evoked. "She loves him. Oh, indeed she does. Her heart quickens at the sight of him, her bowels dissolve with longing." Here the narrator seems to borrow the traditional literary discourse of "love" — love letters, love poetry, love stories. "She cannot succumb to his embraces" is a cliché straight out of Mills & Boon romance — its parodic quality underlines the inauthenticity of Grace's behaviour. The parentheses in the next sentence, ("Yes, he sails . . . yes, he climbs . . . yes, he can afford to") might be the narrator anticipating the reader's questions, acknowledging, but not apologizing for the belatedness of this information. Or they might be echoes of Grace's boasting about Christie to her female friends. (A further complication is that the narrator is in fact one of those friends, Chloe, who writes about herself in the third person and claims a novelist's knowledge of the secret thoughts of the other characters.)

"No diamonds, thank you, Christie. No wrist watches. No gifts, no bribes, my dearest. Chocolates, yes, oh thank you!" Grammatically this, and all the rest of the paragraph, is Grace's direct speech, but it has no quotation marks round it in the text, and obviously it isn't the record of a single speech act. It's speech functioning as summary, a condensation of what Grace said on several different occasions — or thought, or implied. She would have said "goodnight" and conceivably "My own, my love, my dearest dear," but almost certainly not, "I would die for you but I will not sleep with you," another line that seems to come from some half-remembered literary source. Two short, symmetrical

paragraphs sum up the sexual deadlock in a narrative voice that dully echoes each character's special pleading.

This passage exemplifies in a striking but by no means unrepresentative way a property of novelistic prose which the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin called "polyphony" or, alternatively, "dialogism". (Readers antipathetic to literary theory may wish to skip the remainder of this section; though the subject is of more than theoretical interest — it is at the very heart of the novel's representation of life.) According to Bakhtin, the language of traditional epic and lyric poetry, or the language of expository prose, is "monologic", striving to impose a single vision, or interpretation, on the world by means of a single unitary style. The novel in contrast is "dialogic", incorporating many different styles, or voices, which as it were talk to each other, and to other voices outside the text, the discourses of culture and society at large. The novel does this in various ways. At the simplest level there is the alternation of the narrator's voice with the voices of the characters, rendered in their own specific accents and idioms of class, region, occupation, gender etc. We take this for granted in the novel, but it was a relatively rare phenomenon in narrative literature before the Renaissance. There is a foundinging in Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* called Sloppy, who is adopted by an old woman called Betsey Higden, in whose eyes he is especially gifted. "You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper," she says. "He do the Police in different voices." Novelists do the Police in different voices.

"For the prose artist the world is full of other people's words," wrote Bakhtin, "among which he must orient himself and whose speech characteristics he must be able to perceive with a very keen ear. He must introduce them into the plane of his own discourse, but in such a way that this plane is not destroyed." Novelists can do this in various ways. By the technique of free indirect style (see Section 9) they can combine their own voice with the voices of their characters in order to render thought and emotion. Or they can give their own narrative voice a different kind of colouring that has nothing to do with character. Henry Fielding, for instance,

128

often narrates in a mock-heroic style, applying the language of classical and neoclassical epic poetry to vulgar brawls or amorous encounters. This is how he describes the efforts of Mrs Waters to seduce the eponymous hero of *Tom Jones* over the supper table:

First, from two lovely blue eyes, whose bright orbs flashed lightning at their discharge, flew forth two pointed ogles. But happily for our hero, hit only a vast piece of beef which he was then conveying onto his plate, and harmless spent their force.

And so on. Bakhtin called this kind of writing "doubly-oriented discourse": the language simultaneously describes an action, and imitates a particular style of speech or writing. In this case an effect of parody is created because the style is incongruous with the subject matter, and thus its mannerisms seem absurd and artificial. The gap between subject matter and style is less obvious in the passage from Fay Weldon's novel, because the language it borrows from romantic literary fiction and glossy women's magazines is not inappropriate to the subject matter, merely exaggerated and clichéd-ridden. Probably one should describe this kind of writing as "pastiche" rather than parody, or use Bakhtin's own term, "stylization". His categorization of the various levels of speech in novelistic discourse is complex, but the basic point is simple: the language of the novel is not *a* language, but a medley of styles and voices, and it is this which makes it a supremely democratic, anti-totalitarian literary form, in which no ideological or moral position is immune from challenge and contradiction.

129