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10 Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film

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Discourse: Covert versus Overt Narrators

A clear sonorous voice, inaudible
To the vast multitude.
William Wordsworth,
The Excursion

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day,
and heard behind me a great voice,
as of a trumpet.
The Revelation

It is less important to categorize types of narrators than to identify the features that mark their degrees of audibility. A quantitative effect applies: the more identifying features, the stronger our sense of a narrator's presence.[1] The "non" or minimally narrated story is simply one in which no or very few such features occur.

Still, a fundamental distinction can be made between covert and overt narrators, and that is the task of this chapter. Not every feature can be discussed in detail, so the focus is on the salient and particularly the problematic features.

Three matters are of preliminary concern: the nature of indirect discourse, the manipulation of the surface of the text for covert narrative purposes, and the limitation of point of view to a particular character or characters. The first two are very much open topics, as recent research has shown. The complexities of indirect discourse have spawned a large literature that is not yet conclusive. Contemporary linguistics has challenged the traditional formulations and raised some fascinating questions about indirect style. It has also begun to analyze the mechanisms for placing special emphasis on certain elements in sentences – by which the covert narrator may "surreptitiously" manipulate his sentence structures, thus backgrounding or foregrounding narrative elements of varying degrees of importance. The mechanism of "presupposition" is discussed here by way of example. Closely related to covertness, indeed often confused with it, is the limitation placed by the implied author on the narrator's knowledge.

Shifting to the overt narrator, we consider a spectrum of features, ranging from least to most obtrusive markers: from set descriptions and reports of what characters did *not* say or think, to the various kinds of commentary – interpretation, judgment, generalization. This chapter (and the book) concludes with some observations about the narrator's interlocutor, the narratee.

Covert Narrators

Covert or effaced narration occupies the middle ground between "nonnarration" and conspicuously audible narration. In covert narration we hear a voice speaking of events, characters, and setting, but its owner remains hidden in the discoursive shadows. Unlike the "nonnarrated" story, the covertly narrated one can express a character's speech or thoughts in indirect form. Such expression implies an interpretive device or mediator qualitatively different from the simple mindreading stenographer of nonnarrated narratives. Some interpreting person must be converting the characters' thoughts into indirect expression, and we cannot tell whether his own slant does not lurk behind the words: "John said that he would come" may transmit more than "John said 'I will come,' " since there can be no guarantee that John used those exact words. Hence our intuition of a shadowy narrator lurking in the wings.

The terrain of covert narration is bewildering, and it is easy to lose one's bearings. I was disconcerted to hear in a lecture recently that Joyce's "narrators" included most of his major characters – Eveline, Lenehan, Gabriel, Stephen Dedalus, Leopold and Molly Bloom. The impropriety of assigning the term "narrator" to the character's own mental voice in interior monologue was demonstrated in Chapter 4.[2] The point is even clearer where characters' thoughts are expressed by covert narrators. It is simply a mistake to argue that Lenehan is in any sense the "narrator" of "Two Gallants." When he speculates, reminisces, or whatever, he is not telling a story to anybody, not even himself. It is an outside speaker who is reporting ("internally analyzing") his thoughts:

> In his imagination he beheld the pair of lovers walking along some dark road; he heard Corley's voice in deep energetic gallantries and saw again the leer of the young woman's mouth. This vision made him feel keenly his own poverty of purse and spirit. He was tired of knocking about, of pulling the devil by the tail, of shifts and intrigues.

Clearly Lenehan's vocabulary does not include "deep energetic gallantries," "his own poverty of purse and spirit," "shifts and intrigues." And since these are not his words, he cannot be the narrator of the story which they recount. The narrator is *imputing* the feeling of "poverty of purse and spirit" to Lenehan, but it is only an imputation, an internal analysis or report by a covert narrator. When words and phrases that could be part of Lenehan's vocabulary appear – "tired of knocking about," "pulling the devil by the tail" – we are conscious of quotation in indirect free form.

Indirect Tagged and Free Style

Any analysis of the complex relations between the speech acts of characters and narrators requires an understanding of the ways of communicating speech (external voice) or thought (internal voice). A basic distinction is that between quotation and report, or in more traditional terms, "direct" and "indirect" forms, a distinction that has been commonplace for centuries. Usually formulated in terms of speech – the difference between " 'I have to go,' she said" and "She said that she had to go" – it obviously applies to thinking as well: " 'I have to go,' she thought" and "She thought that she had to go."

The surface differences between the two forms are quite clear-cut. In both cases there are two clauses, one optional and the other obligatory. For clarity's sake I shall call the introductory or optional clause the "tag" ("she said") and the second the "reference." The tag clause signals that it is the reference clause which contains what is reported or quoted ("I have to go" or "She had to go"). In English, the differences between direct and indirect style involve (1) the tense of the predicate of the reference clause, (2) the person of the subject of the clause, and (3) the (optional) presence of "that." In indirect style the tense of the reference clause is generally one tense *earlier* than that of its direct counterpart. And the pronoun is changed from first to third person.

The deeper semantic relations of the two forms, however, are more obscure. Until recently, it was thought that they were straightforward variants of each other, that "She said she had to go" meant the same as "She said 'I have to go' ". But linguists have shown that important differences discredit that easy assumption.[3] For example, some sentences can only appear in direct form. "Egbert blurted out, 'How I have loved it!' " cannot be transformed to "Egbert blurted out how he had loved it" and still preserve its original meaning. In the first sentence "how" means "how much," while in the second it means "in what manner." Similarly, "Clarissa whispered, 'There!' " cannot occur in indirect form – *"Clarissa whispered that there." Perhaps the most interesting restriction, from the narrative point of view, is that only direct forms can cite the speaker's exact words; indirect forms give no such guarantee. Thus it is possible to question only the language of indirect report clauses; we can say "Oedipus cried out that he had done something horrible with his mother, but I won't repeat what he actually said," but not *"Oedipus cried out, 'I have done something horrible with my mother,' but I won't repeat what he actually said."

The indirect form in narratives implies a shade more intervention by a narrator, since we cannot be sure that the words in the report clause are precisely those spoken by the quoted speaker. Of course, they may be, as when they differ radically in diction and/or syntax from the established "well-spoken" style of the narrator: for example in "Eveline" the sentence "... latterly he [Eveline's father] had begun to threaten her and say what he would do *only* for her dead mother's sake." The context clearly indicates that the italicized portion is the lower-class Irish dialect counterpart of "*if it were not* for her dead mother's sake." But the well-spoken narrator is not speaking in lower-class dialect. There are several other kinds of expressive effects which suggest that the character's speech or thoughts are being directly quoted. For instance, parts of the sentence can be shifted around and elements deleted to give them more prominence, as someone might do in the heat of actual expression: "John shouted out that how Mary could behave so badly was beyond his comprehension." Interjections can be introduced: "Richard protested that Lord! he didn't like it." Or hesitations: "He protested that he, God help him, he could not be held responsible." Or special emphasis: "He protested that *he* could not be held responsible."[4]

On the other hand there may be good evidence that the words are not exactly quoted, as in the Oedipus example cited above. We sense that the "I" has paraphrased Oedipus' original words. The "I" may equally summarize, epitomize, interpret, or otherwise alter the exact words of the quoted speaker. And, of course, the "I," the reporter, who must be the narrating subject of such sentences, may not refer to himself, so that the *pronoun* "I" need not actually appear.

In the nineteenth century there arose in most European languages another distinction which crosscuts that between direct and indirect speech and thought, namely that between "tagged" and "free" style (*style indirect libre, erlebte Rede*).[5] Free style deletes the tag. Thus:

	Tagged	Free
Direct:		
Speech	"I have to go," she said	I have to go
Thought	"I have to go," she thought	I have to go
Indirect:		
Speech	She said that she had to go	She had to go
Thought	She thought that she had to go	She had to go

Free speech and thought are expressed identically, and thus ambiguously, unless the context clarifies.

Direct free forms, I have argued, characterize interior monologue. Indirect free forms do not, precisely because a narrator is presupposed by the third person pronouns and the anterior tense. They may, of course, co-occur with direct free forms: examples abound in *Ulysses*. But often, as in Virginia Woolf's major novels, they co-occur only with indirect-tagged forms.

Still, the meaning of the indirect free form is not the simple remainder of indirect tagged form minus the tag. It has a greater degree of autonomy, and though ambiguity may persist, the absence of the tag makes it sound more like the character speaking or thinking than a narrator's report. A sentence like "She felt that John, bless his soul! would provide for the family" could mean that either the character or the narrator, or both, were blessing John's soul. Whereas in context the indirect free counterpart "John, bless his soul, would provide for the family" seems more exclusively the blessing of the character. This is true of a whole host of expressive features: exclamations, questions, expletives, imperatives, repetitions and similar emphases, interruptions, the words "yes" and "no," colloquialisms, and other forms of "unnarrative" diction (for example, pet names, technical jargon, foreign language elements, etc.). A narrator could hardly remain covert if he himself were to use such forms.

Take exclamations, for example. A covert narrator is hard put to use them because they express strong feelings – deprecation, enthusiasm, or whatever. Such expression would call undue attention to those feelings: we would begin to wonder about them and particularly whether "thereby hangs a tale" about *him*. Exclamations do not suit the role of effaced or transparent mediator. The logic of covert narration permits only the character to exclaim. In Joyce's "The Dead":

> Gabriel's warm trembling fingers tapped the cold pane of the window. How cool it must be outside! How pleasant it would be to walk out alone, first along by the river and then through the park! The snow would be lying on the branches of the trees and forming a bright cap on the top of the Wellington Monument. How much more pleasant it would be there than at the supper-table!

We assume that the exclamations are exclusively Gabriel's, a direct quotation of his mind's speech. We have no reason to believe that the narrator is exclaiming.[6]

Stylistically, the reference clause can be either identical with or clearly distanced from the surmisable words of the character, indeed, so distanced as to seem only the narrator's paraphrase. I can present indirectly the statement of a fired streetcleaner in language which is or is not evidently his: "He said he was canned and it was the goddamned foreman's fault." Or "He said that his resignation was enforced, implying that questions of a distinctly jurisdictional nature had been raised." And either of these can occur in free indirect style. Thus free indirect style divides into subclasses, attributable to character or to narrator. In between, there are statements of

varying degrees of ambiguity. For language that is clearly the character's, a suitable label, recently proposed, is *narrated monologue*.[7] "Narrated" accounts for the indirect features – third person and prior tense – while "monologue" conveys the sense of hearing the very words of the character. Narrated monologue is clearly distinguished from narrative report (internal analysis), where the character's thinking or speech is communicated in words that are recognizably the narrator's. Finally, there is the relatively common ambiguous situation, discussed below, where it is difficult to know whose voice speaks.

The kind of indirect mode considered so far is purely verbal, that is, an account of *words* spoken or thought by the character. But there is clearly another kind of report, whose basis is, rather, perceptions. From the end of Chapter IV and the beginning of Chapter V of *Madame Bovary*:

> The old servant appeared, presented her respects, apologized for not having dinner ready and suggested that Madame look over her new house in the meantime.
>
> V
>
> The brick front of the house was flush with the street, or rather the road. Behind the door hung a coat with a short cape, a bridle and a black leather cap....

And so on through a description of the parlor, the hall, Charles's office, a large room used as a woodshed and storeroom, and the garden. Then

> Emma went up to the bedrooms. The first one was not furnished, but the second one, the conjugal chamber, had a mahogany bed standing in an alcove hung with red draperies....

This is not a mere description of the house at Tostes by an outside narrator, but a sense of how the place struck Emma on her first view of it. Though no verb refers to Emma's perceptions, they are clearly implied – that is, we infer that the second sentence is really a shortened form of "She saw that the brick front of the house was flush with the street," and so on. This cannot be called "indirect free thought": the full form is not "Emma thought that the brick front of the house was flush with the street'." It is rather a "free indirect perception."[8]

Let me illustrate the distinctions between narrated monologue and internal analysis with two quotations. Here is something of the logic by which I think we decide whose voice it is that we hear in indirect discourse. The opening sentences of "Eveline" again:

(1) "She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue." At first we are uncertain that there is a narrator. The discourse may be only an enactment, the narrative equivalent of an actress sitting on-stage by a window painted on the backdrop. "Sitting at the window" could clearly pass as "nonnarrated," but "watching" is ambiguous. A character may be described as watching something from an external vantage, hence no narrator. Or the verb may verbalize her perception, hence a covert narrator.

Then we encounter the phrase "evening invade the avenue." The metaphor clearly presupposes a mind capable of its invention; if it is not Eveline who does so, the speaker can only be the narrator. Later evidence validates this hypothesis (number five below).

(2) "Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odor of dusty cretonne." The first part of this sentence again might seem to present a simple enactment. But in the jelling context it seems more like a covert narrator's pronouncement, a free indirect perception.

(3) "She was tired." This is ambiguous: either "She felt [that she was] tired," or "My [the narrator's] report is that she was tired," whatever she thought. (Or *both*: the ambiguity of free indirect forms.)

(4) "Few people passed." Ditto: "She saw few people pass" or "On my [the narrator's] authority few people passed." Or both.

(5) "The man out of the last house passed on his way home." Here clearly we distinguish two vocalic styles. "Out of" is a class dialect form of "from." The voice that speaks of the evening "invading" the avenue is clearly not the one that speaks of a man "out of" the last house; clearly the former belongs to an "author"-narrator and the latter to the character. The basic form of the sentence is indirect free perception but the phrase "out of the last house" is a direct quotation, hence narrated monologue.[9] (Corroboration occurs later in the text in usages like "used to" as iterative instead of the more literary "would," "she always had an edge on her," "hunt them in," "not so bad," including forms that indicate that Eveline is still very young: "grownup," "keep nix," and so on.)

Several changes that Joyce made when "Eveline" was republished in *The Dubliners* (it had originally appeared in the *Irish Homestead*, September 10, 1904) are obvious attempts to make her mental voice more prominent. In the revision, she wonders where "all the dust came from"; in the original, her room is said to "secrete" dust. A subjunctive is replaced by a dialectal form: her father's "saying what he would do if it were not for her dead mother's sake," becomes "what he would do to her only for her dead mother's sake." Perhaps the most interesting change is the dropping of the quotation marks that originally embraced the word "edge" in the sentence about Miss Gavan: "Miss Gavan had an 'edge' on her...." Deleting the quotation marks turns the sentence into narrated monologue. (The quotation marks would mean not direct free thought but a narrator's "Jamesian" self-consciousness about slang.)

So we distinguish the simple colloquial voice of the character Eveline from the voice of a covert narrator of literary ability. The distinction, of course, is supported by the story's content. We have now read enough to sense that her environment is poor (the curtains are dusty because they hang in a decrepit building in a neighborhood where the atmosphere is smoky), that she has lived in that neighborhood since she was a child, playing in empty lots with the other children of the neighborhood (not in the green fields of an exclusive boarding school), and so on. Even without the evidence from diction, these recognitions would make it unlikely that she is "literary," say a would-be author struggling in a loft. Later sentences confirm our judgments about the first two sentences: they are clearly a narrator's report.[10]

This laborious and unnatural way of reading is not, of course, what the reader actually does, but only a suggestion of what his logic of decision must be like. As narratee he *hears* the narrator's report; the snatches of the character's actual verbiage he *overhears*.

Sometimes it is not possible to decide whether the words in indirect free form are the character's or the narrator's, for example, if both speak in a highly literate manner. This is not a negative characterization, since the merging of the two voices may well be an

intended aesthetic effect. The implication is "It doesn't matter who says or thinks this; it is appropriate to both character and narrator." The ambiguity may strengthen the bond between the two, make us trust still more the narrator's authority. Perhaps we should speak of "neutralization" or "unification," rather than ambiguity.

Thus, the covert narrator can describe from a clear external vantage point, dip down to quote from the character's thoughts in his own or the character's very words, or plant an ambiguity about a locution, indistinguishably telling and showing, narrating and enacting the character's inner life.

Brilliant examples of the "neutralized" indirect free style occur in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The first sentences:

> Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumplemayer's men were coming.

A "sympathetic" effect arises because there is no reason to assume that Clarissa's idiolect differs significantly from the narrator's. Such statements imply that character and narrator are so close, in such sympathy, that it does not matter to whom we assign the statement. Indifferently "For you see, dear reader, Lucy had her work cut out for her" (that is, "I, the narrator observe that"), or "[Mrs. Dalloway remembered that] Lucy had her work cut out for her." Indeed the ambiguity goes further, since a *speech* could as easily be implied: "[Mrs. Dalloway *said* that] Lucy had her work cut out for her." All three possibilities hover above the sentence. A feeling is established that the narrator possesses not only access to but an unusual affinity or "vibration" with the character's mind. There is the suggestion of a kind of "in"-group psychology: "It was understood by all parties, including 'myself' (the narrator), that Lucy had her work cut out for her." The content of the first sentence prepares us for this consensus: Mrs. Dalloway is reported simply as saying that she would buy the flowers, not saying that to any particular person. It seems more pronouncement than dialogue. There arises a sense of the broader social context: Mrs. Dalloway is accustomed to having a cooperative audience, maids, cooks, and butlers. The same kind of consensus operates at the beginning of Katherine Mansfield's "The Garden Party." "And after all the weather was ideal. They could not have had a more perfect day for a garden-party if they had ordered it": indistinguishably the thought of one or all of the family, or what one of them said to the others, or the narrator's judgment of the situation.

But the indirect free style is by no means committed to sympathy. It may work ironically.[11] In a beautifully conceived passage Flaubert plays the dreams of Charles and Emma Bovary against each other:

> When he came home in the middle of the night he did not dare to wake her.... Charles looked at his wife and daughter.... How pretty she would be later, at fifteen! She would look just like her mother, and they would both wear wide straw hats in summer; from a distance they would look like two sisters... they would think about her marriage: they would find her some fine young man with a good position; he would make her happy, and it would last forever.
>
> Emma was not asleep, but only pretending to be; and while he sank into sleep beside her she lay awake, dreaming different dreams.

> She and Rodolphe had been traveling for a week, drawn by four galloping horses toward a new country from which they would never return. They went on and on, their arms intertwined, without speaking. Often from the top of a mountain they would suddenly catch sight of some magnificent city, with domes, bridges, ships, forests of lemon trees and white marble cathedrals with storks' nests on their pointed steeples.

The irony lies in the juxtaposition of the indirect free plunges into the two disparate fantasy worlds. The minds are a million miles apart, though the bodies are separated only by inches.

As I have argued, indirect tagged forms go further toward illuminating a narrator's presence. Indeed, the tag may directly interpret the character's thought, feeling or speech: "John concluded that he was right" implies a greater degree of narrator-mediation than "John thought that he was right" precisely because the mental process through which John has achieved his certainty is characterized by the narrator.

Also interpretive are sentences in which the thought or sensation is not couched in a *that*-clause, but in a nominal phrase. This further syntactic move underlines a kind of epitomization, hence greater narrator audibility. "John concluded the correctness of his position" is more evidently the internal analysis of the situation by a narrator, since it is even less certain that John had in fact uttered to himself the precise words "the correctness of my position."

"Internal analysis" or "narrator's report" is what critics doubtless mean by "limited third person narration," though, as I argue above, "third person" is improperly used. In pure covert narration, the narrator does not refer to himself at all, so there is no real parallelism with "first person narration." In the latter the narrator indeed refers to *himself* through the first person pronoun. But in the former it is the *character* who is referred to by the third person pronoun: the narrator simply does not refer to himself at all. It is no more meaningful to call him "he" than "I" or "you."

NOTES

1 There is a hierarchy of "degrees of narratorhood" implicit in Wayne Booth's *reductio ad absurdum* of the dogma of "objective" argument in narratives (*Rhetoric of Fiction*, 1961, pp. 16–19). But I take the notion of degree of narratorhood seriously.

2 Dorrit Cohn, "Narrated Monologue: Definition of a Fictional Style," *Comparative Literature*, 18 (1966), 102, ventures an explanation of the reason for this kind of mistake: "The arguments in favor of an internal angle of vision, so forcefully stated by Henry James, Percy Lubbock, and Joseph Warren Beach, have led to the belief that the separate narrator is absent from the dramatized novel, and that therefore the 'central intelligence' is himself the narrator, in the same sense as the 'I' is the narrator of a story told in the first person. Lubbock may have started this misapprehension when he referred to the character in whom the vision rests by such names as 'dramatized author,' 'spokesman for the author,' or 'fresh narrator.' But despite these misleading metaphors, Lubbock himself was fully aware that in all third-person novels the figural psyche is supplemented by 'someone else... looking over his shoulder....'"

3 See Ann Banfield, "Narrative Style and the Grammar of Direct and Indirect Speech," *Foundations of Language*, 10 (1973), 1–39 (and the literature quoted therein); see also the important study by Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice* (Totowa, N.J., 1977). The examples are taken

from Banfield's article, which I find challenging even as I disagree with it. Asterisks mark un-English forms.

4 Despite Banfield, who asterisks them, these are eminently possible in fiction. But not all expressive elements can occur. Banfield is right in arguing that the indirect counterpart of sentences like "Clarissa exclaimed, 'What a lark!' " is not possible (p. 7).

5 See the bibliography in footnotes to Dorrit Cohn's article and that in Stephen Ullmann's "Reported Speech and Internal Monologue in Flaubert," *Style in the French Novel* (Cambridge, 1957). The first reference to "*style direct libre*" that I know, cited by Derek Bickerton, "Modes of Interior Monologue: A Formal Definition," *Modern Language Notes*, 28 (1976), 233, occurred in L. C. Harmer, *The French Language Today* (Melbourne, 1954), p. 301.

6 Why exclamations must mark the indirect free discourse of a character is argued in a subtle article by Pierre Guiraud, "Modern Linguistics Looks at Rhetoric: Free Indirect Style," in Joseph Strelka, ed., *Patterns of Literary Style*, Yearbook of Comparative Criticism, Vol. III (University Park, Penn., 1971), p. 83.

7 Cohn, "Narrated Monologue," p. 98. Among the many other terms that have been suggested are "substitutionary speech," *verschleierte Rede, erlebte Rede*, "independent form of indirect discourse," *uneigentlich direkte Rede*, "represented speech," "narrative mimicry," *Rede als Tatsache, monologue intérieur indirect.* See Paul Hernadi, *Beyond Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1972), pp. 187–205, and Edward Versluis, "Narrative Mimicry and the Representation of the Mental Processes" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1972).

8 Or "substitutionary perception," in the phrase of Bernard Fehr, "Substitutionary Narration and Description: A Chapter in Stylistics," *Von Englands geistigen Bestanden* (Frauenfeld, 1944), pp. 264–279. Fehr notes some interesting features of substitutionary perception, for instance that it is regularly followed by progressive rather than simple verb forms: "He saw one of the men who had returned with Silva. *He was standing* in his boat. . . ."

9 Graham Hough has identified the convention of the "well-spoken" narrator and its importance as a norm against which the voices of the characters are placed. He points out that the contrast is characteristic of the novel but not the epic ("Narrative and Dialogue in Jane Austen," *Critical Quarterly*, 12 [1970], 201).

10 Thus the incorrectness of Clive Hart's assumption (in "Eveline," *James Joyce's Dubliners: Critical Essays*, London, 1969, p. 51) that the "invasion" figure of the first sentence is "just the sort of hyperbole that a girl like Eveline might be expected to use."

11 Dorrit Cohn too has noted that the free indirect style "implies two basic possibilities: fusion with the subject, in which the actor identifies with, 'becomes' the person he imitates; or distance from the subject, a mock-identification that leads to caricature. Accordingly there are two divergent directions open to the narrated monologue, depending on which imitative tendency prevails: the lyric and the ironic" (110–111). "Lyric" strikes me as less descriptive of the effect than "sympathetic," in its root sense of the word – "in agreement with another's taste, mood, feeling, disposition, etc."