

How Fiction Works

Tenth Anniversary Edition

Updated and Expanded

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Picador

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

New York

2008; 2018

Narrating

1

The house of fiction has many windows, but only two or three doors. I can tell a story in the third person or in the first person, and perhaps in the second person singular, or in the first person plural, though successful examples of these latter two are rare,* indeed. And that is it. Anything else probably will not much resemble narration; it may be closer to poetry, or prose-poetry.

2

In reality, we are stuck with third- and first-person narration. The common idea is that there is a contrast between reliable narration (third-person omniscience) and unreliable narration (the unreliable first-person narrator, who knows less about himself than the reader eventually does). On one side, Tolstoy, say; and on the other, Humbert Humbert or Italo Svevo's narrator, Zeno Cosini, or Bertie Wooster. Authorial

*See Samantha Harvey's *Dear Thief* and Eimear McBride's *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* for examples of this rare success.

omniscience, people assume, has had its day, much as that "vast, moth-eaten musical brocade" called religion has also had its. W. G. Sebald once said to me, "I think that fiction writing which does not acknowledge the uncertainty of the narrator himself is a form of imposture which I find very, very difficult to take. Any form of authorial writing where the narrator sets himself up as stagehand and director and judge and executor in a text, I find somehow unacceptable. I cannot bear to read books of this kind." Sebald continued: "If you refer to Jane Austen, you refer to a world where there were set standards of propriety which were accepted by everyone. Given that you have a world where the rules are clear and where one knows where trespassing begins, then I think it is legitimate, within that context, to be a narrator who knows what the rules are and who knows the answers to certain questions. But I think these certainties have been taken from us by the course of history, and that we do have to acknowledge our own sense of ignorance and of insufficiency in these matters and therefore to try and write accordingly."*

*This interview can be found in *The New Brick Reader*, ed. Tara Quinn (2013).

3

For Sebald, and for many writers like him, standard third-person omniscient narration is a kind of antique cheat. But both sides of this division have been caricatured.

4

Actually, first-person narration is generally more reliable than unreliable; and third-person "omniscient" narration is generally more partial than omniscient.

The first-person narrator is often highly reliable; Jane Eyre, a highly reliable first-person narrator, for instance, tells us her story from a position of belated enlightenment (years later, married to Mr. Rochester, she can now see her whole life story, rather as Mr. Rochester's eyesight is gradually returning at the end of the novel). Even the apparently unreliable narrator is more often than not reliably unreliable. Think of Kazuo Ishiguro's butler in *The Remains of the Day*, or of Bertie Wooster, or even of Humbert Humbert. We know that the narrator is being unreliable because the author is alerting us, through reliable manipulation, to that narrator's unreliability. A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator.

Unreliably unreliable narration is very rare, actually—about as rare as a genuinely mysterious, truly bottomless character. The nameless narrator of Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* is highly unreliable, and finally unknowable (it helps that he is insane); Dostoevsky's narrator in *Notes from Underground* is the model for Hamsun. Italo Svevo's Zeno Cosini may be the best example of truly unreliable narration. He imagines that by telling us his life story he is psychoanalyzing himself (he has promised his analyst to do this). But his self-comprehension, waved confidently before our eyes, is as comically perforated as a bullet-holed flag.

5

On the other side, omniscient narration is rarely as omniscient as it seems. To begin with, authorial style generally has a way of making third-person omniscience seem partial and inflected. Authorial style tends to draw our attention toward the writer, toward the artifice of the author's construction, and so toward the writer's own impress. Thus the almost comic paradox of Flaubert's celebrated wish that the author be "impersonal," Godlike, and removed, in contrast with the high personality of his very style, those exquisite sentences and details, which are noth-

ing less than God's showy signatures on every page: so much for the impersonal author. Tolstoy comes closest to a canonical idea of authorial omniscience, and he uses with great naturalness and authority a mode of writing that Roland Barthes called "the reference code" (or sometimes "the cultural code"), whereby a writer makes confident appeal to a universal or consensual truth, or a body of shared cultural or scientific knowledge.*

6

So-called omniscience is almost impossible. As soon as someone tells a story about a character, narrative seems to want to bend itself around that character, wants to merge with that character, to take on his or her way of thinking and speaking. A novelist's omniscience soon enough becomes a kind of secret sharing; this is called

*Barthes uses this term in his book *S/Z* (1970; translated by Richard Miller, 1974). He means the way that nineteenth-century writers refer to commonly accepted cultural or scientific knowledge, for instance shared ideological generalities about "women." I extend the term to cover any kind of authorial generalization. For instance, an example from Tolstoy: at the start of *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, three of Ivan Ilyich's friends are reading his obituary, and Tolstoy writes that each man, "as is usual in such cases, was secretly congratulating himself that it was Ivan who had died and not him." *As is usual in such cases*: the author refers with ease and wisdom to a central human truth, serenely gazing into the hearts of three different men.

“free indirect style,” a term novelists have lots of different nicknames for—“close third person,” or “going into character.”*

7

a. He looked over at his wife. “She looks so unhappy,” he thought, “almost sick.” He wondered what to say.

This is direct or quoted speech (“‘She looks so unhappy,’ he thought”) combined with the character’s reported or indirect speech (“He wondered what to say”). The old-fashioned notion of a character’s thought as a speech made to himself, a kind of internal address.

b. He looked over at his wife. She looked so unhappy, he thought, almost sick. He wondered what to say.

This is reported or indirect speech, the internal speech of the husband reported by the author, and flagged as such (“he thought”). It is the most recognizable, the most habitual, of all the codes of standard realist narrative.

*I like D. A. Miller’s phrase for free indirect style, from his book *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2003): “close writing.”

c. He looked at his wife. Yes, she was tiresomely unhappy again, almost sick. What the hell should he say?

This is free indirect speech or style: the husband’s internal speech or thought has been freed of its authorial flagging; no “he said to himself” or “he wondered” or “he thought.”

Note the gain in flexibility. The narrative seems to float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the character, who now seems to “own” the words. The writer is free to inflect the reported thought, to bend it around the character’s own words (“‘What the hell should he say?’”). We are close to stream of consciousness, and that is the direction free indirect style takes in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries: “He looked at her. Unhappy, yes. Sickly. Obviously a big mistake to have told her. His stupid conscience again. Why did he blurt it? All his own fault, and what now?”

You will note that such internal monologue, freed from flagging and quotation marks, sounds very much like the pure soliloquy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels (an example of a technical improvement merely renovating, in a circular manner, an original technique too basic and useful—too real—to do without).

8

Free indirect style is at its most powerful when hardly visible or audible: "Jen watched the orchestra through stupid tears." In my example, the word "stupid" marks the sentence as written in free indirect style. Remove it, and we have standard reported thought: "Jen watched the orchestra through tears." The addition of the word "stupid" raises the question: Whose word is this? It's unlikely that I would want to call my character stupid merely for listening to some music in a concert hall. No, in a marvelous alchemical transfer, the word now belongs partly to Jen. She is listening to the music and crying, and is embarrassed—we can imagine her furiously rubbing her eyes—that she has allowed these "stupid" tears to fall. Convert it back into first-person speech, and we have this: "Stupid to be crying at this silly piece of Brahms, she thought." But this example is several words longer; and we have lost the complicated presence of the author.

9

What is so useful about free indirect style is that in our example a word like "stupid" somehow belongs both to the author and the character; we are not entirely sure who "owns" the word. Might

"stupid" reflect a slight asperity or distance on the part of the author? Or does the word belong *wholly* to the character, with the author, in a rush of sympathy, having "handed" it, as it were, to the tearful woman?

10

Thanks to free indirect style, we see things through the character's eyes and language but also through the author's eyes and language. We inhabit omniscience and partiality at once. A gap opens between author and character, and the bridge—which is free indirect style itself—between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance.

This is merely another definition of dramatic irony: to see through a character's eyes while being encouraged to see more than the character can see (an unreliability identical to the unreliable first-person narrator's).

11

Some of the purest examples of irony are found in children's literature, which often needs to allow a child—or the child's proxy, an animal—to see the world through limited eyes, while alerting the older reader to this limitation. In

Robert McCloskey's *Make Way for Ducklings*, Mr. and Mrs. Mallard are trying out the Boston Public Garden for their new home, when a swan boat (a boat made to look like a swan but actually powered by a pedal-pushing human pilot) passes them. Mr. Mallard has never seen anything like this before. McCloskey falls naturally into free indirect style: "Just as they were getting ready to start on their way, a strange enormous bird came by. It was pushing a boat full of people, and there was a man sitting on its back. 'Good morning,' quacked Mr. Mallard, being polite. The big bird was too proud to answer." Instead of telling us that Mr. Mallard could make no sense of the swan boat, McCloskey places us in Mr. Mallard's confusion; yet the confusion is obvious enough that a broad ironic gap opens between Mr. Mallard and the reader (or author). *We* are not confused in the same way as Mr. Mallard; but we are also being made to inhabit Mr. Mallard's confusion.

12

What happens, though, when a more serious writer wants to open a very small gap between character and author? What happens when a novelist wants us to inhabit a character's confusion, but will not "correct" that confusion, re-

fuses to make clear what a state of nonconfusion would look like? We can walk in a straight line from McCloskey to Henry James. There is a technical connection, for instance, between *Make Way for Ducklings* and James's novel *What Maisie Knew*. Free indirect style helps us to inhabit juvenile confusion, this time a young girl's rather than a duck's. James tells the story, from the third person, of Maisie Farange, a little girl whose parents have viciously divorced. She is bounced between them, as new governesses, from each parental side, are thrust upon her. James wants us to live inside her confusion, and also wants to describe adult corruption from the eyes of childish innocence. Maisie likes one of her governesses, the plain and distinctly lower-middle-class Mrs. Wix, who wears her hair rather grotesquely, and who once had a little daughter called Clara Matilda, a girl who, at around Maisie's age, was knocked down on the Harrow Road, and is buried in the cemetery at Kensal Green. Maisie knows that her elegant and vapid mother does not think much of Mrs. Wix, but Maisie likes her all the same:

It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing: so much, one day when Mrs. Wix had accompanied her into the drawing-room and left her, the child heard one

of the ladies she found there—a lady with eyebrows arched like skipping-ropes and thick black stitching, like ruled lines for musical notes on beautiful white gloves—announce to another. She knew governesses were poor; Miss Overmore was unmentionably and Mrs. Wix ever so publicly so. Neither this, however, nor the old brown frock nor the diadem nor the button, made a difference for Maisie in the charm put forth through everything, the charm of Mrs. Wix's conveying that somehow, in her ugliness and her poverty, she was peculiarly and soothingly safe; safer than any one in the world, than papa, than mamma, than the lady with the arched eyebrows; safer even, though so much less beautiful, than Miss Overmore, on whose loveliness, as she supposed it, the little girl was faintly conscious that one couldn't rest with quite the same tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling. Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet, embarrassingly, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave.

This is tremendously subtle. It is so flexible, so capable of inhabiting different levels of comprehension and irony, so full of poignant identification with young Maisie, yet constantly moving in toward Maisie and moving away from her, back toward the author.

James's free indirect style allows us to inhabit at least three different perspectives at once: the official parental and adult judgment on Mrs. Wix; Maisie's version of the official view; and Maisie's view of Mrs. Wix. The official view, overheard by Maisie, is filtered through Maisie's own half-comprehending voice: "It was on account of these things that mamma got her for such low pay, really for nothing." The lady with the arched eyebrows who uttered this cruelty is being paraphrased by Maisie, and paraphrased not especially skeptically or rebelliously, but with a child's wide-eyed respect for authority. James must make us feel that Maisie knows a lot but not enough. Maisie may not like the woman with the arched eyebrows who spoke thus about Mrs. Wix, but she is still in fear of her judgment, and we can hear a kind of excited respect in the narration; the free indirect style is done so well that it is *pure voice*—it longs to be turned back into the speech of which it is the paraphrase: we can hear, as a sort of shadow, Maisie saying to the kind of friend she in fact painfully lacks, "You know, mamma got her for very low pay because she is very poor and has a dead daughter. I've visited the grave, don't you know!"

So there is the official adult opinion of Mrs. Wix; and there is Maisie's comprehension

of this official disapproval; and then, countervailingly, there is Maisie's own, much warmer opinion of Mrs. Wix, who may not be as elegant as her predecessor, Miss Overmore, but who seems much more safe: the purveyor of a uniquely "tucked-in and kissed-for-good-night feeling." (Notice that in the interest of letting Maisie "speak" through his language, James is willing to sacrifice his own stylistic elegance in a phrase like this.)

14

James's genius gathers in one word: "embarrassingly." That is where all the stress comes to rest. "Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet, *embarrassingly*, also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave." Whose word is "embarrassingly"? It is Maisie's: it is embarrassing for a child to witness adult grief, and embarrassing that a body could be both up in heaven and solidly in the ground. We can imagine Maisie standing next to Mrs. Wix in the cemetery at Kensal Green—it is characteristic of James's narration that he has not mentioned the place name Kensal Green until now, leaving it for us to work out—we can imagine her standing next to Mrs. Wix and feeling awkward and embar-

rassed, at once impressed by and a little afraid of Mrs. Wix's grief. And here is the greatness of the passage: Maisie, despite her greater love for Mrs. Wix, stands in the same relation to Mrs. Wix as she stands to the lady with the arched eyebrows; both women cause her some embarrassment. She fully understands neither, even if she uncomprehendingly prefers the former. "Embarrassingly": the word encodes Maisie's natural embarrassment and also the internalized embarrassment of official adult opinion ("My dear, it is so *embarrassing*, that woman is always taking her up to Kensal Green!").

15

Remove the word "embarrassingly" from the sentence and it would barely be free indirect style: "Mrs. Wix was as safe as Clara Matilda, who was in heaven and yet also in Kensal Green, where they had been together to see her little huddled grave." The addition of the single adverb takes us deep into Maisie's confusion, and at that moment we become her—that adverb is passed from James to Maisie, is given to Maisie. We merge with her. Yet, within the same sentence, having briefly merged, we are drawn back: "her little *huddled* grave." "Embarrassingly" is the word Maisie might have used, but "huddled"

is not. It is Henry James's word. The sentence pulsates, moves in and out, toward the character and away from her—when we reach “huddled” we are reminded that an *author* allowed us to merge with his character, that the author's magniloquent style is the envelope within which this generous contract is carried.

16

The critic Hugh Kenner writes about a moment in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Uncle Charles “repaired” to the outhouse. “Repair” is a pompous verb that belongs to outmoded poetic convention. It is “bad” writing. Joyce, with his acute eye for cliché, would only use such a word knowingly. It must be, says Kenner, Uncle Charles's word, the word he might use about himself in his fond fantasy about his own importance (“And so I *repair* to the outhouse”). Kenner names this the Uncle Charles principle. Mystifyingly, he calls this “something new in fiction.” Yet we know it isn't. The Uncle Charles principle is just an edition of free indirect style. Joyce is a master at it. “The Dead” begins like this: “Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet.” But no one is *literally* run off her feet. What we hear is Lily saying to herself or to a friend (with great emphasis on pre-

cisely the most inaccurate word, and with a strong accent): “Oi was *lit-er-rully* ron off me feet!”

17

Even if Kenner's example is a bit different, it is still not new. Mock-heroic poetry of the eighteenth century gets its laughs by applying the language of epic or the Bible to reduced human subjects. In Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, Belinda's makeup and dressing-table effects are seen as “unnumbered treasures,” “India's glowing gems,” “all Arabia breathes from yonder box,” and so on. Part of the joke is that this is the kind of language that the personage—“personage” being precisely a mock-heroic word—might want to use about herself; the rest of the joke resides in the actual littleness of that personage. Well, what is this but an early form of free indirect style?

In the opening of Chapter 5 of *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen introduces us to Sir William Lucas, once the mayor of Longbourn, who, knighted by the king, has decided that he is too big for the town, and must move to a new pile:

Sir William Lucas had been formerly in trade in Meryton, where he had made a tolerable fortune,

and risen to the honour of knighthood by an address to the King, during his mayoralty. The distinction had perhaps been felt too strongly. It had given him a disgust to his business and to his residence in a small market town; and quitting them both, he had removed with his family to a house about a mile from Meryton, denominated from that period Lucas Lodge, where he could think with pleasure of his own importance . . .

Austen's irony dances over this like the long-legged fly in Yeats's poem: "where he had made a tolerable fortune." What is, or would be, a "tolerable" fortune? Intolerable to whom, tolerated by whom? But the great example of mock-heroic comedy resides in that phrase "denominated from that period Lucas Lodge." Lucas Lodge is funny enough; it is like Toad of Toad Hall or Shandy Hall, or Trump Tower, and we can be sure that the house does not quite measure up to its alliterative grandeur. But the pomposity of "denominated from that period" is funny because we can imagine Sir William saying to himself "and I will *denominate* the house, from *this period*, Lucas Lodge. Yes, that sounds *prodigious*." Mock-heroic is almost identical, at this point, to free indirect style. Austen has handed the language over to Sir William, but she is still tartly in control.

A modern master of the mock-heroic is V. S. Naipaul in *A House for Mr Biswas*: "When he got home he mixed and drank some Maclean's Brand Stomach Powder, undressed, got into bed and began to read Epictetus." The comic-pathetic capitalization of the brand name, and the presence of Epictetus—Pope himself would not have done it better. And what is the make of the bed that poor Mr. Biswas rests on? It is, Naipaul deliberately tells us every so often, a "Slumberking bed": the right name for a man who may be a king or little god in his own mind but who will never rise above "Mr." And Naipaul's decision, of course, to refer to Biswas as "Mr. Biswas" throughout the novel has itself a mock-heroic irony about it, "Mr." being at once the most ordinary honorific and, in a poor society, a by no means spontaneous achievement. "Mr. Biswas," we might say, is free indirect style in a pod: "Mr." is how Biswas likes to think of himself; but it is all he will ever be, along with everyone else.

There is a funny moment in Penelope Fitzgerald's novel, *The Blue Flower*—one of many in that gem-like book. Fitzgerald has established a comic contrast between the rapturous, self-absorbed, romantic dreamer, Fritz von Hardenberg (based on

the German poet and philosopher, Novalis), and his friend, Karoline Just, who is sensible, sober, and humanly wise. In the gendered environment of late-eighteenth-century Prussia, Karoline's modest task is to be a domestic help-mate, while Fritz's grander, male role is to talk and explain: philosophy, science, poetry, and love. But the canny author, channeling her inner Jane Austen, observes this setup with an ironic eye. The two are talking in the kitchen: "All was confessed, he talked perpetually. Neither the sewing nor the forewinter sausage-chopping deterred him. As she chopped, Karoline learned that the world is tending day by day not towards destruction, but towards infinity. She was told where Fichte's philosophy fell short." As the woman works, the man talks. But where, precisely, does the irony fall? Surely on that innocent-sounding verb, "learned": as she chops sausages, Karoline *learns* that the world is tending toward infinity. But she hasn't actually learned it; she's been *told* it—a rather different thing—by her exuberant, mansplaining instructor. You can't *learn*, in a few seconds in the kitchen, something as massive and amorphous as the "fact" that the world tends towards infinity. Elsewhere in the novel, women are amusedly ironic or briskly sardonic when Fritz starts opining. At one moment, he announces that a heroine in a

Goethe novel dies because the world "is not holy enough to contain her." To which Karoline tartly responds: "She dies because Goethe couldn't think what to do with her next." So we can assume, I think, that "she learned" is being used at Fritz's expense. The sentence really means: "Karoline was told, and tried to learn, but finally did not learn, that the world tends toward infinity." So the verb, used as part of free indirect style, achieves here the purest form of compacted irony: it means the opposite of what is written. Free indirect style is sometimes called a conservative or old-fashioned technique,* but it is an insidiously radical literary tool, because it allows the author to put words on the page whose ironic, shadow meanings are virtual inversions of their apparent ones.

19

There is a final refinement of free indirect style—we should now just call it authorial irony—when the gap between an author's voice and a character's voice seems to collapse altogether; when a character's voice does indeed seem rebelliously to have taken over the narration altogether. "The town was small, worse than a village, and in it

*See, for instance, Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013).

lived almost none but old people, who died so rarely it was even annoying." What an amazing opening! It is the first sentence of Chekhov's story "Rothschild's Fiddle." The next sentences are: "And in the hospital and jail there was very little demand for coffins. In short, business was bad." The rest of the paragraph introduces us to an extremely mean coffin-maker, and we realize that the story has opened in the middle of free indirect style: "and in it lived almost none but old people, who died so rarely it was even annoying." We are in the midst of the coffin-maker's mind, for whom longevity is an economic nuisance. Chekhov subverts the expected neutrality of the opening of a story or novel, which might traditionally begin with a panning shot before we narrow our focus ("The little town of N. was smaller than a village, and had two rather grubby little streets," etc.). But where Joyce, in "The Dead," clearly pegs his free indirect style to Lily, Chekhov begins his use of it *before* his character has even been identified. And while Joyce abandons Lily's perspective, moving first into authorial omniscience and then to Gabriel Conroy's point of view, Chekhov's story continues to narrate events from the coffin-maker's eyes.

Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that the story is written from a point of view

closer to a village chorus than to one man. This village chorus sees life pretty much as brutally as the coffin-maker would—"There were not many patients, and he did not have to wait long, only about three hours"—but continues to see this world after the coffin-maker has died. The Sicilian writer Giovanni Verga (almost exactly contemporaneous with Chekhov) used this kind of village-chorus narration much more systematically than his Russian counterpart. His stories, though written technically in authorial third person, seem to emanate from a community of Sicilian peasants; they are thick with proverbial sayings, truisms, and homely similes.

We can call this "unidentified free indirect style."

20

As a logical development of free indirect style, it is not surprising that Dickens, Hardy, Verga, Chekhov, Faulkner, Pavese, Henry Green, and others tend to produce the kinds of similes and metaphors that, while successful and literary enough in their own right, are also the kinds of similes and metaphors that their own characters might produce. When Robert Browning describes the sound of a bird singing its song twice over, in order to "recapture / The first fine

careless rapture," he is being a poet, trying to find the best poetic image; but when Chekhov, in his story "Peasants," says that a bird's cry sounded as if a cow had been locked up in a shed all night, he is being a fiction writer: he is thinking like one of his peasants.

21

Seen in this light, there is almost no area of narration not touched by the long finger of free indirect narration—which is to say, by irony. Consider the penultimate chapter of Nabokov's *Pnin*: the comic Russian professor has just given a party, and has received the news that the college where he teaches no longer wants his services. He is sadly washing his dishes, and a nutcracker slips out of his soapy hand and falls into the water, apparently about to break a beautiful submerged bowl. Nabokov writes that the nutcracker falls from Pnin's hands like a man falling from a roof; Pnin tries to grasp it, but "the leggy thing" slips into the water. "Leggy thing" is a terrific metaphorical likeness: we can instantly see the long legs of the wayward nutcracker, as if it were falling off the roof and walking away. But "thing" is even better, *precisely because it is vague*: Pnin is lunging at the implement, and what word in English better conveys

a messy lunge, a swipe at verbal meaning, than "thing"? Now if the brilliant "leggy" is Nabokov's word, then the hapless "thing" is Pnin's word, and Nabokov is here using a kind of free indirect style, probably without even thinking about it. As usual, if we turn it into first-person speech, we can hear the way in which the word "thing" belongs to Pnin and wants to be spoken: "Come here, you, you . . . oh . . . you annoying *thing!*" Splash.*

*Nabokov is a great creator of the kind of extravagant metaphors that the Russian formalists called "estranging" or defamiliarizing (a nutcracker has legs, a half-rolled black umbrella looks like a duck in deep mourning, and so on). The formalists liked the way that Tolstoy, say, insisted on seeing adult things—like war, or the opera—from a child's viewpoint, in order to make them look strange. But whereas the Russian formalists see this metaphorical habit as emblematic of the way that fiction does not refer to reality, is a self-enclosed machine (such metaphors are the jewels of the author's freakish, solipsistic art), I prefer the way that such metaphors, as in Pnin's "leggy thing," refer deeply to reality: because they emanate from the characters themselves, and are fruits of free indirect style. Shklovsky wonders out loud, in *Theory of Prose*, if Tolstoy got his technique of estrangement from French authors like Chateaubriand, but Cervantes seems much more likely—as when Sancho first arrives in Barcelona, sees on the water the galleys with their many oars, and metaphorically mistakes the oars for feet: "Sancho couldn't imagine how those hulks moving about on top of the sea could have so many feet." This is estranging metaphor as a branch of free indirect style; it makes the world look peculiar, but it makes Sancho look very familiar.