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THE 'IRRESPONSIBILITY' OF FID

Abstract

Looking at the rise of novelistic literature in a broad – three hundred year – sweep, we can suggest that it accompanied the spread of genuinely free expression, utterance released from answerability to authority (for whatever scandal, treason, blasphemy, or revolution it might be felt to harbour). Not without resistance of course, but a gradually retreating resistance. That polymorphous hybrid we call by many names, including FID, that sport of literary narrative, is a radically free speech that has emerged within the free speech that is literary fiction. FID is a discursive chafing at the bounds of normal grammar. Where most inventively used, it is expressive of linguistic creativity itself, and the latter's natural unstable state. Like any freedom FID can be dangerous, can be used irresponsibly, at the expense or to the detriment of others, like lying with impunity. Any mingling of narrative voices that approximates FID is intrinsically endowed with uncertain attributability – the 'Who says this?' question. At the same time uncertainties about the truth status of what has been said or told often arise, particularly where mutually incompatible accounts are presented: is what has been narrated 'the truth,' or fabrication, or something other or in between? And the 'who says this?' and 'how true/reliable is this?' questions are interdependent. By way of literary exemplification this essay discusses some moments of narrative danger or irresponsibility in Alice Munro's story "The Love of a Good Woman." I propose that the kinds of unreliability found in such stories – uncertainty as to what really happened and what will happen henceforth, what really was said, and who said what – articulate the 'irresponsibility' and unreliability of everyday life: ir-

responsibility in the sense that we find (and know) that final truth, and full and determinate accountability, are unachievable.

Starting out in metaphorical Manchester

He was very pleased and excited and indeed honoured to be the second speaker at this seminar, having come all the way to Tampere (“the Manchester of Finland” he had been told) from Birmingham (“the Turku of England” perhaps?). That’s how he would start his talk. Yes. Why not? A reasonably safe formulation – who could object to that? It wasn’t true, of course, the ‘pleased and excited’ bit. More accurate would be to say that he was annoyed with himself. Why so? Because of that stupid title, obviously. The ‘irresponsibility’ of FID. Such a grandstanding sort of title, and now he was saddled with it and with trying to say something of some slight value on the topic; and preferably not something that his alarmingly clever, well-read and multi-lingual fellow seminarians had already heard a dozen times before. Here he was, sometimes lost for words in his native English, talking with proper scholars and linguists, able to tease delicacies of FID grammar from Russian, Hungarian, Czech... Perhaps he should start with a little joke in Finnish? A nice idea, all very well as a thought to himself, but not remotely feasible in the text-world of the seminar, seeing as he didn’t know any Finnish. Any other brilliant suggestions?

Still, he thought, once he got started in this vein it felt like he could carry on per omnia saecula saeculorum, he could take himself off to any distant time and place. He could imagine himself back in Birmingham, right now, in his university office (where, months later, he revises this hastily drafted introduction, as it happens), being constantly interrupted by first-year students wanting information which they should have taken from the noticeboard or by third-year narrative students who couldn’t get started on their Genette essay because – God help us – they “couldn’t find any short stories.” No, stay away from the office! Instead maybe he could change gender. What would they make of that, she wondered, chuckling to herself as she pushed the sleeves of her embroidered sweater up her forearms and jangled her bracelets on the lectern? Or he could jump forward in time, past his own paper, and Sibylle’s, say to the end of lunch. He could be walking back from lunch now – quite a long lunch wasn’t it? – and he would flourish the printed seminar schedule and make some comment about how he hoped he’d have the stamina for the long afternoon, leading to Conclusions at 19.15, not in bold or capitals he noticed, and no endpoint given, no set time for, back to caps, DINNER. Perhaps DINNER was at 22.15. Crikey!

Gradually he realized that maybe this was what he meant by the dangerousness or irresponsibility of FID – the way it could take you anywhere, let you say anything, let you be a different ‘you,’ and then (let you) turn around and, not so much deny everything, but at least re-frame it, exit from the established narrative

plane strapped into a paralipsis, and imply that this he is really an I, or vice versa, or that this narrated present is really a hallucinated future, and so on. Neither absolutely firm ground nor incontrovertibly fixed time, and stable facts beset on all sides by uncertainty and unreliability: the kind of uncertainty that would be abhorrent in a court of criminal law – at least to the criminal prosecution – where the judge now asks the jury “Are you sure?”

Yes, that was pretty much what he had in mind, if (adopt Oxford ordinary language philosophy mannerism) one could coherently talk of minds, and ‘having’ ‘things’ ‘in’ ‘minds’.

In mind or not, this was only the general thing he wanted to talk about. The particular thing he wanted to talk about was Alice Munro’s “The Love of a Good Woman,” and the subtle moments of character voicing in the narration. He had better get through his more theoretical points quickly now, so there’d be some time to look at the Munro. And he’d better make the pronominal shift to the first person, and start speaking in his own voice, otherwise his audience would think it very suspicious and might regard everything he said as quite unreliable. But this shift from he to I, it wasn’t that easy – it felt like a Beckettian moment – as if one voice in him was telling another one, a reluctant one, to get a move on, go on, take over, you speak now. Go on!

Alright, I will. I will, he said. I will speak and no longer be spoken. I will exercise my ‘freedom of expression’ – it is a matter of freedom of expression. For something as profound and modern as that idea and endowment comes hand in hand with FID; the latter is a literary and irresponsible speech, heterodox opinion, and the toleration of verbal scandal, mutiny, and revolt. FID is an important form of modern (i. e. , post-1800) irresponsibility or licence, and not mere ingenious play, just as the larger movement towards freedom of expression itself is. To rehearse the old argument, without freedom of expression in which to voice all sorts of absurd responses where would be the forum in which other new responses – which in time may show received opinion, the elders’ reported speech, itself to be marked by absurdity – could be heard? So too, in its own way, with FID – which I hasten to stress is not, as deployed by the most interesting writers, a ‘thing,’ a delimited form with a fixed and ideal grammar. It is a tendency, a slippage, as much a field as a wave or particle, a deictic unanchoring of the old I-tell-he-said-she-said. FID disrupts determinations of order, duration and frequency; it is the metaleptic impossibility (unspeakable); it is like the circle labelled ‘Square,’ or the audio-visual image that looks like a rabbit but sounds like a duck.

1 The clear and present dangers of free speech

But the uncertain detectability of FID leads to the idea mentioned in my paper's title: if in some cases FID is hard to establish conclusively, does this not mean that misattributions can arise? Does it not mean that one reader can decide that a narrator is responsible for some outrageous commentary where another reader decides that it is the character who is really the source of the offensive or defective assessment? Or readers may differ over who (author, narrator, character) is responsible for the 'adulterous', marriage-undermining language in *Madame Bovary*, language which those who prosecuted Flaubert strove to lay at his door – as discussed by Mäkelä (2003)? The short answers to these questions have to be yes. Nor is this different from what has always been possible in relations between author and narrator, and on-record responsibility for the views expressed (the Rushdie/*Satanic Verses* problem, it could be called). It is not an entirely new phenomenon: the kind of irresponsibility that arises in assimilated FID is perhaps only an extension of the kind of challenges of responsibility and narratorial reliability that have been around a very long time. Such uncertainties of discourse uptake are as old as irony. But in irony the irresponsibility or unreliability takes a different form: a clearly indicated someone presents themselves and argues that eating babies would solve the food shortage and population explosion.

Those acts of utterance that we allude to by the label FID are part of a running battle with a stance and an ethos which is reactionary, proscriptive, disciplinary, and hierarchical, an ethos in relation to which a writer fears that their every claim is challenged along the following lines:

Who says this: you, or your narrator, or a character? On whose or what authority do you say that? You have no right or entitlement to say this; it is blasphemy, defamatory, obscene, a scandal, treason, improper, incorrect, unfitting, unnatural, or (lesser offences) merely ludicrous, fanciful, or lacking significance or seriousness.

Theoretical accounts that move too far away from the experiential conditions of readers are, in my view, problematic; the more divergent the theoretical and the experiential are, the less interesting and useful the former are. Ultimately there has to be – there always is – a rendering of accounts, a drawing up of the

interpretive account, in which we decide the governess is sane and the children were possessed, or that she's paranoid and they were innocent, or that the text withholds sufficient evidence for this to be decided. And we point to words and passages in the text and claim they are evidence. There is no illusionism in this; provided one is prepared to accept the preparatory conditions concerning literary character (e. g. that within *The Turn of the Screw* there exist, inter alia, the characters of Mrs Grose and the governess and these are distinct people, not 'one single person viewed in two aspects'), such character-assessment is normal, natural, and real.

Those phenomena we bundle together under the label FID have attracted the enduring attention of scholars because of their important connection with pressures at the core of the western literary tradition. Concerning the latter, J. Hillis Miller, in part following Derrida (in *La carte postale* and elsewhere), has recently risked various sweeping but illuminating generalizations:

The concept of literature in the West has been inextricably tied to Cartesian notions of selfhood, to the regime of print, to Western-style democracies and notions of the nation-state, and to the right to free speech within such democracies. 'Literature' in that sense began fairly recently, in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century, and in one place, Western Europe. It could come to an end, and that would not be the end of civilization. In fact, if Derrida is right, and I believe he is, the new regime of telecommunications is bringing literature to an end by transforming all those factors that were its preconditions or its concomitants. (Hillis Miller 2001: 59)

This is not the place to ponder Hillis Miller's exciting conclusion here, that the new global technopoly will bring 'Literature' to an end. But I would agree with him that looking at the rise in the West of novelistic literature in a broad – three hundred year – sweep, we may see that it accompanies and is a corollary of the spread of genuinely free expression, utterance released from answerability to authority (bishop, judge, boss) for whatever scandal that authority suspected therein. Literature and free expression have not spread without resistance of course, but a gradually retreating resistance; novel titles alone rehearse both the social and the literary story: *Madame Bovary*, *Lolita*, *Satanic Verses*, and so on (parallel stories could be rehearsed in chronological lists of titles of cer-

tain plays, titles of certain political magazines and journals, and titles of certain laws). Freedom of expression means, in effect, speech for which you are not held – as you are in typical performative language – responsible, liable, and answerable. Or at least not answerable in the normal way, in which language that appears under your name is taken to be ‘your’ language, hence potentially *your* libel or blasphemy or obscenity *vis à vis* others, the state, the ruler. The state may have developed a monopoly on the use of force – sticks and stones – but has gradually relinquished it (not fully or absolutely of course) with regard to words. So as various theorists have argued, literature – especially in the west since the establishment of religious tolerance, and something approaching universal suffrage – is a particularly important and powerful arena of largely ‘free’ speech, speech from which even its begetter is largely ‘free’. As many have suggested, literature of this western kind is often a display text, pretend speech acts, or heterocosmic, a relatively low-risk stage on which to enact and perform (but non-performatively) the way things are, were, or could be.

And at the heart of literary language are phenomena which enact again, in miniature or in concentrated form, this use of language in ways that are powerfully enfranchising and at the same time ‘irresponsible’; they are far from inconsequential, but they are intended to be without *immediate* everyday-world consequences. These phenomena include irony and free indirect discourse. Both are necessarily ‘embedded’ (one reflex of which is the rarity of FID in story- or novel-titles – by contrast with the reasonably frequent use there of Direct Discourse). Irony and FID can only arise ‘in context,’ from within a narrative or interactional situation which is already ongoing, seemingly established, in relation to which and in response to which (like jitsu, and other synergistic exploitations) an utterance can be designed with the intent of being heard as not a simple continuation of the voice, tone and accent previously adopted, but a shift or complication in these, incorporating a different accent and even a different subjectivity, with all the implicatures of criticism, humour, and clash that such blended difference can trigger. The display, pretend or free nature of literature and its most distinctive constituents (like irony, metaphor and free indirect discourse) should not detract from its seriousness and consequentiality. On the contrary, writers, readers, all concerned, have to take very seriously this freedom to be ‘irresponsible,’ ordinarily ‘unanswerable’ for what is openly and perhaps shockingly expressed in (especially) novels and stories. There is a fragile

notional demarcation of the 'zone' or special territory where the rule of literature operates; beyond it on all sides – if we are lucky – the rule of law applies; and beyond the latter are forces of tyranny, special interests, capital, power, gangs and mobs, who do not stand on due process if they find writers and works taking any kind of liberties.

Partly because I wish to emphasize the seriousness of FID's irresponsibility, I want to give only qualified assent to the view that there is 'illusionism' involved in the identification of FID, the stipulation of a narrator persona, and the invoking of the categories of voice and focalization. I would not go so far as Monika Fludernik does, in asserting that adopting the category of voice 'projects a communicative schema on the narrative' while focalization 'uses a visual metaphor for determining the source of fictional knowledge' (2001: 635). To comment on these in reverse order, I have never found focalization unproblematic as a distinct category, but it is surely more embedded in language use (and more grammaticized) than reference to visual metaphor might suggest, having its source in deixis. Precisely because many languages permit a speaker to adopt a deictic centre other than their own, i. e. to project, a space opens up by which voice and adopted perspective can be distinguished (the enormous linguistic literature on deictic shift and relativity includes, e. g. , Haviland, 1996; Duchan et al, 1995).

2 Telling voices

But it is voice that interests me more, and here differences of theoretical account may come down to differences of commitment. The illusionism of voice, the degree to which 'voice' in the novel is an *effet du réel*, is surely worth reiterating. It is also worth remembering the degree to which, where narratologists use the term 'voice' metaphorically, ordinary readers may be adopting it in a more literal sense, so that it becomes an illusion or reductive fiction. On the other hand there is much in this which rehearses old disputes involving a postulated radical distinction between a communicative schema and a discursal one (Benveniste, Banfield, etc.) which itself is now regarded by many as an enabling illusion. Certainly, it is a binary opposition which, like so many other oppositions in linguis-

tics and elsewhere, an integrational linguistics must question. Indeed as soon as a binary contrast is postulated, such as that between natural and non-natural narrative, the deconstructors move in. One of these is Gibson, who suggests (2001: 641) that treating Labov's danger of death stories – often triggered by the researcher asking *Were you ever in a situation where you feared for your life?* – as unelicited and spontaneous begs difficult questions about spontaneity. Gibson goes on to suggest that what underlies Fludernik's natural narratology is “a familiar humanism,” evidently for him a bad thing (familiar things always being bad ones), although he does not clarify what this familiar humanism consists in. But to turn again to problematic binaries, a broader question that must arise if old dichotomies are deconstructed concerns narratology itself. Can it survive, or must it undergo considerable reformulation, if it is no longer to be built on robust and empirically-attested oppositions?

In Jonathan Ree's afterword and commentary on the special issue of *New Literary History* on ‘voice,’ in which both Fludernik's and Gibson's papers appear, I detect a note of impatience with most contributors' seeming unwillingness to contemplate the simplest uses of voice, namely in everyday conversation. Ree suggests that the narratologists and literary historians are embarrassed by and circle nervously around ‘material’ or ‘literal’ voice. For his part he is keen to celebrate conversation, “the very emblem of civilization” (Ree 2001: 789), and – as he terms it – the “voice to voice” negotiation that it entails.

To take one starting-point, it is unclear to me whether much is gained by dispensing with (or insisting upon) the notion of implied narrators. However one considers the literary narrative, *some* strategy of reading must be adopted, some interpretive decision to ‘treat everything as coming from one teller, one voice (perhaps echoing, or alternatively performing, many roles)’; or to treat the text as a weaving of innumerable reports, from countless witnesses only some of whom are provisionally identified, this authoritative act of weaving done by a person or party too distant to be reliably named; or to judge that some intermediate arrangement, between those extremes of minimal distance and extreme distance, obtains. It is primarily a question of degrees of distance (and not of narratorial presence vs. absence), where distance itself cannot be dispensed with. As the reader proceeds through the lines of a Munro or Nabokov story they should be asking (they must be asking, whether they want to or not: otherwise they are not truly reading) who is this whose word/report/judgement I read (not just what is

their name, but where, in what notional world, are they, and when, and in what mood and with what motives and preoccupations?)? And they can tacitly ask these questions, make these checks, with every passing word.

We do not of course continually ask again and answer again these questions, and books that appear to make us work that hard, with such constant unreleased attention, risk neglect (*Finnegans Wake*, Beckett, Pynchon). A balance needs to be struck: not by voice alone does narrative live; and analogously, how many scene-shifts is it desirable to have in a play? In that struck balance, the demands of narrative progression and causal coherence will usually discourage the teller-weaver from remaining so permanently distant from the segments of disparate witness spliced together that no rhyme or reason can be seen by the reader. Besides, it would be perverse (uncooperative in Gricean terms) for a teller to distance themselves, communicate by means of indirectness and fabricated intermediaries, without good cause. What cannot be dispensed with is the assumption that literary texts, like all other signs qua signs, are communicative and, to be treated as signs, entail a communicative context in which an interpreter projects an intentional communicator.

3 Aligned voices

My general thoughts about Free Indirect Discourse are pretty much as I have expressed them in a number of publications, beginning with my book on the language and style of William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, in which I claimed that the chiefly empathetic use of FID in that short story sequence created effects of narrative alignment. By the term 'alignment' I wanted to promote the idea that in the Faulkner story sequence the narration often held together two voices, like two paths or tracks, those of the narrator and of a particular focalizing character. The voices or paths are in principle quite distinct, with no necessity for them ever to share the same viewpoint, use the same language, or converge on a common outlook; in fact it seems to me very strange if they did – like having a heterodiegetic narrator and a character with the same idiolect, or two voices that were identical in pitch, intonation, rhythm, etc., as perhaps identical

twins could have. I also thought about all the other terms already being used to describe FID effects, such as the idea of a dual voice, or merged discourses, or combined discourses, and so on. I didn't believe those labels were quite right, at least for the FID in *Go Down, Moses*. Merging, combining, and even polyphony, suggest a degree of fusion, as if the text speaks with one harmonized blend, which I wasn't convinced was really true. I preferred the idea of the narrator's and character's voices as two paths, running independently and quite often at a distance from each other, but then running alongside each other, taking a common shared course, for a period of the narration.

Recently I have begun to think of FID, in particular FIS, as a kind of conversation, or as near to conversation as you can get within the narrational frame, that is, without having recourse to the old methods of direct speech and indirect speech. This seems palpable in novels like *To the Lighthouse* and its lengthy FID sequences, which feel quite conversation-like in some respects – or seem to serve as an alternative to orthodox conversation in, for example, the famous dinner scene. Again conversation is preferable as a characterization as it implies the persistence, in a local coming together, of two or more distinct voices or speakers. Those voices do not get merged, blended, or combined: that is a characteristic of choruses, not conversations. But the voices are, for the duration, aligned.

It is because we cannot in ordinary circumstances include the two sides, the two speakers, of a conversation in one sentence, that we talk of the *invraisemblance* or unspeakability of FID. FID sentences are impossible to anchor to one speaker at one place and time: they are impossibly divided between two distinct speakers (narrator and character) and anchorages. We can no more ordinarily speak an FID sentence than we can ordinarily 'do both voices' and play both roles of a greeting and its acknowledgement.

Like any freedom FID can be risky, can be used irresponsibly; it can help lies and misrepresentations to circulate. As much of course is true in the mingling of opinions and expressions in conversation; conversations can develop into quarrelling, and slanging matches. I am thinking here of FID involving what we might call – if we are to use simplifying terms – 'speaker change,' rather than FID where the speaker is held constant but there is 'setting (time and/or place) change' – as in the examples from Nabokov's 'Terra Incognita' and 'An Affair of Honor' discussed by Pekka Tammi. In response to a point made by Fludernik (2001), denying the foundational importance of the 'Who speaks?' question, I

would say that in 'speaker change' or Bakhtinian situations of FID, the 'Who speaks?' question remains criterial; in 'setting change' cases, identifying the speaker is unproblematic, and is more often an enabling condition for the setting change to work; and in other circumstances besides the foregoing, perhaps exemplified by George Garrett's novel *Death of the Fox* as Fludernik argues, answering the 'Who speaks?' question is not a reading priority.

4 Loose talk and last confessions

The rest of this paper dwells on one section of Alice Munro's long story "The Love of a Good Woman." I will not summarize the story (75 pages) here. But in part it concerns a sequence of hitherto concealed alleged crimes – sexual assault on one Jeanette Quinn, a farmer's wife, by an optometrist who is caught in the act and killed by the husband, Rupert, this murder then being passed off as accidental drowning when Rupert dumps the dead optometrist and his car in a nearby river. All these shocking revelations are disclosed, secretly, by the still-young Jeanette on her deathbed (she has a terminal disease) to her carer and contemporary, Enid, who is perhaps the person for whom these disclosures can potentially cause greatest change. This is because there are strong feelings of attraction between Enid and Rupert, and Enid foresees the possibility of marriage to him, and becoming mother to his children.

I want to look at narration which may be lies or fantasies, passed off as the truth, in the pivotal section III of Munro's "The Love of a Good Woman," precisely because it is marked by FID and internal inconsistencies or 'unreliability'. It is heterodiegetically narrated, but often clearly adopts the viewpoint and the idiolect of Jeanette (who whether due to the terminal cancer or defect of character is frequently sarcastic, bitter, and even crude, contemptuous of conversational decorum).

Of particular interest with regard to the working of FID as an unreliable and irresponsible voicing is Section III, 'Mistake'. As indicated above, it is distinctive in being told from the point of view of Jeanette Quinn, the dying woman who here shockingly discloses that her husband Rupert killed the optometrist

Willens in a fit of anger and that she then helped Rupert dispose of the body and conceal all incriminating evidence. Rupert is said to have caught Willens sexually assaulting Jeanette. But what is the nature of this sexual assault? On first telling, at the section's opening, it is reported as no assault at all, as essentially harmless and inconsequential:

III. MISTAKE

MRS. QUINN had been sitting in the rocker getting her eyes examined and Mr. Willens had been close up in front of her with the thing up to her eyes, and neither one of them heard Rupert come in, because he was supposed to be cutting wood down by the river. But he had sneaked back. He sneaked back through the kitchen not making any noise – he must have seen Mr. Willens's car outside before he did that – then he opened the door to this room just easy, till he saw Mr. Willens there on his knees holding the thing up to her eye and he had the other hand on her leg to keep his balance. He had grabbed her leg to keep his balance and her skirt got scrunched up and her leg showed bare, but that was all there was to it and she couldn't do a thing about it, she had to concentrate on keeping still. (p. 56–57)

The wording is such as to suggest that both Willens and Quinn were innocent of conscious improper behaviour or questionable submission, respectively. It's a case of accidental touching (*to keep his balance*, we are twice told) and *that was all there was to it*. If anyone's at fault it is Rupert, who we are twice told *sneaked back* into the house. And of course there's no agent to blame in the passive voice *her skirt got scrunched up* or in the middle voice *her leg showed bare* for that matter, but against this the suspicious reader may note the verb *grabbed*, in *he had grabbed her leg*.

But if the initial impression is of innocent accident, this is soon amended. A few pages further along in the Jeanette-aligned narration, after Rupert's assault and killing of Willens have been described, we are told how the couple carried Willens's body to his car:

They hoisted Mr. Willens up, she by the feet and Rupert by the head, and he weighed a ton. He was like lead. But as she carried him one of his shoes kind of kicked her between the legs, and she thought, There you are, you're still at it, you horny old devil. Even his dead old foot giving her the nudge. Not that she ever let him do anything, but he was always ready

to get a grab if he could. Like grabbing her leg up under her skirt when he had the thing to her eye and she couldn't stop him and Rupert had to come sneaking in and get the wrong idea. (p. 59)

What was formerly reported as a single incident is now reported as something he was 'always' ready to do if he could, although it is asserted that she did 'not ever let him do anything.' And now the grabbing is purposeful and unwanted, and no excuse that it was *to keep his balance* is added this time. There follow a few paragraphs in which the Quinns solve the problem of concealing Willens and his car – Rupert will push the car, with the body inside, into the river – and then a paragraph that ends by telling us that before driving the car and body away from the farm, Rupert put Mr. Willens's hat on his head, the hat that had been sitting on the seat of the car. The text continues:

Why take his hat off before he came into the house? Not just to be polite but so he could easier get a clutch on her and kiss her. If you could call that kissing, all that pushing up against her with the box still in one hand and the other grabbing on, and sucking away at her with his dribbly old mouth. Sucking and chewing away at her lips and her tongue and pushing himself up at her and the corner of the box sticking into her and digging her behind. She was so surprised and he got such a hold she didn't know how to get out of it. Pushing and sucking and dribbling and digging into her and hurting her all at the same time. He was a dirty old brute. (p. 60)

Here a rather more detailed and repulsive picture of Willens's behaviour, now unambiguously an assault, is drawn. Is this a corrected account of the single occasion, the occasion on which Rupert surprises Willens, or could this be read as a single telling of an iterated action? The phrasing here is studiously neutral on this question, but we have already been told that *he was always ready to get a grab*, so recurrent indecencies may be inferred.

Next we are told how Jeanette scrubs Willens's blood from the floor, how she is almost seen in her blood-stained dress by a teacher dropping the girls home, how she later paints the floor brown to hide a stain, and for days forgets that Willens's optometry box is still sitting incriminatingly in her front room.

She took that box and hid it in one place and then she hid it in another. She never told where she hid it and she wasn't going to. She would have smashed it up, but how do you smash all those things in it? Examining things. Oh, Missus, would you like me to examine your eyes for you, just sit down here and just you relax and you just shut the one eye and keep the other one wide open. Wide open, now. It was like the same game every time, and she wasn't supposed to suspect what was going on, and when he had the thing out looking in her eye he wanted her to keep her panties on, him the dirty old cuss puffing away getting his fingers slicked in and puffing away. Her not supposed to say anything till he stops and gets the looker thing packed up in his box and all and then she's supposed to say, "Oh, Mr. Willens, now, how much do I owe you for today?"

And that was the signal for him to get her down and thump her like an old billy goat. Right on the bare floor to knock her up and down and try to bash her into pieces. Dingey on him like a blowtorch.

How'd you've liked that?

Then it was in the papers. Mr. Willens found drowned.

They said his head got bunged up knocking against the steering wheel.

They said he was alive when he went in the water. What a laugh. (p. 62)

Several details of grammar and vocabulary here point to this being probably the FID passage in the section which is most fully (with least narratorial refraction) in the idiolect of Jeanette Quinn herself. But we also tend to judge that it is the most 'accurate,' most 'reliable,' account of Willens's behaviour. This must be partly an effect of end-focus, and of 'final telling': the psychological plausibility of someone (here, a woman on her deathbed) making the effort to disclose a shocking narrative secret, who 'builds up' to a full confession by way of previous self-censored tellings. Of course the situation could be the reverse, with Jeanette's first account being closest to the truth, later versions scandalous and lurid elaborations, designed to cast Willens in an increasingly squalid light and to make Rupert's violence more excusable. But we have already seen (in section II) that the dying Jeanette seems to have no depth of affection or sympathy for her husband, and this final re-telling casts Jeanette as chronic victim; so that for this final version to be a misrepresentation would be entirely unmotivated and implausible. Notice, incidentally, how easily and inescapably discussion of these three or four versions of Willens's sexual assaults is cast here as tellings, by

Jeanette. In fact there are no *inquires*, no frames to confirm the reader's assumption that this is a more or less word-for-word account, save for a few tense, name and pronoun adjustments, of what Jeanette Quinn on her deathbed said about Mr Willens to a horrified Enid. But that is exactly how we read the section, and how the end of section II and the opening of section IV encourage us to read this intervening section. Munro is always meticulously astute in controlling the rhythm and fitness of that which is disclosed. So Section II ends:

The next day Mrs. Quinn's strength came flooding back, in that unnatural and deceptive way that Enid had seen once or twice in others. Mrs. Quinn wanted to sit up against the pillows. She wanted the fan turned on.

Enid said, "What a good idea."

"I could tell you something you wouldn't believe," Mrs. Quinn said.

"People tell me lots of things," said Enid.

"Sure. Lies," Mrs. Quinn said. "I bet it's all lies. You know Mr. Willens was right here in this room?" (p. 56)

We may note the economy of the Narrative Report of Speech Acts in *Mrs. Quinn wanted to sit up against the pillows. She wanted the fan turned on.*, its conveying of Jeanette's demands (but without indications that the reports are so close to the speaker's wording as would warrant calling them Indirect or Free Indirect Speech), to which Enid's remark is suitable response. More importantly these lines 'place' Jeanette and Enid together, in the front room turned sickroom, with husband Rupert away at a stock auction, and Enid having already disclosed to us (twelve lines earlier) that, she felt sure, "Mrs. Quinn was building up to a display."

As for Section IV, titled 'Lies,' this begins:

Enid stayed awake all night – she didn't even try to sleep. She could not lie down in Mrs. Quinn's room. She sat in the kitchen for hours (...)

She got up stiffly and unlocked the door and sat on the porch in the beginning light. Even that move jammed her thoughts together. She had to sort through them again and set them on two sides. What had happened – or what she had been told had happened – on one side. What to do about it on the other. What to do about it – that was what would not come clear to her. (p. 62–63)

5 Terrible talk

This review of the multiple tellings of Mr Willens's alleged assaults on Jeanette, and his subsequent alleged killing and transfer to the river, would be of lesser importance if they did not weigh so heavily on Enid's mind. But these reports do so weigh, not least because Enid has grown very fond of Rupert and the children. Jeanette dies on the day after her outpouring that is section III. Thereafter, Enid thinks in terms of marrying Rupert; but she decides she cannot do so until and unless Rupert's crime – if, she thinks, he is guilty of the crime Jeanette has revealed – has been exposed and punished. As she says to the little girls in a generalized discussion early in section IV, "If you do something very bad and you are not punished you feel worse, and feel far worse, than if you are".

But what does Enid really think of Jeanette's revelations? An early minimal evaluation appears (p. 67) in her diary of the patient's condition: *July 9. Vy. agitated. Terrible talk.* And a couple of pages later we are told that

She [Enid] had been awake now three nights in a row, awake every minute, and she had not been able to eat, even to fool her mother. (p. 70)

Shortly thereafter she visits Rupert and gets him to agree to take her in a rowing-boat out onto the river, "to get a picture of the riverbank." Unable to swim (and intent on making Rupert well aware of this), Enid has devised a melodramatic plan according to which she will, mid-lake, confront Rupert with Jeanette's confession. Rupert, she intends, will then have to choose: either to kill her (*He would only have to give her a shove with one of the oars and topple her into the water and let her sink*), or to confess the crime (evidently expressing the words Enid imagines she will then say to Rupert, the text, again without *inquires*, runs: *I am not going to tell, but you are. You can't live on with that kind of secret.*)

But even before Enid and Rupert begin walking down to the riverbank she looks into that front room, where Jeanette Quinn and possibly Willens have died, and the words Enid hears in memory are Mrs Quinn's: "Lies. I bet it's all lies." The narrative continues, in FIT:

Could a person make up something so detailed and diabolical? The answer is yes (...) You can never say, Nobody could make that up. Look how

elaborate dreams are, layer over layer in them, so that the part you can remember and put into words is just the bit you can scratch off the top. (p. 74)

This in turn is followed, in the story, by a recollected episode from Enid's early childhood, when she told her mother that she had seen her father fondling a woman's breast, but told this in such a confused way that the report was explained back to Enid by her mother as a dream or even a lie. The narration is careful *not* to inform us unambiguously whether the transgression was in fact real or pure imagining: *She had told her mother about this* [sc. her father sucking on a woman's breast] *in perfect certainty that she had seen it.*

At this point in the narrative present, still in the front room, with Rupert by her side, Enid is acutely conscious that "It was still *before*", that she has not yet confronted Rupert over Willens's death, that a different life for herself might soon transpire if she is prepared to collaborate in a silence, with benefits "for others, and for herself". And indeed the story ends *before*: at its close, Rupert is getting the boat ready, while to Enid it feels "as if everything for a long way around had gone quiet." No mid-lake truth-telling is narrated (contrary to the impression given by the Vintage book cover), and judging by the story's brief proleptic preface, and by the fact that before walking down to the river Enid changes out of her dress shoes into an old pair of boots loaned to her by Rupert, perhaps none took place.

What a reader or narratologist *cannot* reasonably say is that it is perfectly obvious what happened involving Jeanette Quinn and Mr Willens. Nor can we say that the uncertainty is a flaw or error or lapse, indicative of some kind of failure of telling (on Munro's or an implied author's or a narrator's part). Here, as in others of her stories, Munro seems not to have *contrived* an uncertainty, or an effect of things being 'before'; rather she has articulated the everyday reality of uncertainty, and of being 'before,' the reality that it is impossible always to have ourselves and others act entirely responsibly and accountably. I believe this is one of Munro's most deeply-held convictions, and that it explains in part her preference for relatively traditional storytelling techniques, with little trace of overtly postmodern disruptions through manipulation of 'levels' and 'worlds'. She is interested in irresponsibility, unpredictability, unaccountability, in the everyday serious ways that confront us all. As readers, like Enid, we have learned

what happened or what we have been told has happened; but what should be our response? What is the responsible reaction? What to do about it – that is what will not come clear to us.

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