

THE MEANS TO A MORAL FICTION

James Wood. *How Fiction Works*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2008.

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It is not really a great number of questions, what makes for meaningful fiction, yet theorists ancient and modern have forever been bashing their heads against these stones. In the twentieth century, Bakhtin, James, Woolf, Forster, Trilling, Booth, Crane, Barthes, Gass, and Kundera, among other prominent critics and writer-critics, have tried to clarify some of the perennial dilemmas: What is character? Does fiction represent reality? If so, what is the nature of this reality? Is novelistic narrative different from other kinds of narrative? How crucial is conventional plot to meaning? How far can fiction stray from ordinary prose and still maintain the claim to realism? Is the history of modern consciousness the same as the history of the novel? Does and should fiction seek to alter reality? Is the fiction writer a presence above and beyond his creation, or is he to be read as submerged within it? Does, in the end, the world need fiction? Never have these questions had such urgency, as the reading of literary fiction plummets according to any measure. If the history of liberal consciousness is indeed in large measure coterminous with the history of the novel, then the prognosis is grim indeed. So there must be value in rehashing the old, familiar questions at this late date.

Enter James Wood, critic at first for *The New Republic* and now for *The New Yorker*, himself the author of a well-received novel, *The Book Against God* (FSG, 2003), and one of the most rewarding critics of our times. In landmark essays like “Hysterical Realism,” “Jonathan Franzen and the ‘Social Novel,’” and “Tom Wolfe’s Shallowness, and the Trouble With Information,” he has shown himself to be a keen analyst of the compulsions driving contemporary authors. In *The Irresponsible Self: On Laughter and the Novel* (FSG, 2004), his last collection of criticism, the metatheme running throughout the essays is the contrast between what he calls “the comedy of forgiveness” (the “comedy of irresponsibility” being a branch of this) and the sterner “comedy of correction,” a wide enough rubric to enfold a vast range of innovative fiction. Like J. M. Coetzee’s *Inner Workings: Literary Essays 2000-2005* (Viking, 2007), with which it overlaps considerably in subject matter and lucidity, *The Irresponsible Self* is an indispensable manual for readers wanting to be educated in the not-always-so-obvious connections within and across national styles of writing.

Now Wood has come to the explication of great fiction from another

angle, using the format of the manual of craft so popular in the first half of the twentieth century—the kind of exercise to which most serious fiction writers feel drawn to at some time or the other—to not only expound the rules as manifest in the works of the greatest fiction writers, but to convey them in such a manner as to provoke self-criticism in the aspiring fiction writer about his means and methods, and more importantly, about why he wants to be a fiction writer in the first place. It is a philosophical treatise expertly cloaked as a guide book (one thinks of Machiavelli's *The Prince*, exemplar in another discipline, as a parallel), and is simultaneously rooted and diffuse enough to appeal to practitioners of fiction at all levels of skill.

The book's greatest value seems to be as a needed corrective to the reductionist approach to fiction-making typical of the nation's writing workshops, an important and growing part of the humanities at our universities. Whereas the ethos in the classroom seems to be to produce fiction meaningful to the writer's own moral needs, Wood, as must be true of any critic worth his salt, seeks to understand the type of fiction that writers over the ages have produced at the level of universal meaning. Individualism, it seems, is best nourished not in conditions of solipsism, but in a reach of Shakespearean or Keatsian "negative capability," the ability to leave the confining precincts of the self and stand in the shoes of low and high; the greater the courage of the writer in attempting this miracle of self-distance, the greater the writing. We must be taught not to dig deep within ourselves (as this injunction is understood simplistically), but to reach far outside ourselves. A common instruction in the academy is to write what one knows best, that is, to regurgitate the wisdom and judgment of the solitary soul. But the greatest writers have not been afraid to leap into the unknown, deploying the elements of fiction—choice of narrative point of view, selection of detail, and interplay of plot with character—as means to realize the reality of their own imaginative world.

The question comes down to confinement versus expansiveness. Wood's fundamental motive seems to be to reintroduce the lost commitment to expansiveness, of the mind and spirit, in contemporary writing. Is one's audience fellow workshop participants, or at best interested commercial publishers, or is the task one of connection with the vastest aims of one's literary forebears, to whom one must return again and again to replenish the will?

Along the way Wood finds a number of false dividing lines to blur again, at the same time as he must reiterate clear evolutionary markers in the history of narration. The distinction between reliable and unreliable narration might not be as clear as popular perception would have it: "Actually,

first-person narration is generally more reliable than unreliable; and third-person 'omniscient' narration is generally more partial than omniscient"; furthermore, "omniscient narration is rarely as omniscient as it seems" and "[s]o-called omniscience is almost impossible." Wood argues that "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." This involuntary merger of omniscient narrator with independent character leads to the crowning glory of narrative fiction, "free indirect style," or "close third person," or "going into character."

This represents an advance over the soliloquy of pre-twentieth-century novels, itself derived from earlier theater, because it opens up numerous gaps between author and character, allowing for greater room for various forms of irony. Wood shows how James in *What Maisie Knew* uses free indirect style to let us adopt multiple perspectives on the action. He undertakes close reading of passages to pinpoint James's choice of individual words that open up ironic distance for more generous understanding of Maisie's character. The really thrilling peak is when a writer like Chekhov coins striking similes and metaphors that the character himself might have produced. Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* meets Wood's test of veracity here, while Updike's *Terrorist* fails. Much of the reader's engagement in the text ensues from the uncertainties following the "tension between the author's style and his or her characters' styles."

Wood fluidly converts any simple rule-making about choice of point of view into an issue of integral choice about style, or the author's personality: "So the novelist is always working with at least three languages. There is the author's own language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; there is the character's presumed language, style, perceptual equipment, and so on; and there is what we could call the language of the world—the language that fiction inherits before it gets to turn it into novelistic style..." A stylist like Joyce or Bellow can write over his characters, depending on which details his inclinations compel him to choose. Wood takes us back to Flaubert, the originator of fictional narration without visible traces of authorship, and ascribes his success to his ability to mix "habitual detail with dynamic detail." What's interesting about Wood's method of exposition of the elements of fiction is that each room in the house of fiction opens naturally into another; choice of point of view is inextricable from style, which depends on the author's visibility, which is determined by the ability to mix the relevant and the irrelevant detail, which creates a lifelike effect, a cinematic perspective of the flâneur standing in for the author and for the astute reader.

From Flaubert onward, the literary author gives readers a great deal

of credit for being above-average “noticers,” which in turn minimizes our disbelief at encountering characters who seem to have an unnatural (author-like) facility to notice and describe. To the extent that this expectation has become part of the role of good readership, fiction trains us to become good noticers in life, ideally teaching us to distinguish between necessary and unnecessary information. The cinematic eye, Wood suggests, is never all-encompassing. It is, however, a myth modern fiction has taken over, but is always, to the extent that it is realistic, at pains to demolish, since style takes the upper hand over indiscriminate observation.

Stepping back to the function of free indirect style, its connection with teaching us to be stylists or cinematographers or observant flâneurs or invisible writers in our own right, Wood does not deviate from received consensus, from Percy Lubbock onward, in elevating Flaubert to fatherhood of contemporary fictional technique. But the history of the rise of extravagant noticing, compared to what Coetzee has called the “moderate realism” of the eighteenth century (without the imaginative, specific, strange detail), is as instructive as ever. Wood, as always, is wary of adopting the simplifying instructions of the elementary workshop: not all detail that is important is visual, as Nabokov seemed to fail to understand, dismissing “Mann, Camus, Faulkner, Stendhal, James,” because they trafficked in metaphysical detail. Another way to describe the choice is between “off-duty” and “on-duty” detail, both superfluity and impoverishment serving necessary purposes, given the author’s aims of the moment.

To retreat into another room in the house of fiction, all this manipulation of types of detail has the purpose of “the management of temporality,” the evocation of the “passage of time” being fiction’s “new and unique project in literature.” It is mysterious details, which “refuse to explain themselves,” as in Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Little Dog,” that leave a more lasting impression of character. This is a more complex analysis than the workshop’s basic rule of tying up all details in a fully explanatory matrix. Even intentional misleading, as Henry Green seems fond of doing, has its place in the construction of character.

And now that this room has been entered, Wood takes apart some of the fondest myths of the writing trade, which seem most wrongheaded on character. The partiality for likeable characters, such a staple of writing instruction as well as editorial preference at the commercial publishing houses, is mistaken, since we can see life as well from the eyes of unlikeable characters as their more empathizable counterparts. On the other hand are critics like Gass with too little belief in character, holding them to be never more than provisional constructions. Wood takes offense at this polarity as

well. Similarly, contrary to perhaps the most pervasive prejudice of the writing business, that in favor of Forster's "round" against his "flat" characters, Wood suggests that often the most alive characters, such as Dickens's Mrs. Micawber, are flat characters, "monomaniacs," caricatures that come with easy tags perpetually attached to them. By the measure of aliveness, they fully succeed as novelistic characters.

Wood goes so far as to claim that he would be "happy to abolish the very idea of 'roundness' in characterization," since it is an "impossible ideal" that tyrannizes "readers, novelists, critics." Instead, "It is subtlety that matters—subtlety of analysis, of inquiry, of concern, of felt pressure—and for subtlety a very small point of entry will do." Flat, monomaniacal characters may be interesting and alive because they may be "*consistently surprising*." Roundness is true only of Austen's heroines, but not of her surrounding characters, who are just as memorable. Of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Wood argues that King Harry is round but unsurprising, while Fluellen is flat but surprising. In surprise lies the "self's chink of freedom, its gratuity or surplus, its tip to itself."

Wood has here pounced on one of the secrets of great fiction, the extent to which, in the end, it is a gratuitous, not an earnest, act, and this in turn is connected with the novel's unique contribution to "*who a character is being seen by*." This uniqueness can be singled out by contrasting King David in the Old Testament, Macbeth, and Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*. David has no "privacy" and "*he does not exist for us, but for the Lord*." Compared to David's opacity, Macbeth's "story is one of publicized privacy," while "Raskolnikov's story is one of scrutinized privacy." The novel's unprecedented gift to literature is that the hero is now free to be an ordinary man, liberated from "the tyranny of necessary eloquence." Since the character no longer has to "voice his motives," the reader must interpret the real, unconscious motives.

Wood immediately recognizes the new tyranny, however: "In the novel, we can see the self better than any literary form has yet allowed; but it is not going too far to say that the self is driven mad by being so invisibly scrutinized." We may use this as an epitaph for the twentieth-century novel as a whole, the unprecedented hermeneutic demands on the reader to decipher unconscious motives and make moral choices accordingly, and the semi-madness of many of the most memorable twentieth-century characters. This, in fact, is where we stand now, and if fiction stands at a plateau, it is because of the very great heights reached by Proust and Joyce in creating self-dividing characters, inviting us to probe bottomless motives.

Twentieth-century writers have deployed surprise in metaphor (its

mixedness can be justified) and different registers of language, as Roth and Bellow do, for instance, to manage to be stylists without “writing over” their characters. What finally distinguishes commercial realism from literary realism is the degree of style which cannot be “reproduced” and “reduced,” and the challenge for the writer of fiction is not to latch on to successful convention, which “is always dying,” but in “trying to outwit it.” When we arrive at realism by this definition, we escape the dead-end of deconstructionist dismissal of the novel’s ability to depict reality as such.

Metafiction at the trivial level asks the question, “Does Christie [B. S. Johnson’s Christie Malry] exist?”, but at the more sophisticated level, asks, “How does Christie exist?” In Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the profound metaphysical question being addressed is, “Do we exist if we refuse to relate to anyone?” The successful fiction writer, like Virginia Woolf, W. G. Sebald, or Philip Roth, teaches us to adapt to his or her conventions, to accept his or her reality. In convincing us of the truth of the writer’s world, he may resort, as James does at the beginning of *The Portrait of a Lady*, to extended essayistic commentary. This lays to rest another of the simplistic no-nos of writing workshops. Essayistic rendering may not meet the criterion of exact cinematic detail, but can help make characters memorable anyway, as is true of Isabel Archer.

Poststructuralist theory has long banished consideration of the author to primitive backwaters—in its view, the creative writing departments. In the war between the supposed intellectual side of the literature departments (theory) and the unintellectual side (writing), the latter have been defended as at least upholding the belief in the existence of the author—their very purpose, after all, is to create more and better authors. Wood shows that writing departments need not feel defensive in relation to their more *au courant* competitors if they accept the depth of the challenge of understanding what makes great literature. The way ahead lies in respecting the author’s intentions, giving him his due, while also understanding that modern novelistic discourse has evolved so greatly from its beginnings that the reader too is a moral agent every step of the way. Fiction works best when both forms of agency are in full swing. When a work of fiction is transparently successful, it brings into question our settled notions of what is lifelike and what is artifice, calling attention to the necessary stylistic choices that have gone into creating this uncertainty. Understanding novelistic realism is perhaps little less than understanding reality in life; this is where fiction derives its moral purpose.