

## Free Indirect Discourse

ROSEMARIE BODENHEIMER

VICTORIAN writers didn't have a name for it, but that did not prevent them from producing the sentences that we have come to call free indirect discourse. Originating in early twentieth-century linguistics, the term acquired cachet during the period when omniscience was out of fashion, and narrators were especially prized when they "disappeared" into the inner thoughts of their characters. Since the recent turn to cognitive literary studies, its cachet has reappeared, not because we prize the fantasy of unmediated access to interiority, but because we are interested in mind reading, collective thinking, and the history of mind theory.<sup>1</sup>

Free indirect discourse is a singularly bloodless term for the intensification of narrative it designates. It has been called by other names, most of which maintain its grammatical and comparative nature. FID (as I will call it) refers to sentences in third-person past-tense narration that imitate the interior thoughts of a character. It is "free" only in the grammatical sense that it's not subordinated to a main clause such as "He wondered," or "She thought."

There are more suggestive descriptions. The German phrase *erlebte Rede*, or experienced speech, has the advantage of suggesting that someone is experiencing vivid mental and emotional activity. It's as much about hearing a voice as it is about penetrating a mind. Best of all, to my mind, is the novelists' nickname, "going into character."<sup>2</sup> It points to the actual process of writing, the moments when the writer slides into a new sort of role-playing, and begins ventriloquizing a character. It also suggests that FID is something you go in and out of from something else; it depends on the context created by whatever else a narrator is saying about a character's thoughts and feelings. Alan Palmer calls such description "thought report," emphasizing that thought report takes up most of the narrative space as a reader learns to know a character.<sup>3</sup> In Victorian fiction, islands of FID occur intermittently to punctuate seas of thought report.

FID is often discussed as a personal relationship between narrator and character, as if they were two sentient entities. D. A. Miller writes of FID as "a virtuoso performance, against all odds, of the narration's persistence in detachment from the character, no matter how intimate the one becomes with the other."<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that the drama of FID lies elsewhere, in the mind of the writer shifting from one of its

narrational guises to another. Those who *experience* the enlivening effects of FID are the writer in the act of writing, and the reader in the act of reading.

Releasing FID from the narrator-character story frees us to consider some of the ambiguities raised by the practice. There has long been a debate about whether an instance of FID represents thought, inner speech, or something else. What do we think we are hearing: a character thinking in silent words, or something the character senses in half-conscious, inchoate ways, articulated for the reader by the narrator? The imitation of thought can only go so far to capture the flux of neural connections that goes on, consciously and not, in human brains. It follows that FID relies on a set of conventions that pretend to interiority. In Victorian novels, those conventions stand out on the page: just scan the paragraphs looking for a sudden burst of question marks, exclamation points, italicized words, or dashes. Often, the character involved has been faced with some jolt or threat to a worldview, which s/he is struggling to accommodate or deny.<sup>5</sup> Ambiguity may also appear in the temporality of FID. Is the thinking going on in the novel's present scene, or is it a summary of inner tendencies over time?

Charles Dickens rarely moves into FID, but when he does, he is usually depicting a mind *in extremis*. The murderers Bill Sikes and Jonas Chuzzlewit get brief moments of FID as they flee their crimes in states of near-madness. When Dickens's Mr. Dombey broods over Florence, he is headed toward disintegration: "The worthier she promised to be of him, the greater claim he was disposed to ante-date upon her duty and submission. When had she ever shown him duty and submission? Did she grace his life—or Edith's? . . . Why, he and she had never been, from her birth, like father and child! They had always been estranged. She had crossed him every way and everywhere. She was leagued against him now."<sup>6</sup>

Checkmated by Edith, Dombey has entered a frantic state. Readers recognize that he has it exactly backwards, that he's accusing Florence of his own failures. The passage occurs amid a long, emphatic thought report, but the difference is telling. The FID prompts the reader to a visceral feeling of protest and dismay: how can you think like that? You are blind, paranoid! On second thought, we might recognize that Dombey is, at least, thinking about his daughter. The narrator will quickly reinforce that insight: "It may have been that in all this there were mutterings of an awakened feeling in his breast, however selfishly aroused by his position of disadvantage, in comparison with what she might have made his life."

Dickens is quick to rope the reader back into his interpretive authority, but not before FID has worked its intensifying magic.

The boundary between thought report and FID is not always so easy to ascertain. William Makepeace Thackeray's callow George Osborne is allotted some remorseful FID as he watches Amelia sleep before he departs to die at Waterloo: "Good God! How pure she was; how gentle, how tender, and how friendless! and he, how selfish, brutal, and black with crime! Heart-stained, and shame-stricken, he stood at the bed's foot, and looked at the sleeping girl. How dared he—who was he, to pray for one so spotless!"<sup>7</sup> The melodramatic cliché exposes George as a thoughtless rake even in his moment of apparent self-knowledge. But not so fast: this can also sound disturbingly like the narrator's own passages of sentimental doting over the body of his benighted heroine. Thackeray will sometimes "go into character," exclamations and questions flying, to animate his own narrator.

George Eliot's subtle blends of FID and thought report are especially rich in ambiguities. Consider the cultural mind informing the Middlemarch view of Dorothea:

Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions, but the great safeguard of society and domestic life was, that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbors did, so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them.<sup>8</sup>

The first sentence arguably imitates the logic and assumptions of an upper-class male mind. The second begins like narrative report and veers into comedy. The third might be anything, but its kick is palpable. Whether you call it an articulation of what (George Eliot thinks) lies deepest in Middlemarch instincts, or an indulgence in narrative sarcasm, you have to laugh, and feel its pain.

#### NOTES

1. The founding literary study of FID in English remains Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Alan Palmer builds on her work in a cognitive mode in *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln:

- University of Nebraska Press, 2004) and *Social Minds in the Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010). For a brief overview, see David Herman, ed., *The Emergence of Mind: Representations of Consciousness in Narrative Discourse in English* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), 1–40.
2. James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), 8.
  3. Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, 13–14, 75–86.
  4. D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 59.
  5. Andrew Miller discusses FID as a vehicle for the ethics of casuistry in *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 93–104.
  6. Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1999), 594.
  7. William Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 360.
  8. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 9.



## Generations

TREV BROUGHTON AND HELEN KINGSTONE

THE term “generations” is everywhere. Successive demographic cohorts are construed as being in zero-sum competition over authority, airtime, resources, or power.<sup>1</sup> In the British press, for instance, it is commonplace to see the interests of newly pensionable “babyboomers” pitted against those of “millennials,” and for such rivalry to be seen as personal, structural, or both. From serious sociological and economic analysis to pop-quizz punditry, it is taken for granted that the idea of a generation is useful. In cultural historiography, too, the term is ascribed explanatory force: first and second generation Romantic poets, “Bloomsbury” defying “Victorian,” and so on. In practice, however, such commentaries often rely on ahistorical assumptions about the meanings of age-identity (“child” versus “adult”), Freudian accounts of family structure (child *vis-à-vis* parent) and dialectical readings of