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The Return of the Omniscient Narrator

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CHAPTER 4

Style and the Pyrotechnic Storyteller

THE PYROTECHNIC STORYTELLER is typically humorous or satirical, employing a flourishing and expansive narrative voice, a garrulous conversational tone, to assert control over the events being narrated, eschewing the impersonality of analytic omniscience to the extent that the narrative voice often overshadows the characters being described or analyzed. This third mode of narrative authority in contemporary omniscience includes Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, Rick Moody's *The Diviners*, Nicola Barker's *Darkmans*, and much of the work of David Foster Wallace. While the novels discussed in this chapter display zero focalization and, in the case of Smith, overt commentary, the intrusive presence of their authorial narrators is produced most strikingly by expressive features of style which characterize the "voice" of the storyteller. Take, for example, this passage from *Darkmans*: "The house (which'd looked fairly bleak *prior* to this new development—with its sagging sills, mouldy fascia, and muddy garden) now peeked out, disconsolately, from beneath its perilous-seeming exo-skeleton like a sadly neglected poodle in an ill-fitting muzzle" (182). Of course, this authorial style is not a "quality" of omniscience, but in this instance it establishes an idiosyncratic expressive presence tied to the narrative voice itself.

Style in the literary-critical sense usually refers to elements of language—such as idiom, diction, tone, syntactic rhythm—which would be lost in a paraphrase of the story; the linguistic choices which distinguish the writing of one author from another. As a result of the foundational distinction between author and narrator, narrative theory has traditionally been less concerned with prose style—how a narrative is *written*—than with storytelling methods—how a story is narrated. Hence, in *Story and Discourse*, Seymour Chatman defines discourse as the “structure of narrative transmission,” with style as the “texture of the properties of the medium” (10–11), pertinent only to the extent that it facilitates the presentation of discourse. In a more specific sense, style in narrative theory has generally referred to linguistic features which enable readers to distinguish a character’s “voice” from a narrator’s, particularly in the form of free indirect discourse. This narratological linking of stylistic elements to the evocation of subjectivity in narrative discourse echoes the literary-critical understanding of individual authorial style. In the study of free indirect discourse a narrator’s formal diction is conventionally taken as the neutral voice against which to measure the stylistic deviation of characterial language. With the pyrotechnic storyteller, by contrast, colloquial language, informal tone, idiosyncratic syntax, and metaphorical excess all contribute to the evocation and characterization of a dramatized narrator, whose intrusive presence is established stylistically.

Dan Shen has argued for a need to include stylistic analysis of the language choices of writers alongside narratological analysis of the structural organization of a narrative in order for a fuller understanding of these two levels of presentation. She does not, however, relate this broad approach to narrative discourse as the “how” of narrative to the more specific question of discourse as the utterance of a narrator. Richard Aczel takes up the question of style in his essay “Hearing Voices in Narrative Texts,” which criticizes the narratological definition of voice as the generating instance of a narrative. He claims that Genette’s functional concept of voice as the agent responsible for telling a story, understood as the spatio-temporal location of the narrator in relation to the story, is limited because it does not establish *how* a narrator speaks and is thus “inherently deaf to qualitative factors such as tone and idiom” (468). Hence voice, for Aczel, must primarily be understood as a question of style. He argues for a distinction between the function of the narrator (the instance of enunciation) and the effect of the narrator, which he calls voice. This distinction, for Aczel, allows for

a qualitative, as opposed to merely functional, concept of voice, and emphasizes the centrality of stylistic expressivity—features of style which evoke a deictic center or subjectivity—in the identification of voice effects and their agents. Positing voice as a textual effect rather than an originary *anima*, it insists on a radical separation between textual signs of stylistic agency and projected (metatextual) principles of narrative organization and unity. (467)

In dismissing the claims by Ann Banfield and Monika Fludernik for narratorless third-person fiction, he challenges accepted approaches to the presence of a narrator. Rather than first-person pronouns, addresses to a reader, reflexive statements and overt commentary, which he assigns to the function of narration, Aczel locates the presence of a narrator in lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical elements of style, claiming that only these features can be considered elements of voice:

This is not to say that style necessarily evokes a subjective center (there are, for example, impersonal, collective, and period styles), but where style does have an expressive function it will produce a voice effect. Not only, therefore, does stylistic expressivity—style anchored in subjectivity—have an important role to play in the *identification* of narratorial audibility, but it must play the central role in the *characterization* of a narrator's voice. Narratorial self-mention posits a speaker function, and comment names a subject position, but it is only stylistic expressivity which endows this speaking subject with a recognizable *voice*. (472)

Aczel's evidence is the fiction of Henry James. Despite the restricted focalization of *The Ambassadors* or *What Maisie Knew*, Aczel claims that James's narratorial presence is clearly audible in the style of narration, and this is far more important to the voice effect of the narrator than the occasional intrusive comment which can be found in James's work. It is easy to accept that James's ornate circumlocutive sentences can be seen as stylistic evidence of the subjective presence of a narrator despite the rigorous reflectorization of his narratives. However, Aczel's "qualitative" approach seems to leave a lot of interpretive leeway in identifying the voice "effect" of stylistic expressivity. Would we deny narratorial characterization to the objective narration of a Hemingway story because of its minimalist style? And doesn't stylistic expressivity—a deictic center of subjectivity—indicate a "trace" of the narrating instance in the narrative discourse?

While I would still retain the importance of the narrating instance as the subjective center which generates the stylistic effects of voice, and the importance of intrusive commentary as the most overt performance of omniscient authority, Aczel's approach is nonetheless particularly salient for understanding how the mode of the pyrotechnic storyteller asserts a pervasive narratorial presence. Drawing upon Bakhtin, Aczel argues that the voices of narrators and characters emerge in a quotational context, audible only in their stylistic difference from each other, and becoming functional via a dialogue between readers and a projected narrating instance. The narrator, then, is not a "uniform teller persona" but a "composite configuration of voices, whose identity lies in the rhetorical organization of their constituent elements" (495). By contrast, I will approach style in this chapter as an extranarrative function of the narrator. That is, style is part of the act of narration, employed not only in the service of telling a story, but of asserting the omniscient narrator's linguistic presence at the level of discourse.

Narratological attention to style further complicates the author-narrator distinction because the stylistic features which Aczel claims evoke the voice effect of a narrator—"tone, idiom, diction, speech-style" (469)—also enable us to identify the prose style of individual authors. In character narration, I would argue, an author's style is metadiscursive. That is, when Humbert Humbert writes, in the opening to his confession, "You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style" (9), we are invited to attribute the stylistic choices to Humbert's narrative voice, even though we know that they are a product of Nabokov's authorial craft in writing *Lolita*. In third-person narration, there seems little purchase in separating an author's stylistic choices discernible in the text from those which establish the narrator's voice at the level of discourse. If homodiegetic narrators are characterized as much by their manner of telling as their diegetic experience, then heterodiegetic narrators must be characterized as much by their stylistic choices as they are by their commentary. The pyrotechnic storytellers of contemporary omniscience invoke the highest degree of personalized narration by virtue of these stylistic choices.

There are two writers whose maximalist prose has had the greatest influence on the syntactic rhythms of contemporary fiction, and has provided a stylistic model for the narrative voice of the pyrotechnic storyteller: Salman Rushdie and David Foster Wallace. Here is a passage from the opening page of Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*:

Gibreel, the tuneless soloist, had been cavorting in moonlight as he sang his impromptu gazal, swimming in air, butterfly-stroke, breast-stroke, bunching himself into a ball, spread-eagling himself against the almost-infinity of the almost-dawn, adopting heraldic postures, rampant, couchant, pitting levity against gravity. (3)

This hectic overdescription is accompanied by metaphorical excess: “The aircraft cracked in half, a seed-pod giving up its spores, an egg yielding its mystery. Two actors, prancing Gibreel, and buttony, pursed Mr Saladin Chamcha, fell like titbits of tobacco from a broken old cigar” (4). In two lines the narrator employs images of a seed-pod, an egg and a cigar, hurling language at us, and this prolixity seems almost to license in stylistic terms narratorial commentary, in the following case relating to the influence of aviation on modern thought and subjectivity:

Yessir, but not random. Up there in air-space, in that soft, imperceptible field which had been made possible by the century, and which, thereafter, made the century possible, becoming one of its defining locations, the place of movement and of war, the planet-shrinker and power-vacuum, most insecure and transitory of zones, illusory, discontinuous, metamorphic,—because when you throw everything up in the air anything becomes possible—wayupthere, at any rate, changes took place in delirious actors that would have gladdened the heart of old Mr Lamarck: under extreme environmental pressure, characteristics were acquired. (5)

For David Foster Wallace, stylistic pyrotechnics, in the form of extended sentences replete with qualifications and parentheticals, function as a way to elaborate the convolutions of individual character thought, while retaining a deliberately bland “style” in terms of lexical choice and figurative range. Here is a representative passage from “Luckily the Account Representative Knew CPR”:

Particularly the divorced Account Representative, who remarked, silently, alone, as his elevator dropped toward the Executive Garage, that, at a certain unnoticed but never unheeded point in every corporate evening he worked, it became Time to Leave; that this point in the overtime night was a fulcrum on which things basic and unseen tilted, very slightly—a pivot in hours unaware—and that, in the period between this point and the fresh-suited working dawn, the very issue of the Building’s owner-

ship would become, quietly, in their absence, truly an issue, hung in air, unsettled. (46)

In this passage, the narrator tells us that the unnamed Account Representative “remarked silently, alone” that it was “Time to Leave,” but the sentence is elongated by a paratactic clause following the semi-colon, shifting into a narratorial elaboration of the thought, overwhelming the character’s subjective presence with its drawn out explanatory comment. These feature of style—overdescription, metaphorical excess, and narratorial elaboration of character thought—are all ways in which the omniscient pyrotechnic storyteller rhetorically performs the controlling presence of the authorial narrator.

Nicola Barker, *Darkmans* (2007)

Nicola Barker’s *Darkmans* is the most striking example of the pyrotechnic storyteller. Set in the town of Ashford in contemporary England, the novel focuses on how the progress of modernity is haunted by the sedimentary layers of the city’s medieval past. As one of the characters says, Ashford is “like history in paradigm. At its center beats this tiny, perfect, medieval heart, but that heart is surrounded—obfuscated—by all these conflicting layers, a chaos of buildings and roads from every conceivable time-frame. It’s pure, architectural mayhem” (398). At the beginning of the novel we are introduced to sixty-one-year-old Daniel Beede, now a broken man working in a hospital laundry after spending much of his earlier life fighting the effects of the Channel Tunnel on his town. In particular, he had been devoted to restoring an historic water mill threatened by an arterial rerouting, a project during which he “had gripped the liver of history and had felt it squelching in his hand” (10), but which amounted to nothing once the mill was bulldozed. He remains galled by the disappearance of invaluable ancient tiles which had been salvaged from the building, and his desire to discover what happened provides the impetus of the plot. As the narrator says: “Beede was the vengeful tsunami of history” (13), and his actions appear to have unleashed the ghostly figure of the darkmans, spirit of John Scogin, the infamous court jester to Edward IV, whose life Beede is researching.

Throughout the novel, both Beede and his drug-dealing son, Kane, appear to be haunted by this figure, in dreams and in waking life, and sometimes possessed by him. Both father and son are besotted with chi-

ropodist Elen whose disturbed husband, Isidore, is the most affected by Scogin, prone to amnesiac lapses of mind during which he unconsciously re-enacts the jester's tricks, and seeming to hear his voice in his head. Elen and Isidore's six-year-old son, Fleet, is monomaniacally obsessed with constructing a perfect matchstick replica of the Cathedral Basilica of Sainte-Cécile and its surrounding buildings, without actually having seen it, and which he does not finish because it had not been completed in Scogin's lifetime. Fleet also talks of a mysterious friend, "John," relaying information about Scogin's biography he could not possibly know. At one point, paternity tests based on DNA samples reveal Fleet genetically to be Isidore's ancestor rather than his son.

Most significantly, these hauntings take the form of a linguistic inhabitation, with the characters involuntarily thinking and speaking in archaic words and words from other languages of which they are unfamiliar. For instance, in one scene between Kane and Elen, Kane is trying to control both his feelings of sexual arousal and his jealousy of her relationship with his father. He looks down at a coin Elen is holding and thinks: "*Coin— / Cuneus— / Kunte— / Cunt*" (773). *Cuneus* is Latin for wedge, also an architectural element of medieval theatres, suggesting the jester's hand at play. In this context, Elen is the wedge between himself and Beede, leading associatively and phonetically to "cunt," which can be seen as an expression of both desire for and anger toward Elen. Kane is overwhelmed by his experience: "—he saw words clashing and merging and collapsing and rotating. He saw chaos—an infinity of teeth, tongues, mouths, breath. He saw a storm of confusion" (775).

This linguistic chaos is replicated in the act of narration. Barker's novel has a manic prose style, full of multiple overblown metaphors, colloquial language, parenthetical embellishments and, most strikingly, regular interpolations of characters' thoughts (typographically represented by italics and separated by line breaks) into the narrator's discourse. There are some overt narratorial assessments, such as this: "In bald truth, Beede's studious attempts to present himself as unfailingly approachable to his son were all just so much baloney" (73). However, the omniscient authority and intrusive presence of this pyrotechnic narration is largely stylistic, emerging from summary, descriptive pause and the representation of consciousness. The voice "effect" of stylistic expressivity which characterizes the narrator is clear in the excessive elaboration of metaphors which occur throughout the book. Here is an example of character summary: "To boil it all down (which might take a while—there was plenty of old meat, hard lessons and human frailty in this particular

broth), Beede was wildly cynical about the functions of paternity” (73). Commenting on a conversation between Beede and his son Kane, the narrator writes: “The unmentionable hung between them like a dank canal (overrun by weed and scattered with litter—the used condoms, the bent tricycle, the old pram)” (340). In these passages the parentheses contain the excessive elaboration of metaphors which are extranarrative in their function.

Another example of stylistic presence is the extended introduction to one of the characters. “Mrs Dina Broad had a wonderful facility for getting total strangers to do exactly as she wanted” (104). This introductory statement is straightforward enough, but over the next page of character summary the narrator’s presence is keenly asserted in the hyperactive prose with its regular parenthetical qualifications and extended metaphors. “If Dina’s life was a carousel (which it was anything but), then there was only enough room on the rotating podium (midst the high-painted roses, the mirror-tiles, the lovely organ) for a single pony; and Dina’s was it” (104). The metaphor of the single-pony carousel is exhausted before it segues into one of the character’s life as a theatrical show: “The Dina Broad show (like Celine Dion in Las Vegas) was a show that never ended (it just went on and on and *on*); but this low-budget extravaganza (in perfect Technicolor) by no means ran itself” (104). “*Nuh-uh*,” the narrator says, before pursuing the metaphor for another two paragraphs.

In this following extract we have what appears to be a passage of free indirect discourse concerning Fleet’s antisocial behavior at school and the response of his parents. The passage is not linked to any single character perspective, but its sentiments seem most attributable to the general opinion of the mothers of other children in the school, a summary of their assessment of Fleet and his parents:

Fleet on the other hand . . .

Hmmm

Fleet had . . .

What did Fleet have? Whatever it was, the parents wouldn’t deal with it (were uncooperative, wouldn’t face facts), which automatically rendered them a part of the problem. To care too much was a weakness all parents could quite reasonably be found guilty of, but to actively obstruct? To smother? To deny? Not only was it unhealthy, but in the voluminous

wardrobe of parental misdemeanours, this was that fine-seeming, well-laundered garment hanging neatly alongside the foul and mouldering suit of abuse (contamination was always a possibility when two items were hung so close). (151)

This passage gives the appearance of the narrator reporting the collective opinion of the mothers emerging out of a discussion about Fleet and his parents, rendering this opinion in a form of free indirect discourse, complete with interrogatives. But as it continues it becomes less of a mediated report than a narratorial performance which linguistically overwhelms the characters and asserts the narrator's stylistic authority through the hyperbolic wardrobe metaphor. The last parenthetical line, "contamination was always a possibility when two items were hung so close," can, in the context of the narrator's overriding presence, also be read as a reflexive metaphor for the operation of stylistic contagion, showing the contamination of narratorial and character language.

Darkmans was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2007, the year in which Anne Enright won for *The Gathering*. In an article in *The Guardian*, one of the judges, Giles Foden, explains that, while the novel was an early favorite of the judges, "the general impression was that not enough thought had been given to the reader. It seemed a book written for the author whose evident zeal for language could only take one so far," and which "with much more disciplined handling, could have been a *Middlemarch* for our times." Enright's novel, on the other hand, was praised for its "controlled" and "carefully modulated" prose. Stylistic excess, then, may have cost Barker the chance at a Booker prize. In particular, Foden notes that a "number of judges had difficulty with italic interjections, broken out of the main text, as a way of presenting a character's thoughts." This style can be seen as idiosyncratic to Barker's writing, but it also matches the novel's preoccupation with the power of language, performing at the level of the discourse the chaotic inhabitation of characters' thoughts which the darkmans performs in the story.

The key stylistic technique is a kind of reflexive experimentation with stylistic contagion. Throughout the novel, the narration is fragmented by separate paragraphs of italicized words and phrases which must be attributed to a character. Often these appear as snatches of direct discourse supplementing an internally focalized passage such as in the following:

Elen had a sudden sense of how it might feel to be a student who wasn't excelling in Mrs Santa's class (that atmosphere of "tolerant" disappoint-

ment; of “accepting” disquiet). She didn’t like it. The angry knuckle tensed itself up inside her stomach again—

Cow

—then the second, gentler knuckle—the pacifier—

She’s his teacher—She just wants to help . . .

—predictably balanced it out. (141)

Sometimes these italicized passages of interpolated direct discourse appear to operate as a character’s response to the narrator’s comments. One section elaborates, in free indirect discourse, Kane’s frustration with his father’s uptight stoicism. This is interrupted by a narratorial evaluation of Kane’s attempt to distinguish himself from Beede:

Of course, by comparison—and by sheer coincidence—Kane’s entire life mission—

Oh how lovely to hone in on me again

—was to be mirthful. To be fluffy. To endow mere trifles with an exquisitely inappropriate gravitas. Kane found depth an abomination. (20)

The following passage is our first introduction to Kane’s ex-girlfriend:

Kelly Broad was sitting on a high wall, chewing ferociously on a piece of celery. She was passingly pretty and alarmingly thin with artificially tinted burgundy hair. . . . She had bad circulation, weak bones . . . a penchant for laxatives and an Eating Disorder—

Might as well bring that straight up, eh?

Un,

Deux,

Trois . . .

Bleeeaa-urghhh! (39)

In the following example, the narrator—who is describing Beede’s efforts, along with a group of volunteers, to restore the Old Mill—seems to respond to the character’s interjection:

It wasn’t all plain sailing. At some point (and who could remember when, exactly?), it became distressingly apparent that recent “improvements” to the newer parts of Mill House had seriously endangered the older structure’s integrity—

*Now hang on—
Just . . . just back up a second—
What are you saying here, exactly?*

The worst-case scenario? That the old mill might never be able to function independently in its eighteenth century guise; like a conjoined twin, it might only really be able to exist as a small part of its former whole. (10)

Here the narrator is articulating what Beede does not want to hear: that his attempts to restore the mill contributed to its destruction. If stylistic contagion is understood as an assimilation into the narrative voice of language a character might use to describe themselves (such as the famous “Uncle Charles repaired to the outhouse”), these moments seem to be the narrator’s hypothetical interpolations of the response a character might have to being described by someone else. In other words, we have less the sharing of the narratorial function with the character’s voice, than the narrator supplying the character’s thoughts for them, linguistically penetrating the psyche of the characters. One of the characters, the historian Winifred, is researching the life of Scogin on Beede’s behalf. At one point, Winifred tells Kane: “Words are his allies. It’s like he’s at his most powerful, his most mischievous, when experimenting with the variables of language” (646). In this way, the narrator’s stylistic excess matches the Jester, for the characters’ thoughts also suffer from linguistic intrusion at the diegetic level.

In one scene, Beede’s cat scratches Elen’s hand, and he takes her hand in his to inspect it: “‘He’s drawn *blut*,’ Beede murmured thickly, his chest tightening as he inhaled the roses on her, then he frowned. ‘Blood,’ he repeated” (656). Later, in a scene where he appears to be completely possessed, prancing around, somersaulting, farting, and eventually hanging

his cat, Beede notices blood on his arm and this list of words appears in his thoughts: “*Reudh? Ruber? Rood? Rud? Red? Red? Blut-red? Eh? Blut?*” (677). This might be explained by Beede’s interest in the origins of languages, but the other characters have no such interest or knowledge. Indeed it is the resurfacing of archaic words across characters which links them together.

Toward the end of the novel, Dory explains to Beede that the dark-mans, whom they know but cannot name, has been a constant voice in his head: “He keeps telling me that you made your own key. He keeps repeating it. He keeps going on and on and on and *on*. . . . I mean at first I didn’t *understand*—he speaks differently to us. He kept repeating the word *kay* and I just couldn’t . . . but then he said *luk* . . . then *loch* . . . and I knew he meant lock. Like a lock and a key. A *key* . . . ” (713). The next chapter, focalized through Kane who is driving to meet an art forger called Peta Borough, opens this way:

Tenterden. He’d planned to head for Tenterden—

Peta—

Peta Borough—

The f-forger . . .

The f-fabricare . . .

She’s definitely the k-k-kay, here

—but when he drew up at the roundabout—

Eh?

—the Rover was just one car ahead of him—

Kay?

—so he calmly proceeded to follow—

F-f-fabric-what?! (716)

Here we see Kane confused by this linguistic invasion of his own internal thoughts. Peta Borough in fact turns out to be the key to the plot, revealing to Kane in the denouement the fate of the missing tiles, as well as her and Beede’s involvement in it. Later, Kane is discussing ash trees with

a gardener who tells him they can be recognized by their seeds, known as keys.

“Keys?” Kane repeated. “Why do they call them that?”

“Because in the very old days they used to resemble the actual keys that people used for their locks.”

“Key,” Kane mused, dreamily, “kay . . .” (785)

The word is now uttered in his speech. Later we have this line to introduce a chapter in which the word has found its way into the narration:

Kane took out his kays—

KEYS, Goddammit!

(He shook his head—

STOP this now!

ENOUGH!!)

—inserted them into the lock, then paused for a second and stared down, frowning, at his outstretched hands. (796)

This passage follows the pattern of reporting characters’ thoughts that seem to be responses to the narration. In this instance, the narrator’s use of “kays,” as an instance of stylistic contagion, is an echo of the Jester’s lexical infection of the characters’ thoughts. If Kane cannot get the word out of his head, it is because neither the darkmans nor the omniscient narrator will let him. And if Scogin is “at his most powerful, his most mischievous, when experimenting with the variables of language” (646), then so is the narrator in her experiment with represented thought. At one point in the novel Kane reflects upon the strange words in his mind: “Almost as if his thoughts were a war drum (or a tom-tom or a bongo) being deftly played by a mysterious hand on the other side of a very distant, very stark and yet beautiful snow-capped mountain” (485). This mysterious hand of the darkmans, who embodies the return of a repressed history, infiltrating the characters’ minds and intruding into their idiom, is also a kind of spectral figure of the omniscient narrator. Given the history of novelistic form as an attempt to repress the intrusive presence of the omniscient narrator by developments in impersonal narration, this presence can be seen

erupting in the stylistic excess of the pyrotechnic storyteller exemplified by Barker's novel.

Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000)

The pyrotechnic narrator is also the mediating voice for much of the fiction which the prominent British critic James Wood denounces as “hysterical realism.” For Wood, much contemporary fiction is beset with an “excess of storytelling” (*Irresponsible* 171), neglecting the development of characters with genuine humanity. He describes hysterical realism in this way: “The big contemporary novel is a perpetual motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity. It seems to want to abolish stillness, as if ashamed of silence. Stories and sub-stories sprout on every page, and these novels continually flourish their glamorous congestion. Inseparable from this culture of permanent storytelling is the pursuit of vitality at all costs” (*Irresponsible* 167). Wood argues that this mode of fiction has absorbed the textual qualities of magic realism into the realist novel. The manic flourishes of verisimilar improbability do not tip into the surreal, but simply exhaust the conventions of realism. Wood coined the term “hysterical realism” in a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, and listed Smith's novel as the latest in a “hardening” genre including Rushdie's *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*, DeLillo's *Underworld* and Wallace's *Infinite Jest*.

The publication of *White Teeth* at the turn of the millennium was a genuine media event: a debut novel about contemporary multicultural England by a young, attractive female writer, easily situated in a tradition of postcolonial fiction which explores the hybrid nature of migrant identities, with a direct line of descent from Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. “This has been the century of strangers,” utters the omniscient narrator, “brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the late immigrant experiment. It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fishpond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O'Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune” (326). If *The Satanic Verses* experiments with an omniscient narrator who asserts his noninterventionist stance while hinting he may also be Satan, *White Teeth* can be read as a postsecular novel in which the omniscient narrator refuses to organize the plot around the traditional concept of providence. Here, *White Teeth*'s narrative voice bears comparison with that in Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*, the prototype of

omniscient narration in the English novel. In *God's Plot and Man's Stories*, Leopold Damrosch argues that in Fielding's novel "[a]n omniscient and affectionate narrator acts as the disposing deity of the fictional universe, instructing the reader, by means of a plot whose coherence is only gradually revealed, to understand the operations of a Providence that subsumes all of the apparent accidents of chance or Fortune" (263). In the final book of *Tom Jones*, the narrator writes:

Here an Accident happened of a very extraordinary Kind; one indeed of those strange Chances whence very good and grave Men have concluded that Providence often interposes in the Discovery of the most secret Villainy, in order to caution Men from quitting the Paths of Honesty, however warily they tread in those of Vice. (818)

If, as Wayne Booth argues in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Fielding's narrator establishes an intimacy with readers that "produces a kind of comic analogue of the true believer's reliance on a benign providence in real life" (217), the omniscient narrator of *White Teeth*, by contrast, engages readers by satirizing this reliance.

The novel opens with a scene in which the protagonist, Archie Jones, is attempting to commit suicide by gassing himself in his car. After the scene is established the narrator asserts her colloquial stylistic presence and intrusive authority in this passage of zero focalization:

For, though he did not know it, and despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live. (4)

This passage seems deliberately designed to prevent us from reading Archie's escape from suicide as some sort of profound statement about the fragility of human existence. Its satirical references to various popular theories of universal cause and effect seem to terminate in the suggestion that the somebody who "makes shit happen" is either a divine entity about which the narrator can only speculate (she knows what happened, but not

why), or simply the narrator herself, the storytelling author's proxy, who playfully acknowledges her analogous relation to God. Smith's narrator, in fact, regularly employs intrusive commentary to satirize the desire of characters to assign events to providence:

The principles of Christianity and Sod's Law (also known as Murphy's Law) are the same: *Everything happens to me, for me*. So if a man drops a piece of toast and it lands butter-side down, this unlucky event is interpreted as being proof of an essential truth about bad luck: that the toast fell as it did just to prove to *you*, Mr Unlucky, that there is a defining force in the universe and it is bad luck. It's not random. It could never have fallen on the right side, so the argument goes, because that's Sod's Law. In short, Sod's Law happens to you to prove to you that there is Sod's Law. Yet, unlike gravity, it is a law that does not exist whatever happens: when the toast lands on the *right* side, Sod's Law mysteriously disappears. (44)

This passage occurs in the middle of narrating the involvement of two characters in a motorbike accident. The narrator goes on to point out the character Ryan's belief that he had escaped injury while his companion Clara had her teeth knocked out because God had chosen to save him: "Not because one was wearing a helmet and the other wasn't" (44). Most damningly, the narrator comments that if the opposite had occurred "you can bet your life that God, in Ryan's mind, would have done a vanishing act" (44).

Here we see the narrator extrapolating from the report of a character's experience to general commentary on "human nature." "Authorial narrative," according to Monika Fludernik,

is most familiar to us in the form of a reliable guide to human affairs. There is a consoling ability to know, to see into characters' minds, to grasp the why, how and wherefore of life, and to uncover life's rules and regularities *sub specie aeternitatis et mundi*. (*Natural* 165)

This is a conventional understanding of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century omniscient narrator established by critical consensus. Rather than offering consoling explanation, the narrative voice of *White Teeth* offers a world of random uncertainty, relativizing the authority of her commentary.

In an essay on the relationship between postcolonial fiction and post-secular thought, Graham Huggan argues that *White Teeth* is a contempo-

rary postsecular text which performs in fiction the aims of postsecularism, defined as “a strategy for the deconstructive reading of established religious texts” (757). Like *The Satanic Verses*, he points out, Smith’s novel is a celebration of hybridity and an attack on cultural purism:

However, if the promises and illusions of Islam remain very much at the center of Rushdie’s novel, their space in Smith’s has largely been usurped by the secular history of the genome. . . . *White Teeth*, in this sense, is *The Satanic Verses* for the age of the Human Genome Project. (761)

A key character in *White Teeth* is the geneticist Marcus Chalfen, who publicly champions the potential for all humans arising from his attempts to produce a genetically engineered mouse. A press release announcing the launch of his “FutureMouse[®]” experiment states that this research “holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate” (433). As Huggan points out, the novel undercuts this promise as events unfold “through a succession of biological accidents and historical contingencies” (762).

The final chapter of *White Teeth* brings all the strands of the plot together in a set piece centered on the launch of the FutureMouse[®]. If the denouement of *Tom Jones* resolves the plot to reveal the hand of Providence, here there is structural unification, but no real resolution. “*But first the endgames,*” the narrator writes, acknowledging the desire of readers to know what happens to the characters and projecting several possibilities. “But surely to tell these tall tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, it’s not like that. It’s never been like that” (541). Instead she concludes by following the mouse who has escaped. “He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. *Go on my son!* thought Archie” (542). So while Smith’s narrator may reject providence, she also rejects secular belief in the promise of science to eliminate the random.

“The humanism that Smith’s novel endorses,” Huggan argues, “is neither intrinsically secular nor fundamentally religious; rather, it occupies a postsecular sphere of radical indeterminacy in which fundamentalist certainties are rejected and salvationist promises of all kinds are unmasked for the self-serving—and sometimes brutally destructive—ideologies they are” (763). Huggan makes no reference to the formal

properties of narration in Smith's novel, but certainly the humanism that the novel "endorses" is facilitated by the narrative voice itself in overt commentary. There are substantial passages of digressive and garrulous commentary throughout the novel which directly address the reader. In each of the following examples, the narrator employs the editorial "we" to rhetorically invoke a general consciousness. On each occasion, the digression concludes with the narrator distancing herself from this "we" by taking issue with conventional wisdom.

After describing Irie's rationalization that Millat doesn't love her because he cannot, because he is damaged, the narrator digresses—"It's a funny thing about the modern world" (462)—wondering how this sort of thinking came to pass in this century:

We are so convinced of the goodness of ourselves, and the goodness of our love, we cannot bear to believe that there might be something more worthy of love than us, more worthy of worship. Greetings cards routinely tell us everybody deserves love. No. Everybody deserves clean water. Not everybody deserves love all the time. (462)

In the following passage, the intrusive commentary invokes a narratee and hence implied reader who is culturally different from the characters under consideration, that is, not an immigrant. "Because we often imagine that immigrants are constantly on the move, footloose, able to change course at any moment, able to employ their legendary resourcefulness at every turn" (465). The narrator proceeds to discuss this belief in relation to Zeno's Paradox of pluralism, before concluding that "multiplicity is no illusion" despite the allure of the One: "Because this is the other thing about immigrants (fugees, émigrés, travellers): they cannot escape their history any more than you yourself can lose your shadow" (466). If it is true that omniscient narration invokes a conventional link between narrative voice and the social identity of the author, then the narrative authority of this voice invokes the cultural authority of Smith—as the child of an immigrant Jamaican mother and English father—beginning the section with an editorial "we" that establishes complicity with the implied reader's difference from the characters, and concluding with a direct address that speaks on behalf of the characters' experience.

As many critics have argued, Smith's public persona has been vital to the reception of her novel, with debate revolving around the extent to which *White Teeth* participates in a contrived multicultural exotica. Paying attention to the different styles of author photo in the hardback and

paperback editions of the novel, Dominic Head writes: “For the author of a book that purports to speak authoritatively to a wide range of ethnic experience—including Caribbean British and Asian British experience—the ability to adopt different guises suggests a substantive hybridized identity that goes beyond the more cynical marketing objectives” (107). Head links this paratextual framing to Smith’s celebration of contemporary multiculturalism by focusing on her satirical critique of genetic engineering. “From the point of view of ethnicity,” he claims, “this signals Smith’s conviction: that we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of pure ethnic origins is a pointless objective. And in celebrating this hybridity, Smith embraces its contradictory and haphazard nature” (114).

The following passage of commentary indicates again how the narrator addresses assumptions about different cultural beliefs before showing how they are not so different from those of the narratee invoked by an editorial “we”:

And it may be absurd to us that one Iqbal can believe the breadcrumbs laid down by another Iqbal, generations before him, have not yet blown away in the breeze. But it really doesn’t matter what we believe. It seems it won’t stop the man who thinks this life is guided by the life he thinks he had before, or the gypsy who swears by the queens in her tarot pack. And it’s hard to change the mind of the high-strung woman who lays responsibility for all her actions at the feet of her mother, or the lonely guy who sits in a fold-up chair on a hill in the dead of night waiting for the little green men. Amidst the strange landscapes that have replaced our belief in the efficacy of the stars, Millat’s is not such odd terrain. He believes the decisions that are made, come back. He believes we live in circles. His is a simple, neat fatalism. What goes around comes around. (506–7)

In this last comment the narrator assumes our complicity in the absurdity of Iqbal’s belief, before going on both to make light of this belief and normalize it by parodying other more quotidian attempts at fatalism. Matthew Paproth describes what he considers a “disconnect between post-modernist tale and modernist telling” (11) in Smith’s novels which, despite their postmodern content, employ a stable narrative structure and authoritative omniscient narrator. It seems odd to describe these features of “telling” as modernist, given the radical experimentation with form and voice which characterizes modernist fiction. Nonetheless, Paproth’s point is that

“while the novels demonstrate the failure of various characters to assert their authority and autonomy in a postmodern world, the narrators are confident, in total control of their narratives, rarely demonstrating the uncertainty or fracturedness that is common in postmodernist fiction” (11). The assumption here is that “a confident omniscient narrator” must be conservative or at odds with postmodern thought. Referring to the neat conclusion of *White Teeth*, Paproth writes: “It is a typically modernist move, one intended to guide readers toward knowledge—paradoxically, we are being led toward the message that randomness and chaos prevail over resolution and closure. The point here is that the modernist structure problematizes the postmodernist message that the final scene reveals to readers” (22). I’m not sure what this problematization entails. That the “message” is obfuscated or diminished by the form? That Smith doesn’t practice what she preaches? At any rate, the use of omniscient narration in *White Teeth* indicates that its form is not necessarily at odds with an exploration of postmodern culture, that it operates to establish the cultural authority of novelists in the wake of postmodernism, and that in doing so it projects a figure of authorship different from that of classic omniscience.

Rick Moody, *The Diviners* (2005)

In a 2001 interview for *Paris Review*, Rick Moody was asked about the literary traditions informing his writing. His response was: “The modernist notion that anything is possible, the postmodernist notion that everything is exhausted, the post-postmodernist notion that since everything is exhausted, everything is permitted” (David Ryan). The prologue, entitled “Opening Credits and Theme Music,” which opens *The Diviners* is a highly flamboyant performance of the spatial freedom of omniscience, with clear echoes of the famous opening to Dickens’s *Bleak House*, a canonical example of zero focalization. The second paragraph of *Bleak House* begins: “Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” (13). In Moody’s novel, the fog over Victorian London becomes the light which spreads from Hollywood to the rest of the world in the year 2000 on the morning after the election of George Bush. And whereas Dickens’s opening passage takes a handful of paragraphs, Moody’s extends over twelve pages. Here is the opening:

The light that illuminates the world begins in Los Angeles. Begins in darkness, begins in the mountains, begins in empty landscapes, in doubt and remorse. San Antonio Peak throws shadows upon a city of shadows. There are hints of human insignificance; there are nightmares. But just at the moment of intolerability there's an eruption of spectra. It's morning! Morning is hopeful, uncomplicated, and it scales mountaintops, as it scales all things. The light comes from nowhere fathomable, from an apparently eternal reservoir of emanations, radioactivities. Light edging over the mountaintop and across the lakes of the highlands, light across the Angeles National Forest, light rushing across skeins of smog in the California skies. Light on Redlands, light on the planned communities, light on the guy tossing the morning newspaper from a Toyota with a hundred and ninety-three thousand miles on it. Light on the Santa Ana river, on a drunk sleeping tenderly beside its dregs, light on the Santa Ana mountains, the San Bernadino mountains, light on the Prado Basin, where a stabbing victim welters in her wounds. (3)

The title to the prologue suggests the narration is mimicking the neutral eye of the cinematic camera, as if voicing the implied message of the camera movements and theme music ("It's morning!" suggesting a swell of music). At the same time the stylistic reference to *Bleak House* demonstrates that the filmic opening wide shot derives its logic from the panoramic perspective of zero focalization. This sets up Moody's novelistic satire of the film and television industry which is said to be responsible for the decline of readership for print fiction. Here the omniscient narration is operating parodically, but it is not a parodic critique of a nineteenth-century fictional technique, or the fantasy of omniscience: it is a deployment of this technique to parody twenty-first-century American cultural imperialism, flagged from the opening line with its ironic assertion that the sun rises in Los Angeles to illuminate the rest of the world. This opening line also echoes the statement in Genesis about the omnipotent creative power of divinity—"And God said: Let there be light"—although the analogy with God is offset by the statement that the light "comes from nowhere fathomable" (3).

The zero focalization proceeds to range across the world, tracking the light over the Pacific Ocean—"Light upon the invisible phytoplankton and all organic material" (4)—but the narrative voice is not anonymous or impersonal: it draws attention to the many metaphorical applications of light as it offers commentary on geopolitical issues around the globe. The

narrator's light shines from Japan—"now dawn upon Nagasaki, where the second of the explosions was detonated, light of dawn reflective of that other light" (6)—to China—"light upon the glass boxes of Chinese capitalism" (6)—to the Middle East—"light upon the troops belonging to a military dictator bent upon keeping as many Afghan refugees on the other side of the pass as is possible" (8)—where "[a]s far as the eye can see, the prophet and his vision, the dawn is his metaphor. . . . Dawn is for all the people's of Mohammed's country" (8). It moves to Europe—"light upon Western Europe and a history founded on light as a mythological tool" (10)—where "light is now visible, beginning to shine upon the Pantheon, that massive structure of such permanence that even a McDonald's just across the square from it cannot spoil its perfection" (10). Then across the North Atlantic before returning to the United States where people "have stuff on their mind" and "International concerns are not pressing" (12). The spatio-temporal freedom of omniscience is thus used to establish the broader international context in which a parody of the western media industry is played out, demonstrating the insularity of the American perspective before settling in New York—"Light upon all the insomniacs, across this city, metropolis of insomniacs" (13)—where the novel is set.

The narrative centers on a group of people who work in a small independent film company called Means of Production. The chief executive, Vanessa Meandro, has decided that the company needs to stabilize its revenue and branch out from art-house films to include television. The complication of the plot arises when one of Vanessa's assistants, Amanda Duffy, misplaces a script which had yet to be assessed. To help Amanda avoid the wrath of her boss, Thaddeus Griffin, a coworker and washed-up action movie star, concocts a treatment for a miniseries called *The Diviners*, supposedly based on a novel by a best-selling author. The satirical plot revolves around attempts by several companies to secure the script development rights to this nonexistent universally appealing historical drama about water diviners.

After the prologue the rest of the novel proceeds to orient the narrative perspective of each chapter around an individual character in a large cast with a minimum of intrusive commentary. This is a typical pattern, setting the scene with panoramic external focalization before "zooming" into variable internal focalization. However, the opening establishes a frame in which the *stylistic* presence of the narrator's voice remains palpable throughout the novel. Despite each focalized chapter relying heavily on free indirect discourse, there is very much the sense of the narrative

voice moving from one character to another, performing their thoughts in pyrotechnic fashion, in much the same way that the light is traced in the prologue, rather than this narratorial consciousness yielding linguistically to shifting deictic centers.

This link between the prologue and the tracing of character thought is made to resonant linguistically in a scene describing the addiction of the corpulent Vanessa, nicknamed “Minivan” by her employees, to Krispy Kreme doughnuts. In this scene Vanessa escapes a meeting for compulsive overeaters and is compelled to seek out doughnuts as solace. As she approaches the store we have this passage, inviting readers to share the experience:

Just stand a little, here, beside the Rite Aid pharmacy, to which Vanessa trots with such purpose that the commuters coming up the PATH train escalators veer out of her way. Doesn’t matter that the Krispy Kreme at concourse level is neither flashy nor fashionable. She will not be diverted from the mission, which is the mission of doughnuts. Is the sign illuminated? Do you need to ask? The sign that indicates that the doughnuts are fresh. Yes, there is a *light* at Krispy Kreme, which indicates that the original glazed doughnuts of Krispy Kreme are just off the assembly line. She looks for the indicator lamp; she looks for a sympathetic light in the eyes in her fellow men and women. Yes, the light is still illuminated! . . . She is destined to have a doughnut that melts in her mouth, a doughnut that tastes like the happy ending of a romantic comedy as purveyed by a vertically integrated multinational entertainment provider under German ownership. (53)

Here we see embedded in the free indirect rendering of Vanessa’s consciousness—“Yes, the light is still illuminated!”—the same narratorial language which rendered the opening scene of zero focalization: “The light that illuminates the world begins in Los Angeles.” The passage then shifts into commentary which overtly satirizes Vanessa’s gustatory desire. After Vanessa has purchased her doughnuts and begun to consume them, we have this passage of commentary:

She doesn’t even wait to be in the open space of the concourse before she has one in her mouth. And here’s the lesson. The great spiritual benefit of the Krispy Kreme original glazed doughnut is the sensation of nothingness. The satori that is the Krispy Kreme is the obliteration of self, the silencing of the voices that are attached to the oppressions of life. As

soon as she has the original glazed doughnut in her mouth, relief floods in. (54)

Descriptions of light and its metaphorical applications abound throughout the narrative. The first chapter is centered on Vanessa's alcoholic mother, Rosa, who suffers from migraines: "These headaches begin with visitations, with rainbows, celestial light" (15). Annabel hopes her boss will one day display tenderness to those around her, and wants to be there "when the world of light opens in Minivan like a flower" (64). Annabel's adoptive father, the Reverend Duffy, opens his door to find his son, Tyrone, returned: "the prodigal son is now in the light on the front step, here he is, and the prodigal son is loved!" (380). In another scene, Tyrone is sitting on a train peering out the window: "Lighting effects are consistent with the light of late afternoon in Connecticut, which is the flickering light of things passing away, the light of things coming to an end" (210).

The taxi driver, Ranjeet Singh, who meets Vanessa when she orders him to ferry her around New York City to feed her doughnut addiction, somehow convinces her to hire him as an expert on television in order to help her company infiltrate the television market and, as she says to her employees, "rocket toward the light" (136). In one of his rants Ranjeet argues that television has replaced literature in its pseudo-religious influence. The "tale of written words, words on the page in alphabets. This tale is a sickness . . . This is not the true way because these tales of the alphabet have no light in them. . . . No, as you can now see, the true way must be the way of bringing light to all the people, and there is but one way to do that" (131). Here Ranjeet's surging monologue to the employees at Means of Production sounds exactly like the omniscient opening with its pomposity, its use of anaphora ("the light") and syntactic rhythm:

That way is the way of television, which is the one light, the light in the house, the light in the darkness, the light of the satellite dish, the light of the dishwallahs of India, the light of the rural places coming out of the darkness, the light of television that brings together all men and women in red bathing suits on a shore, the light of a talking horse, the light of a red-haired woman and her bandleader husband when they argue and she crosses her eyes, the light of an army hospital and its surgeons during the war, the light of a special team of policemen from a city in Florida, the light of a family of oil barons, the light of four women who sleep with many men and talk about it in cafes, the light of all persons who wish to be millionaires. (132)

Throughout the novel the narrator acts as a sort of ventriloquist, taking on and parodying the characters' linguistic habitus, but with the same syntactic rhythm. For instance, in a chapter in which Thaddeus Griffin is having sex with a yoga instructor we have this focalized passage:

She is allowing herself to be kissed by Thaddeus Griffin, movie star and practitioner of yoga, and she is kissing back a little bit, and this is the pose called the Adulterous Union, wherein two practitioners, who are elsewhere participants in love's vast covenant, conjoin their mouths on the Oriental carpet in the ashram. (283)

Similar to Barker's *Darkmans*, the psychonarratorial summary of a character's opinion is often elaborated in such hyperbolic fashion that we have to see it as neither a narratorial report nor a mediated indirect quotation, but a kind of linguistic overwriting of the character's own metaphor:

If Annabel's mother, the psychologist, has a view on sexuality as depicted on television, it's that the excessive saccharine of this sexuality is bound to create expectations, and not just among young people, who are almost honor bound to expect that when they finally get naked with their friends the earth will tremble or there will be the sounds of rockets going off in their ears or they will feel an overwhelming and intoxicating love, more addictive than heroin, and this love feeling, called forth by the commingling of bodily fluids, will never take leave of them, until death comes for them. (459)

So the stylistic excess established in the opening display of zero focalization, and which clearly characterizes the narrator's voice, is employed to retain overt narratorial presence even in passages of internal focalization and free indirect rendering of character thought, spilling over into narratorial commentary.