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**ABSTRACT**

Over recent years terms such as autofiction, postcritique and postfiction have been repurposed to designate a moment in the history of the novel, and in culture more broadly, to do with the distribution of narrative authority. These terms have also helped articulate a contemporary double bind whereby impatience with the knowingness of third-person narration meets an equal and opposite impatience with ideology critique, whose unmasking of textual or authorial ideology is itself viewed as excessively knowing. This article reconnects such a discursive predicament to the enduring problem of modernism's relation to realism. Through a consideration of public acts of reading in James Joyce's 'A Painful Case' (pub.1914), Anna Burns's Milkman (2018) and Patricia Lockwood's No One is Talking About This (2021), it considers the place of realism in relation to both the current impact of the internet and the historical memory of literary modernism. It argues that if we want to think about modernism's continued relevance to contemporary cultural forms we should consider how the devices of realism imperilled at the end of the nineteenth century remain differently imperilled in today's online world.

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## Modernism, Realism, Reading

It is fair to say that in 2023 the 'classic realist text' is no longer the disciplinary canard it once was. In part, this is due to how critiques of realism's 'metalanguage' (the false neutrality of narration) tend now to refer to their own conventions of critical reading.[1] It is also a legacy of post-colonial and world literary paradigms of study. Whereas in the period of high theory modernist autonomy was recruited to call out bad-faith realisms (a discursive movement responding to the prior denigration of modernism as asocial and pathological[2]), more recently the trend has been towards

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implicating modernism as itself the only 'realism' possible in changed historical circumstances.[3] The compatibility of the realist novel's nineteenth-century European inheritance with vastly different structures of social experience remains an important critical problem; yet realist plotting and characterisation endure on the grounds of their ambition to represent a social totality. Realism today is tasked with expressing an ever more complex historical consciousness on the one hand, and fulfilling a set of genre conventions on the other.

I do not believe there is an easy meta-critical way out of this predicament. Nonetheless, we can usefully restate the historical problem of realism, and its imbrication with modernism, through a reconsideration of the structural problem of fiction. After all, literary realism was (and is) an exemplary fiction; and we might usefully ponder the irony that realism is a fiction that cannot lie – that can only tell 'the truth' – because it holds itself to an *impossible* standard of representational transparency. It derives its authority from its impossibility. This is close to what Ann Banfield argued in her influential work, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (1982). For Banfield, novelistic narration is most basically enabled by a stylistic conjunction of two 'unspeakable sentences', the peculiar grammar of which supports impossible representations: first of the objective world (without point of view), and second of a subjective consciousness in the eternal present of its passing.[4] No character inside a narrative can speak the impossible sentences of narration: they can neither offer a full representation of a mind, nor an objective account of time and space. Banfield's book mobilises an impressive array of examples to show how the strange, contradictory grammar of narration, the way an objective record of the past is combined with a subjective feeling for the present moment as it unfolds, permits a form of expressive thinking which is significantly different to personal or direct communication. A novel is realist, then, not because it happens to correspond with the social world as it is, but because it supports a grammar which is 'expressive' without being reducible to communicative intent, and which therefore remains impersonally removed from the direct address of what Banfield calls 'discourse'.[5] The grammar that ensures the unspeakable sentence can be represented is the basis of narrative authority.

Banfield's argument is linguistic and ontological, rather than explicitly social or political, yet it carries the important implication that even when the objects of narrative fiction appear problematically generic (predictable social situations and character types, facile plot resolutions), realism is not invalidated. This view accords with Grace Lavery's recent suggestion, drawing productively from George Eliot, that realism might be assessed less 'on the basis of [its] depiction of objects' and understood instead for its 'subjective phenomena', the way that it models for the reader the dynamics of thinking and feeling between and against the coded objects of historical worlds.[6]

Lavery implicates Freud's version of realism here, which also depends on the authority of fiction. The key distinction across Freud's work is not that between subjective fantasy on the one hand and perception of the objective world on the other (remembering that sense perception is always subject to memory, projection, and unconscious conflict). The key difference, rather, is between forms of fantasy which refuse to let cherished objects go and thoughts or judgments which depend upon the ability to represent objects in their absence. This is stated most succinctly in his 1925 paper 'Negation' [*Die Verneinung*] where Freud notes how the realities his patients find it impossible to affirm are nonetheless expressed using the form of a negation. Negation preserves what it cancels (in accordance with Hegel's notion of *Aufhebung*), and in this way functions as the gateway to reality-testing:

> The antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist from the first. It only comes into being from the fact that thinking possesses the capacity to bring before the mind once more something that has once been perceived, by reproducing it as a presentation without the external object having still to be there. The first and immediate aim, therefore, of reality-testing is not to *find* an object in real perception which corresponds to the one presented, but to *refind* such an object, to convince oneself that it is still there. … . [I]t is evident that a precondition for the setting up of reality-testing [*Realitätsprüfung*] is that objects shall have been lost which once brought real satisfaction [*reale Befriedigung*].[7]

Here Freud is building on his prior insistence that the presentation of something through negation provides the basis of judgment. Although judgment begins as a merely subjective preference, where the thing negated is expelled from the ego, it develops in more complex and enduring terms as a form of objective 'reality-testing'. Crucially, this more complex function depends on an object being *re*found by the subject: an object must be *re*presentable in order to be realistic. This goes well beyond any neat equivalence between realism and direct perceptual correspondence. If the object is not to be a purely subjective presentation it must survive its expulsion from the ego; once lost it must be *re*findable in a form that convincingly resembles what it was. Developing this point in the direction of the current argument, we might say that thinking and judgement, for Freud, depend upon the impossible structure of a realist fiction since 'reality-testing' is operative only once the historic object persists in its absence from direct perception: the object gains transparency only by its separation from affective or perceptual immediacy. Indeed, what Freud in the quoted passage calls 'real satisfaction' becomes the enemy of realism if it means foreclosing the interval of object loss. It is the interval of separation of the object from the subject that facilitates the fiction of realism.

Adding this structural understanding of realism (as a precondition for thought) to a historical account of how realist fiction gave way to literary

modernism allows us to better appreciate its persistence, even today, as an imperilled technique of subjectivity. In fact, as two recent critical studies suggest, if there was a cultural transition away from the realist novel at the end of the nineteenth century, this was not at the expense of realism itself. Rather realism was sedimented within new forms of writing as a question addressed to the status and value of imaginative literature; realism as a form of writing was transformed into a problem of reading. According to Fredric Jameson, throughout the nineteenth century the realist novel held in unsteady relation two basic temporalities: the time of the story or plot and the time of sensation or affect. When the latter came to the fore, extending its narrative space to the point of stalling story altogether, then what had been a dynamic relation became a fundamental crisis of significance. The new dominants of what we now know as modernism included the registration of uncodified sensations or affects, the accumulation of details that didn't arrive at symbolic meaning, 'the waning of protagonicity', and the privileging of scenes over plots.[8] Importantly, however, modernism did not simply cancel realism, it also preserved it, just as realism had not simply cancelled but also preserved prior cultural dominants, including melodrama and theatricality. So, the modernist emphasis upon the scene can usefully be thought of as a resedimenting of the theatricality which realism had once reputedly surpassed.

Alongside Jameson's emphasis upon the scenic dimension of modernism, we can place Michael Fried's discussion of visuality in literary impressionism. Through close readings of Stephen Crane, Joseph Conrad and H.G. Wells, among others, Fried shows in the proto-modernist literature of this period how acts of perception – visual impressions attributed to characters or to the voices of narration – draw attention to their material precondition as writing. The foundational transparency of realism in which outer detail conveys inner life is repeatedly returned, via a process of what Fried calls 'erasure', to the inscriptive act. Most powerfully this happens through the description of faces, whose expressivity is often seen to belie fundamental imperturbability or deadness. The blank face in Conrad's fiction, for Fried, figures the primal anxiety of the blank page. He situates this kind of anxious impressionism between the transparencies of realist narration and the 'sheerly visual' aspect of modernism which seeks to blast itself from narrative entirely.[9]

Together, then, Jameson and Fried draw our attention to the structural encounter between realist fiction and fantasy, between the impossible transparencies of narration and the interruptive question, posed in scenic terms, of what narrative realism can *really* know – what '*real* satisfaction' can it give us? In both studies we are encouraged to enter the terrain usually designated by the term free indirect discourse, the place where narration's two unspeakable sentences – representing objectivity without point of

view, and the eternal present of subjective consciousness – combine. But instead of offering us a political critique of such impossible transparency (as, D.A. Miller did in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), for example) our attention is drawn to undeclared metalepses where objects of narration, specifically fictional characters, intermit as *real* subjects, so that they exist momentarily on the same plane as the reader or writer for whom narration is, among other things, a matter of discourse and a problem of technique. This manoeuvre whereby a character in a fiction becomes the reader of that fiction recalls us to the Bildungsroman which, as Lukács argued, provides the template for the modern novel.[10] The formally endorsed metalepsis of the Bildungsroman ending of our hero reading or writing the story he is in, stabilizes realist narration along the axis of maturity and/or normative adaptation to the *real* world. The interpellative devices of modernism testify otherwise, however, and often beyond the assumed masculinities of Jameson's and Fried's examples. Involuntary stumbles, strange voices, slips and shouts in the street, troubling clicks: these are all familiar scenes of modernist subjectivation through which a novelistic character is suddenly transformed into a self-conscious reader. Indeed characteristically modernist modes of reading, including paranoiac hypervigilance and traumatic retroactivation, are premised on losing the historic object and failing convincingly to *re*find it. In the place of our Bildungsroman hero reading a finished fiction, the modernist reader reads in anticipation of knowing better than the narrations they are in.[11]

The sedimentation of realism within modernist and contemporary novelistic scenes constitutes the major topic of this essay. I argue that when the techniques of realist fiction are challenged to the point of their apparent discreditation, there is a renewed focus on the theatrical and 'discursive' procedures of fantasy. This claim might seem counterintuitive: that fantasies of 'real satisfaction' would disrupt fiction. Yet, thinking alongside psychoanalytic texts, I propose that the anxieties which propelled modernism and those which attach to new electronic media both point towards, albeit in quite different ways, the same disruptive fantasy of reading. In fact, ideas of disruptive reading have long been central to our understanding of modernism: the interplay between difficulty and mass consumption, the avant garde and the common reader, is organised around changing frames for literacy and the facilitations of new reading technologies, both material and institutional. In a similar fashion, today's internet discourse cannot help but reframe the reading habits that determine the literary field, at the same time as it risks trivialising literary fiction within the aspirations of a universal digital literacy focussed on processing factual information. N. Katherine Hayles begins her foundational work on electronic literature with an updated fantasy of the scriptorium, for instance, while works on the state of contemporary criticism have expressed some dismay at a professionalised class of

readers whose eschewal of critical judgment (of realism), in favour of personal and political advocacy, coincides with newly algorithmic determinations of literary taste.[12]

Accordingly, I will analyse the public reading habits of three fictional characters. The first character is the canonically modernist Mr Duffy who reads a newspaper in Joyce's 'A Painful Case'; the second is middle-sister 'reading-while-walking' in Anna Burns's *Milkman*, a late-modernist novel published in 2018 but set in the late 1970s before the internet age; and the third is Patricia Lockwood's protagonist reading the internet in the novel *No One is Talking About This*.[13] All three texts deal with distraction, sexual fantasy, the difficulty of reverie and the disordering of narrative knowledge through the occlusions of a subject who reads.[14] And yet, while *Milkman* recites and reinterprets the dimensions of Joycean fantasy, Lockwood's novel, though everywhere about reading, struggles to land on a formative scene. As we shall see, this difference is significant because it suggests that the scenic interpellations which once defined modernism – the strange sounds, involuntary stumbles and vocal slips that transformed the unfolding present into discontinuous recollections of the past and intimations of the future – are at the very least re-temporalised, if not entirely done way with, in Lockwood's digital dispensation. The digital click, we might say, immediately covers over the modernist slip. And this has consequences for our positioning of realism. Although the trajectory my examples propose is partial, establishing a view of modernism and its aftermath along a single European–White American axis (clearly there will be other geo-temporal axes for considering the interactions of modernist literature and digital culture), I suggest that the question it raises, of subjectivity and its relation to the reconfigured problem of realist fiction, remains of general concern.

## The strange impersonal voice: Joyce's 'A Painful Case'

In 'A Painful Case', Mr James Duffy strikes the persistently contemporary pose of mediated isolation when he consumes the news while consuming his dinner:

> One evening as he was about to put a morsel of corned beef and cabbage into his mouth his hand stopped. His eyes fixed themselves on a paragraph in the evening paper which he had propped against the water-carafe. He replaced the morsel of food on his plate and read the paragraph attentively. Then he drank a glass of water, pushed his plate to one side, doubled the paper down before him between his elbows and read the paragraph over and over again. The cabbage began to deposit a cold white grease on his plate. The girl came over to him to ask was his dinner not properly cooked. He said it was very good and ate a few mouthfuls of it with difficulty. Then he paid his bill and went out.

Leaving aside Joyce's relation to the new media of his time, what interests me here is the fact of Duffy's reading within the visual field of the narrative, a public-private activity which itself recalls a literary history of representing reading. St. Augustine's record of Bishop Ambrose (who 'did not close his door to anyone') has become the inaugurating example in the western clerical tradition of such fascination with the submerged sign.[15] But it is the act of reading in Jane Austen's novels, filtered for Joyce via the infamy of Emma Bovary, which remains key to our understanding of the modern reader as a figure of reflexivity, moving between and potentially confounding private and public worlds. As is well known, Austen's novels repeatedly consider the value of novels as such, a value indexed to the value of their women readers. If even the best fiction pales in comparison to the sermons of Fordyce (see the recommendation of Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*[16]), then the novel's place as a minor pedagogic tool is at once reassuringly gendered (being suitable for women between childhood and matrimony) and dangerously unstable, given that sensibility can detach itself from good sense and the private cultivation of sympathies can easily slide towards shameful sentimentality and autoeroticism. As John Mullen has pointed out, the unstable discourse of sensibility bore a family resemblance to that of hysteria.[17] To read a novel in public – in Austen's world, to read one aloud in a drawing room – would be dangerously akin to a publicly declared self-fascination.

Though nothing seems particularly shameful about Duffy's act of reading the newspaper while eating his dinner – he is a man and there is no suggestion of erotic pleasure in his reading material – the shame of a public performance of a private act continues to structure the scene. And it is, I claim, a *scene*. We know (or think we know) he has read something significant because of his external actions: he stopped eating. But we don't know at this point what it is he has read. Which is to say, the narrative seems to have drawn a line between his private life and our public knowledge. Of course, we soon learn via the apparently verbatim newspaper report that he was reading about the death of Emily Sinico, the married woman he'd had a passionate friendship with before abruptly ending it. So, one way to read this passage is to say that Joyce postpones giving us full disclosure in order to increase the dramatic impact of a late reveal – it is a minor suspense. However, we can enfold within this minor suspense the major question of realism. After all, the short sentences describing Duffy's scrupulously mean routines are themselves scrupulously mean, without florid association or symbolic embellishment. Indeed, they are so conspicuously conventional we might wonder if the language describing Duffy's actions, whose objectivity forbids us from entering Duffy's point of view, in fact, paradoxically, belongs to Duffy. If we imagined we were far removed from interiority in the service of mere description, the two adverbs – he read 'attentively' and ate with 'difficulty'

– close that gap again. Who is to say who is reading 'attentively' or eating with 'difficulty'? Likewise, the cabbage depositing 'cold, white grease' upon Duffy's plate is at once a precise detail and the registration of something perverse: does the cabbage have agency (it does the depositing)? Is its presence in the visual field persecutory (the grease practices a slow, provocative oozing)? So, while it seems that we are *objectively* outside Duffy's mind at the moment he learns of Emily's death, it is equally plausible that we are *subjectively* outside his mind, that this is indeed a psychological scene, though a scene that takes the form of not making a scene.

This accords with what we've been told about Duffy (by Duffy?), namely that '[h]e had an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense'. That the painful case is his, just as much as it is Emily's, is evidenced by the newspaper report whose testimonial record attributes no blame for her death and at the same time perpetrates a face-saving lie, the fabric of which implicates Duffy's shame. Emily's was 'a death of shame' according to Duffy at a late point in the story when his psychological state is more easily legible. But even in the George's Street diner it is discernible in his servility: how he stops eating on reading the news, but then, when the girl asks him if his food is not properly cooked, starts eating again. It is melodrama's revenge against realism that it would take the form of realism, meaning that Duffy is so exaggeratedly shame prone, so careful about how he seems to others, so committed therefore to his orderly routine, that even at the moment of his greatest emotional turmoil he is paralysed by social vanity. It is possible (the signs are there) that we are inside his mind looking at his reaction while he is reading the paper.

The public performance of a private act of reading always raises questions of knowingness. It is not only whether we, as readers, know what James Duffy, as a reader, knows, but also whether we can ever know what he can allow himself to know. Our reading practice is implicated with his: Duffy, we are told, reads Wordsworth, Hauptmann, Nietzsche, in addition to his Maynooth catechism. The problem which arises here concerns whether objective narrative description in fact doubles as a form of readerly disavowal – a refusal to not know creating a point of view that cannot bear to be only a point of view. As already hinted at through our mention of Austen and Emma Bovary, this disavowal though objective description can be historically and structurally linked to the question of 'woman' as object in the visual field, or the way the visual field intersecting with narrative creates sexual difference. As Jacqueline Rose has argued, the question of sexual difference is not a late addition to seeing and categorising the world, but part of a formative structure whereby the object stands in for a disavowed disturbance in the visual field. The objectified woman is what man is not, but also what he is forbidden: jouissance, knowledge, etc.[18] For Rose, the

predicament for real women living within this order of vision cannot be resolved by reference to pre-symbolic experience. Because men and women, as creatures of the visual field, are both *in* language, the only true politics is a politics that takes this language for its object—just as novels take the uncertain merit of novel reading as theirs.

It is striking in this light that in 'A Painful Case' Duffy's face is described in similar detail and style to Emily's, with a focus on the eyes, confirming both the physiognomic conventions of nineteenth-century realism – how visuality and narrative intersect (see the comments on Fried above) – and confusing its realist procedures with the scandal of narcissism: his eyes, which had 'no harshness' and were full of the 'redeeming instinct', mirror her 'dark blue and steady' eyes, which conveyed a 'temperament of great sensibility'. Remembering that these third-person descriptions may only be Duffy's impressions, we can also note the question of citizenship which seems to be at stake. Bodies are matched to places: '[h]is face, which carried the entire tale of his years was of the brown tint of the Dublin streets'. Already introduced as 'a citizen of Dublin', Duffy's complexion is now *Dublinesque*. Yet, importantly, Duffy also chooses to live on the city's outer edge, in Chapelizod. So while he does nothing unexpected for a man in public space, indeed by reading the newspaper he visibly synchronises himself with his 'imagined community', the story marks an almost imperceptible difference, conveying through his very predictability the secret logic of his passing. Duffy is concerned to *pass* as a citizen, and to this end he becomes a kind of Svengali of realism. The anthropologist Harold Garfinkel has used the language of 'anticipatory following' when trying to describe the psychology of passing in the landmark case of Agnes, a transgender person who liked to describe herself (according to Garfinkel) as '120% woman'. Garfinkel describes how Agnes arranged social scenes mentally in advance and constructed them by anticipatory means. Yet, having been raised a boy, excluded from the rituals of an accepted femininity, she was also constantly following the cues of others in order not to make a scene. 'Agnes', writes Garfinkel, made a 'speciality' of 'socially recognised, socially managed sexuality as a managed production so as to be making these facts of life true, relevant, demonstrable, testable, countable, and available to inventory, cursory representation, anecdote, enumeration, or professional psychological assessment'.[19] Duffy, of course, is only a fictional man; yet the way he emerges centrally, factually, within the scenic imaginary of 'A Painful Case' conveys a sense of anticipatory control coupled with a relentlessly passive watchfulness in case there is ever a requirement to react.

This is to say that there is a disturbance in the visual field when it comes to James Duffy, which the story returns us to in ways that may trouble the securing disavowal which allows any man to go about his business being a man in the objective world. Though Duffy has long been suspected by

critics of living in bad faith, or of refusing social bonds, or of repressing his true sexuality, it is his curated reading of the newspaper which draws our attention to this formal disturbance as a question of language and realist representation rather than merely of his character.[20] 'Love between a man and man is impossible because there must not be sexual intercourse and friendship between man and woman is impossible because there must be sexual intercourse'. This infamous sentence, written by Duffy in his private papers two months after his breakup with Emily and nearly four years before he reads of her death, cleaves together impossibility and sex in accordance with the imperative of sexual difference. Interestingly, it also makes Duffy, in Freud's sense, a realist. He is opening the way to a narrative articulation through negation. Yet the fact that he is both a character and a reader within a narrative, making conspicuous the conditions for narration, stages an impasse between objective and subjective worlds which implicates the status of realism itself. Can Duffy's articulation connect with realism at the level of the story, or does it ironically obscure the story's realism by posing it as a discursive problem within the story, at once pulling it back down to the level of point of view and pushing it outside the narrative frame altogether? Is it offered, in other words, as a parody of realism? This agitated hierarchy, between fictional narration and discourse, is one way that realism is cancelled and preserved by modernism in the form of a fantasy scene, which is also the scene of reading.

## The Troubles With Free Indirect Discourse: Anna Burns's *Milkman*

Anna Kornbluh has noted, hilariously, that critics don't simply disagree about what 'free indirect discourse' does but are divided on what it is.[21] Minimally, we might say, it is something to do with voice, and Kornbluh herself hazards that critical dissensus revolves around the counting of voices. For those inclined to celebrate, for its empathogenic qualities and aid to characterisation, its capacity to shift from third- to first-person perspective, there are two voices. For the ideology critic, suspicious of its disciplinary function, the same shift produces three voices: between narrative and first person, there is also a voice of doxa, or of the normalisation of the subject.[22] Counting voices in this manner is a bit like counting who is present when two people meet to have sex (at least four, says Freud).[23] Kornbluh's own approach seems more amenable to the case of Duffy above (as well as to the case I'm about to discuss): it does not invite us to count voices but rather to recognise the place of the subject as a 'precipitate' of multiple voices – voices which recede from direct or public speech, which become 'unspeakable' sentences and 'marshals of silence', revealing mentation to be fundamentally linguistic.[24] The 'freedom' in free indirect discourse,

which Kornbluh associates with the technique of free association in a psychoanalytic setting, is the structured freedom of language itself that moves the subject outside the confines of the proprietary ego, enabling thought and feeling beyond what one already knows (or knows that one knows).

Returning for a moment to Duffy, we might easily say that for him narrative impersonality is an egoic defence. But the question of freedom in 'A Painful Case' does not therefore have to resolve upon the content of a repressed sexuality, as if his authentic first-person voice were waiting to get out from behind the falsity of third-person narration. Instead, the freedom glimpsed in Joyce's story (often under-appreciated in those readings which see Duffy only as a figure to be contemptuous of) is the freedom of linguistic estrangement. At the key moment in which Duffy parted ways with Emily Sinico 'he heard the strange impersonal voice which he recognised as his own insisting on the soul's incurable loneliness'. It is not the conventionally melancholic and romantic content of this insistence which is strange. Nor is it the impersonality itself because Duffy's autobiographic third person is routine. What is strange, and therefore significant, is the punctuation of the utterance: being called from outside himself by himself at this precise moment. In fact, he is being called from beyond the conventions of an adultery plot by the order of fantasy; it is a moment of dangerous and exciting precarity in which the impossible coherence of his fictional character might unravel.

In order to perceive how the subject is bound to scenes and layered by voices – which is to say, *produced* – then something in a fictional character has to slip. Neither 'A Painful Case', nor my next example, *Milkman*, offers a clear and obvious example of free indirect discourse: the first reads most obviously as objective third person; the latter as traumatised first-person narrative. Yet just as I have identified a subjective objectivity in Joyce's story so I hope to show an objective subjectivity at work in Burns's novel.

*Milkman* is a cinematic novel.[25] In my view this statement is a piece with recognising its citational modernism, in its debt to Beckett above all, and a Beckett who can be read contrapuntally with Joyce.[26] It is also a Belfast novel (set in the 1970s), though Burns, like Beckett, unlike Joyce, refrains from abiding by proper names. Instead, we have euphemistic substitution: the Troubles, already a euphemism for the war in the north of Ireland, are called 'the sorrows'; the IRA is called 'Our state denouncers', while excessively familiar phrases to anyone who grew up in Ireland, such as 'over the water' and 'over the border' are repeated for their function as structuring negatives which allow the fantasy scene of 'this time, this place' to emerge (25).

The novel's characters, too, are designated locatively and existentially, rather than according to proper names, with the exception of the eponymous 'Milkman' whose real name, it turns out, is 'milkman': the protagonist is

called 'middle sister'; she's in a relationship with 'maybe boyfriend'; middle sister goes running with 'third brother-in-law' and so on. Though ostensibly a first-person narrative, saying 'I' in this novel is always an invocation of mobility; subjectivity is a 'precipitate' of social relations. This aspect is further emphasised by the novel's action which largely involves middle sister traversing the city space, feeling watched and menaced (particularly by the predatory milkman) while she does so. One zone of city space is called 'the ten-minute area':

> This ten-minute area wasn't officially called the ten-minute area. It was that it took ten minutes to walk through it. This would be hurrying, no dawdling though, no one in their right mind would think of dawdling here […] There were four shops in the circle but these were not classed as real shops despite their 'Open' signs, their unlocked doors, their clean fronts and the impression that life – not visible perhaps at that moment – was nevertheless going on behind them. Nobody was seen to go into these shops and no one was seen to come out of them; it was unclear even what kind of shops they were. There was a bus stop too, outside one of the shops, the only bus-stop in the ten-minute area. It too, never had anybody; nobody waited to board from there and nobody ever alighted. (80–1)

The 'ten-minute area' dynamises – we might say cinematises – space by conveying is as time; it is a zone of affective intensity that must be traversed, whose infrastructure is notionally convivial and public but which remains strangely under-peopled. We can also note the absence of 'I' in this passage. Middle sister is not so much telling her story here as describing multiple figures (including herself) moving in precarious relation to a ground which she registers throughout the novel with the back of her head or her neck. As she moves through the city she is afflicted with what she calls 'numbance', or anti-orgasms. Hers is a counter surveillance physiology which recalls and re-genders the 'foundered precipitancy' of the walker in Beckett's *Film* (1965) who each time he perceives the cinematic apparatus of the gaze, when 'the angle of immunity is breached', cowers and trembles in shame.[27] Another instructive antecedent is Beckett's *Watt* (1953), a novel which begins at a bus stop in observation of the protagonist's 'funambulistic stagger'.[28] *Watt* shifts unpredictably between third and first person, and when in third person is closely focalised through specific characters or voices. It is a novel of obsessive listing and the setting out of permutations in the service, it seems, of cancelling them all, reducing narrative possibility to zero. This device is also prominent in *Milkman*: middle sister's monologue includes extensive setting out of permutations and a compiling of lists. For example, though it's a novel of no names (or only one name), it also provides an exhaustive list of names, any of which would betray a political identity ('Nigel, Jason, Jasper, Lance … ' (23)). Here language is spoken or written out and in the same gesture cancelled, each name a permutation

conspicuously subtracted from the novel's narrative. As a ludicrous gesture of control – of saying everything as a way of saying nothing – we are also invited to diagnose this as a paranoid style, which accords with the novel's intermittent tendency to reduce the possibility of realist perception to the persecuted perspective of being subject to the gaze of milkman.

Understandably, much of the early critical literature on the book foregrounds this harassed first-person perspective. The novel was received as a comment on the #Metoo and 'Reclaim the Streets' movements (asserting women's right to public space), as much as on the history of violence in Ireland.[29] Rightly, these concerns with gender and history are deemed inextricable: Caroline Magennis, for example, argues there is an important reparative function in having the experiences of women from the North of Ireland represented, reclaiming precious moments and pleasures elided by a dominant strand of political critique.[30] And yet, to rehearse a qualification from Jacqueline Rose, positing archaic or minor experience or affectivity in general as a way out of symbolic mediations—applying a gender politics from outside the shifting fantasies which structure gender—risks evading the problem of representation.[31] For instance, to try to separate, as some critics have done, the question of *real* female experience from the citation of mainly male-authored *fiction* (Joyce and Beckett) misses the fact that it is the citational exercise of reading and writing which produces the subject – the shifting signifier 'I' – who lays claim to experience. Psychoanalytically speaking, real experience is distributed across fantasy scenes, and laying claim to it is complicated. This is not only because of traumatic repression, but also because of the structural and linguistic extrapolations from trauma and the part pleasure might play in its retroaction. The subject in language is never identical to the feelings it is afflicted by (which is why valorising affect and valorising subjective autonomy are contradictory endeavours) and its experiences are always in part missing or outsourced to another.

The early pages of *Milkman* make explicit the politics of the male gaze and the vulnerability of women in public space. Yet more than redeeming middle sister's experience from the hostile social scene, the novel interrogates the fantasies that determine the scene and the interacting subjectivities, including middle sister's, which are produced by it. In other words, it proceeds immanently, and its method is necessarily citational, reflexively underwritten by the gendered history of novel reading and the historical question of its compatibility with public life. This is why it is significant that *Milkman*'s formative scene concerns middle sister's 'beyond the pale' activity of 'reading-while-walking':

> He [milkman] appeared one day, driving up in one of his cars as I was walking along reading *Ivanhoe*. Often I would walk along reading books. I didn't see anything wrong with this but it became something else to be added as further proof against me: 'Reading-while-walking' was definitely on the list'. (3)

Duffy's third-person account of reading the newspaper was a way of covering over his not knowing about Emily's death. Contrastingly, middle sister is someone who clearly already knows (she knows that she is vulnerable to milkman harassing her), but whose knowledge is covered over by a community that pretends not to know. The community denies it is happening in the first place, and then adds to this denial a partial explanation for why it might in fact happen. This is a version of Freud's kettle logic whereby contradictory thoughts – I didn't borrow your kettle; and anyway it was broken when you give it to me[32] – exist side by side: *women are never harassed here, but you, a woman, were asking to be harassed by daring to read in public*. Reading in public, by adding a justification to the reality that has been denied, demonstrates the operation of fantasy within that reality. And the scene becomes relationally complex as a result, because what appears to be a first-person retreat from a painful social world into private reverie is also a socially advertised form of hiddenness. A Bishop Ambrose of the street, middle sister becomes even more conspicuous at the point of her attempted retreat from the visual field. Doubtless this is because the novel being read carries the scandal of private pleasure into the public domain, but it is also because it marks a vanishing point: a possible exit out of the surveillance structures of the community. The desire to disappear through reading conforms with Burns's concern in *Milkman* and elsewhere in her work with the link between reading and embodiment, with orality in particular, and the relational and intertextual logic of personal consumption.[33]

Here the named intertext is *Ivanhoe*, a novel which begins 'In that pleasant district of merry England … ', which 'Northern Ireland' very definitely is not.[34] Yet beyond the contradiction between places and times, mention of Scott's work permits the speculation that Burns too is writing a historical novel, focussing on ordinary people who represent in conflictual terms the 'declining and ascending forms of social life'.[35] It is less, then, that Scott's melodrama offers personal refuge from the historical reality of the Troubles, more that it reveals that reality's fantastical structure. It is further significant in this light that middle sister is reading a novel which relies upon omniscient third-person narration. In this way, the act of reading-while-walking in the visual field of another might be read as a telling inversion of free indirect discourse: instead of the third person moving in behind the first (as milkman continually threatens to do to middle sister), here the first person is witnessed entering the language of omniscience, while relying on the third person to navigate the city without looking at it.

The complexity of this scene of middle sister 'reading-while-walking' is consequential to our understanding of the whole novel, since its reflexivity marks the place where her character and personal voice – her 'protagonicity' – meets the question of narrative ground. It is not, or not only, that she is brilliantly sardonic, wily, analytical, by turns hysterical and paranoid – a

*survivor*; it is also that she is a figure in the ground that the novel impersonally maps, which means that her fate is not narrowly nor exclusively attached to that of milkman as the victim of his predatory gaze. Indeed, milkman appears in the visual field too, and of course is shot by 'Somebody McSomebody', the most impersonal non-name possible, reminiscent of Odysseus' foundational (literary-canonical) claim to anonymity, 'No-one'. In this light, we can consider another potential vanishing point, where the character of middle sister and the story of her harassment by milkman passes by its very ground and the condition for its possibility as literature:

> An audible 'click' sounded and the milkman and I ran by a bush and this was a bush I'd run by lots of times without clicks coming out of it. I knew it had happened this time because of the milkman and his involvement and by 'involvement' I mean connected and by connected I mean active rebellion and by active rebellion I mean state's enemy renouncer owing to the political problems that existed in the place. (7)

The political context is quickly characterised as a problem of entanglement (too much involvement, over-connection), while the click is clearly identifiable as that of the British state's surveillance infrastructure: 'now I was to be on a file somewhere'. A situational complexity is established, namely that, with respect to the British state, middle sister is on the same side as the man who is running after her, offering his sinister guardianship against any other prying eyes. But this over-complicated state of affairs is revealed also as a scene of fantasy: 'milkman himself made no reference to the click even though it was impossible he had not heard it. I dealt with it by picking up my pace to get this run over with, also by pretending I had not heard the click myself'. Both milkman and middle sister know what the click means yet cover it over with a pretence at not knowing. The scene then distributes this knowingness in terms of sexual difference – what middle sister calls 'male and female territory' – and, as they continue to run, our protagonist realises with a shock that her pursuer 'knows' more about her routines than she does.

The avowed/disavowed click is also uncannily reminiscent of the click in Freud's 1915 paper: 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psychoanalytic Theory of the Disease'. Freud's case is a legal consultancy on the matter of workplace harassment, a woman's complaint against her boss with whom she has had sexual relations. After consenting to go to his bachelor rooms in the daytime she was disturbed 'by a noise, a kind of knock or click', a click she then associated with two men she'd met, whispering on the staircase, one of whom was carrying a covered box.[36] The click, she concluded, must have been a camera with which her boss had photographed their liaison. Freud is not initially inclined to think of the case in terms of paranoia because the woman was of 'distinctly feminine type' and was

having an affair with a man. Freud had already hypothesised in his analysis of the Judge Schreber 'the part played … by the homosexual components of emotional life in paranoia: especially among males'.[37] The woman (without a name) might rather have been hysterical, presenting herself as an object of fascination, first for her boss, then for the Lawyer, now for Freud. But the consistency of her unevidenced conviction that she was being photographed suggested a paranoiac's claim to know rather than a hysterical demand to be known.[38] On this basis, Freud persists with his investigations and proposes, via a displacement to a white-haired elderly lady at work with whom the woman had seen (but not heard) her boss converse, that she retains a strong libidinal attachment to her mother: her boss had become, somewhat unusually, a 'mother substitute'.[39]

Freud then secures his theory of the homosexual origins of the paranoiac disposition by adding two further notes on the clicking sound. First, that the sound was by no means a contingent fact in the room the lovers had occupied. Rather it was 'something that was bound to assert itself compulsively in the patient' – a recollection of the primal scene of a child overhearing parental intercourse. Following Otto Rank, he writes: 'such noises are … an indispensable part of the phantasy of listening, and they reproduce either the sounds which betray parental intercourse or those by which the listening child fears to betray itself'. In other words, the sound expresses the avidity of an inquisitive child projecting towards the space of more knowing adults, as well as the child's fear of being caught in the midst of this projection. The subject is hiding in her own primal fantasy, and her bodily drive is punctuated through the same displacement – as Freud's second, more outrageous speculation makes plain. He writes that the clicking sound was perhaps 'an isolated contraction of the [woman's] clitoris' projected out into the world.[40]

That the clicking sound middle sister hears (and milkman seems not to hear) is her own foreclosed homosexuality, her own body projected into the persecutory horizons of Belfast, is at once absurd, given the political infrastructure which gives the scene contextual meaning (the click is the British State), and a delightfully comic re-citation of Freud's point about libidinal displacement. When milkman retreats, and middle sister continues on her way, distracted, she slips, Joyce-like, on the glossy pages of a pornographic magazine: the image of 'a woman with long dark, unruly hair … smiling out at me, leaning back and opening up for me … I skidded and lost balance, catching full view of her monosyllable as I fell down on the path' (10).

The obligatory question remains: if they are *really* out to get you, can you still be paranoid? The psychoanalytic answer is yes. Although middle sister's restricted and embattled access to the public space of the city is a social fact, it remains a fact upheld by the fantasy of the subjects produced by this space. In a brilliant reading of Freud's paper, Jennifer Doyle returns us to Freud's

relative failure to think socially. After all, it is possible to allow that the woman is paranoid and at the same time to understand the reality of her complaint against her boss. A woman bearing the burden of moving between private and public space, between waged and unwaged labour, where the latter includes the labour of being sexed and sexualised (objectified in the visual field as such), necessarily suffers under the unresolved social contradiction between sex and work. Though Freud is right to identify sexuality at the root of her suffering, he is wrong, suggests Doyle, to separate this aetiology from a patrician work culture that pretends to separate sex from work while sexualising the woman worker to the extent that sex becomes an expected part of her labour.[41] The woman may be delusional in fact, yet, through an order of fantasy, speak an unpalatable truth.

We are close here to Eve Sedgwick's (after Guy Hocquenghem's) now standard corrective to Freud on paranoia: 'Paranoia is a uniquely privileged site for illuminating not homosexuality itself, as in the Freudian tradition, but rather precisely the mechanisms of homophobic and heterosexist enforcement against it'.[42] Except, just as formally identifying a trauma does not absolve the subject from the conflicts of its retroaction in fantasy, so attributing paranoia to real social causes does not excise the psychic conflict from the scene as it is subjectivised. The complexity of such subjectivation allows us to venture a further thought on the imbrications of realism and modernism. Adapting Freud's terms from 'Negation', we can say that the interval of object loss which permits 'reality testing', and which secures a subject's ability to forego 'real satisfaction' in favour of thought and judgment, is consistently disturbed by the overdetermination of scenes such as those we have discussed. By stretching and contorting the narrative grammar of realism, the modernist scene agitates readerly apprehension, provoking the desire for distracted or intermittent attachments whose affective processes enact a refusal to allow narration its authority. This is why scenes of public reading, including in *Milkman*, mark vanishing points where we can see a fictional protagonist disappearing beyond the horizon of their delineated experience and re-emerging as an insistent question of subjectivity.

## Clickbait literature: Patricia Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This*

So what is different in the internet age? First of all, it is no longer 'beyond the pale' to read in public. The social prop of declaring outwardly one's inwardness on a device is now very much in fashion, except today the discrepant tempo implicit in all images of medieval scriptoria, the slow inside against the quicker speed of the passing world (which remains a subversive aspect of middle sister's 'reading-while-walking'), is mitigated by the very relentlessness of watching each other 'read' the internet. It is now hopelessly

ordinary, helplessly contemporary, to read (to have read; to be going to read) in public.

Jodie Dean has described the participatory medium of the internet in terms which suggest a crisis of sensibility; it is a form of 'communicative capitalism' which 'captures critique and resistance, formatting them as contributions to the circuits in which it thrives'. She continues:

> [t]he temporal take-over of theory displaces sustained critical thought, replacing it with a sense that there isn't time for thinking, that there are only emergencies to which one must react, that one can't keep up and might as well not try.[43]

To characterise the internet as a participatory forum which destroys realism and produces passivity is to place it in the continuum of popular culture as conceived by critical theory at least since the time of modernism. But Dean wants to claim something more contemporary than this. As well as showing that the avant garde devices such as montage are more compatible with right wing disinformation strategies than critical thinking, she pursues Žižek's argument that a decline in symbolic efficiency (for which we could read the decline of realist fiction as cultural dominant) pushes the subject from the logic of desire to that of the drive; from the logic of lack and frustration that accepts it will never be fulfilled ('real satisfaction' will ever be at one remove), to a logic which insists in its repetitions and which 'finds satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object' (Žižek).[44] The terminal subject, writes Dean, 'gets stuck doing the same thing over and over again because this doing produces enjoyment. Post. Post. Post. Click. Click. Click'.[45]

In one sense this is a media theory commonplace. Yet the important point for Dean is that the blog, as a template for all online activities, including tweets, book-toks, thinkpieces, below-the-line comments and so on, has become a technical means of laundering readerly critique, sucking critical distance away and replacing the fictive and provisional structure of thinking and judgment with the agitated fantasy of the thing itself. Accordingly, the near-ubiquitous scene of someone somewhere reading their phone, tablet, or laptop in the convenient present is supplemented by the endless online publicity of *already* having read a piece or communicating the urgency of what they are *going to* read. This tense shift chimes with what Shoshana Zuboff calls 'behavioural surplus' in which the behaviourist logic that imbues our digital technology drives the attempt to code all our past reading into future behaviour: our digital reading activities are endlessly republicised in the form of data.[46] As Zuboff describes the fantasy of predictive certainty, each readerly click is a duplication of experience in the form of information; it is not so much that we disappear into a book than we are reduplicated at each point of digital access, creating selves for the fathomless

markets of the future. Such reading is relentlessly public and relentlessly laboursome insofar as everything we read is extractable value for Bots and processors.

Lockwood's *No One is Talking About This* (*NITAT*) is an internet novel. Which is to say, it is a novel about fantasies of reading in the twenty-first century. In this sense, it is also a novel aware of its own potential obsolescence. As Hayles has pointed out, practically all contemporary novels, whatever their commodified form, begin life as a digital file.[47] My suggestion in this final section is that whereas literary modernism involved the suspension of realist plot and simultaneous exhibition of narrative grammar in its most contorted forms, Lockwood's approach, similar to much internet autofiction, offers us a kind of inversion: it does not suspend realism into the eternal present of modernist scenes, so much as attempt to recover the devices of realist fiction – its grammar, plot and character – from the eternal present of internet culture. If the modernist question was, how does the subject of fantasy interact with the impossible knowingness of realist narration? Then the question raised by the internet is, how can realism still matter when the subject has access to a medium and archive that promises real, as opposed to fictional, knowledge? As the foundational impossibility of realism is increasingly offered as a *real* possibility online so the scenic quandaries of modernism are multiplied as static images of crisis. Voided of desire, and iterated as communicative discourse, these ubiquitous images articulate 'the need to be everywhere' and continually collapse the distance implied by narration in the service of what Dean calls the satisfactions of the drive. Lockwood's novel explores this predicament of *real* satisfaction in two parts: the first part is a report from a subject beset by the problems of online access, struggling to remove herself from the obligatory voice of knowingness. The second part begins to restore narration, to place objective knowledge at a useful remove, through the story of the protagonist's sister's terminally ill child. Significantly, the reality which saves the protagonist from the virtual world is also a re-induction into the logic of literary fiction.

*NITAT* begins in the spirit of diagnosing the internet as a narrative disorder, in part by aping it, using fragments and ellipses to produce a thematic and dramatic miscellany without any obvious temporal logic or arresting scene of reading. Every next thing ('this metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*' (21)) is a cross-reference which harasses the distancing and ordering function of the preterit tense. This is a common trope in contemporary internet-adjacent prose, cleverly satirised by Lauren Oyler when midway through her comic internet novel *Fake Accounts* she breaks into fragmentese:

*

> What's amazing about this structure is that you can just dump any material you have in here and leave it up to the reader to connect it to the rest of the work. I was going to cut that dog story, but why should I? It evokes a mood. It relates to my themes.
>
> *[48]

Through the fragment, a sense of readerly dislocation is wedded to a feeling of assured relevance. Can you be irrelevant when everything is connected? Perhaps not. Yet unearned relevance is a menace to the survival of narration because the relentlessly reparative drive of interconnectivity forbids the kind of object loss or negation that facilitates realist representation and enables judgment. Knowingness is a tone for when you are doomed to relevancy. Lockwood's protagonist, famous for 'getting it' to the extent of producing viral tweets which suggest mastery of 'the discourse' as it flits nonsensically between constantly changing contexts, is a case study in such a fate. We encounter her as an ambassador for online knowingness, getting it without stating it, travelling to real-world (modernist) cities as they exist inside the cliché of their representation on the internet to speak about 'the discourse': 'It was a place where she knew what was going to happen, it was a place where she would always choose the right side, where the failure was in history and not herself, where she did not read the wrong writers … ' (16). The internet is 'it', and online opportunism a style of knowing self-banishment where distinguishing between meaningful solidarity and echolalia is impossible because everything is viewed from the perspective of the archive: 'it' will record that you said this. Being on the right side of history is a way to exempt subjectivity from historical responsibility entirely. History simply arrives from the future in the currency of discourse which demands performative reading:

> Ahahaha! She yelled, the new and funnier way to laugh, as she watched [on the portal] footage of bodies flung from a carnival ride at the Ohio State Fair.
>
> …
>
> 'What's so hilarious,' said her husband, resting sideways on his chair with his bladelike shins dangling over one arm, but by then she had scrolled down the rest of the thread and seen that someone was dead, and five others hanging half in and half out of the world. 'Oh God!' she said as she realised. 'Oh Christ, no, oh God!'. (9–10)

If there is a plot in miniature here it is not one that is interrupted by affect (in line with Jameson's view of modernist literature) so much as enveloped by discourse which reproduces it as a record of punctual and abstractedly corrected stimulations. If the singularity of a death de-ironises the banality of

online spectatorship, chastening it with literal suffering, it also perversely justifies that spectatorship: once the death is known and has been referred to, it doesn't need to be thought about or recollected any longer. The novel, like the reader, is 'satisfied' and can move on to the next fragment.

Of course, such iterative scenes of reading comprise Lockwood's critique. The novel is a means of devising a realist distance from the internet her protagonist is subject to. For instance, the episodic delirium of posting, clicking and 'reading' is crucially interrupted by her husband who sporadically returns her from the logic of the drive to the domesticity of a relationship which she struggles not to idealise.

> 'What are you doing?' Her husband asked softly, tentatively, repeating his question until she shifted her blank gaze up to him. What was she doing? Couldn't he see her arms all full of the sapphires of the instant? Didn't he realise that a male feminist had posted a picture of his nipple that day? (13)

It should be clear that neither 'softly' nor 'tentatively' exist as tones in Lockwood's version of online communication: how can you be tentative when what you read and write will be recorded forever? Lockwood presents her protagonist as the hysteric to her husband's Freud, such that the latter's potentially invasive question, 'what are you doing?', might nonetheless restore to her the possibility of a private life. Indeed, the fact that she claims that 'her therapist was more radical than her' (19) betrays this implied fidelity to such an imperilled psychoanalytic scene. Likewise, modernist literature remains an ambivalent point of origin for her reading neurosis. She embarks on several pilgrimages to sites of modernist writing which disinter the lost futures of literary experimentalism, and at the same time convey regret at modernism's institutional and technological enshrinement as a reading practice that insists upon the collapse of realist fiction into the real.

> On the Isle of Skye, she and her husband ate langoustines at a restaurant overlooking a long grey ridge of rock with a lighthouse at the tip of it, and laughed at the herds of tourists who insisted on visiting lighthouses wherever they went. […] But later, taking an afternoon out of the portal to read Virginia Woolf. She realised that that must have been it, the lighthouse the family sails to on the final page. Was that the final page? Or did the book end with herself and her husband, cracking the red backs of little sweet creatures, cut-outs of each other and all the same, and laughing at the people who moved in one wave, the family who went to the Lighthouse? (49–50)

The same but different: she is a participant in the book she rereads, transfigured within the text as a cut-out, yet simultaneously appalled by this fantasy of inclusion to the extent of laughing at touristic acts of identification. It is not only that the *To the Lighthouse* has been hyper-textualised – gamified even – so that the interiors of spectator, reader, and novel are conceived

as open and available to one another (this is the empathogenic fantasy of the post-Gutenberg age); it is also that Lockwood must know, cannot help but know in the age of *Wikipedia*, that she is wrong – that she is in the wrong place. As any scholar of modernism will tell you, Woolf had not yet, at the time of writing her novel, been to Skye: her lighthouse was a transfer from elsewhere, and a fiction. Lockwood, then, is dramatising how the demand to recover the reality of modernism, to be continuous with it, can only fail, given that the demand for the real thing, the material reference, necessarily bypasses the realism that Woolf's writing exhibits and suspends. The real place collapses the fictional distance integral to Woolf's novel, and in this way consolidates the pathological satisfactions of reading online.

Another scene of pilgrimage is to Joyce's Dublin, and more specifically to the 'rigid bust of Joyce' on St Stephen's Green. 'She took a picture with raindrops on the lens, and she put it in the portal. And then, because whimsy still belonged to the person, she leaned forward and made a soft pooting sound in the statue's ear' (48). The performative withholding of speech might be read as an attempt to put the genie of oversharing back in the bottle: an antidote to Joycean stream of consciousness which she decides to blame for the contemporary condition. But it also marks another hypertextual interaction with the institution of modernism; it is another example of its transformation into an interactive game of images and discursive slogans.

> 'Stream-of consciousness' she yelled onstage in Jamaica, where the water was the colour of a nude aqua marine. Though maybe not for long, she thought darkly. Stream of consciousness was long ago conquered by a man who wanted his wife to fart all over him. But what about the stream of consciousness that is not entirely your own? One that you participate in, but that also acts upon you? One audience member yawned, then another. (42)

The audience yawns (they know better). It is not simply that the news is no longer news. Nor is it because the idea that Joyce's terminal realism—the so-called stream of consciousness—helped structure the digital banal is old hat. It's also because the protagonist relies on the private intimacies of Joyce's letters to Nora for her speech. Indeed, it is the reference to the personal and obscene which mark her engagement as quintessentially institutional. A knowledge economy which works by transgressing the boundaries of a fiction in pursuit of the thing itself more often than not lands on the scandals of the author's private life – a private life made public as a way to elaborate on the fantasy of knowing better.

Indeed, in both these examples, Lockwood moves us towards an understanding of how the demand for a reality (biographical, situational, material) to pose against the virtual or unreal world of online images effects a stimulation which is itself virtual and easily folded back within the economy it was driven to stand outside. 'Reality hunger' is akin to the death drive. This is why in the

second part of the novel, Lockwood treats the reality of her niece's life in a way that gestures, through the recovery of plot and character, towards the structures of fiction. Though on the one hand this is a re-territorialising move, a return to the extended family and the figure of the child, on the other it provides a way of holding the 'metastasis of the word *next*, the word *more*' in check:

> The baby was the first and only case that had ever been diagnosed [with Proteus disease] in utero. The excitement in the room was as palpable as an apple, for the tree of knowledge had suddenly produced an orange. 'still' the doctors urged them finally, 'don't go home and look this up.' That was the difference between the old and the new, though. She would rather die than not look something up. She would actually rather die. (137)

The encyclopaedic impulse, the impulse to read and cross-reference, is a pathology to rival the organic pathology which afflicts her niece. The child is dying but her dying of proliferating cells might itself be a part of the proliferating image economy online whose clicks are designed to cover over death with the very next thing. The fact that the condition is infamous – intertextual we may say, as it also afflicted Joseph Merrick, the so-called 'Elephant Man' – makes this temptation all the more striking. 'It spoke of something deep in human beings, how hard she had to pinch herself when she started thinking of it all as a metaphor'. To think of it 'all as metaphor' here is not to translate the unbearably real back into a manageable fiction, but rather to recognise the problem of how we might recognise loss within an imaginary world in which every 'like' possesses an additive dimension, signalling duplication rather than structural absence. In fact, the proliferation of metaphor destroys fiction. Whilst it may sound too classically psychoanalytic to say simply that Lockwood is trying to relearn how to mourn by recalling the techniques of realist fiction, she nonetheless retraces the uncertain but formative line between communicative discourse (reliant on direct address and sharing real knowledge) and narration (an authority based on unspeakable sentences or fictional knowledge). Without exactly returning us to realism, she shows how the desire for realism—coded as her desire to remain with the sick child, and to narrate her attachments as they develop through linear time until she comes to a clarifying grief—remains key to the novelisation of the contemporary.

*NITAT* ends with a final, iterative non-scene of reading. In fact, there are two fragments, both of which refer to the author/protagonist's lecture at the British Museum. The first begins, 'she had been asked to give a lecture at the British Museum'; the second begins, 'she was asked to give a lecture in the British museum' (204–205). We move from the past perfect to the preterit tense; from a sense that we are living with the haywire consequences of a request, still unfolding, to the settled staging of something in the fictional past; from another fragment to the beginning of a script. The speech marks

in the second iteration suggest that it is her lecture we are reading: a lecture written, however, in the third person. Is this a case of discourse entering, and giving way to, fictional narration, or is fiction once more fragmenting into communicative discourse? The undecidability is telling. A lecture, as anyone who works as a teaching academic knows, is an obsolete pedagogic form, recalling an age of vastly different technologies and distributions of literacy. Yet it remains a persistently contemporary theatricalisation of the reading act. In other words, it demonstrates a sedimentation of modes, both narrative and theatrical, and remains subject to the condensations and displacements of fantasy, often framed in terms of authority: *who knows what and with what entitlement?* But still, if any lecture holds, it does so by virtue of the fiction it perpetrates. Just as important as the knowledge conveyed is the fiction of a subject able to convey it, which is to say the image of a reader with a capacity for thought and judgment. Attentive to this precarious example of public reading, Lockwood ends her work by bringing her protagonist's discursive utterance into novelistic narration, while at the same time signalling how narration, and all that the impossible order of realist fiction might enable, cannot be protected by the novel it is in.

Might we conclude, then, that internet culture has somehow reversed the ordinances of modernism by reinstating a demand for narrative authority and realism against the incessant satisfactions of contemporary 'discourse'? Not quite. Rather, what Lockwood's novel explores, and what its relation to 'A Painful Case' and *Milkman* helps us discern, is how the fantasy scenes of modernist reading were already an enduring means of isolating the precarity of realist fiction within new media ecologies that included the newspaper, the camera, and the movie camera. And although it can sometimes seem in our digital age that this theatre of reading has itself become vulnerable, and therefore that the primary means of establishing realism as a cultural problem is now threatened with foreclosure, it is evident that we haven't yet arrived at a terminal point. Instead, contemporary works like Lockwood's suggest that the relation between realism and modernism continues to play an important role in our reading predicament. To say that certain contemporary novels are 'realist' and others 'modernist' misses the central point of this predicament, however, which instead crosses from professional classification to broad cultural practice.[49] Today realism and modernism must be thought about in sedimentary fashion as a joint means of naming the historicity of reading and acknowledging the precarity of narrative fiction as a technique of subjectivity.

## Notes

1. For a classic definition of the 'classic realist text' see Colin MacCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses', *Screen* 15.2 (1974),

pp. 7–27. It is worth pointing out that this is an essay first published in a journal dedicated to cinema, demonstrating a productive crossover from filmic to novelistic representation which Timothy Bewes has continued in his recent work, *Free Indirect: the Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). Bewes makes extensive use of Deleuze's books on cinema to understand the contemporary 'post-fictional' novel. See note 25, below.

2. Georg Lukács, 'The Ideology of Modernism', in Georg Lukács (ed.), *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John Mander and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1962(1958)), pp.17–46.
3. For an account of this trend, see Joe Cleary, 'Realism after Modernism and the Literary World-System', *Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012), pp 255–68.
4. 'Narrative fiction is structured linguistically by the conjunction of two unspeakable sentences, the sentence of narration and the sentence representing consciousness … the sentence appropriate for the recording of real events divorced from all subjectivity and the sentence whose syntax stimulates the movements of the mind and arrests them in its eternal NOW'. Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 257, 261.
5. Banfield's distinction between narration and discourse does not directly map on to Bakhtin's famous discussion of the dialogic in 'Discourse in the Novel'. Yet, by marking the necessary impossibility of neutral representation, narration's 'unspeakable sentences', Banfield helps us think about how the discursive fold of novelisation (the novel's heteroglot language) described by Bakhtin, still has to be reproduced and organised as an image, or as a singular fiction. As well as resonating with the English transnlation of Bakhtin's work, Banfield's terminology strikes a chord with 'the discourse' of contemporary internet culture. I will consider 'the discourse' in relation to Patricia Lockwood's work below.
6. Grace Lavery, 'Trans Realism, Psychoanalytic Practice, and the Rhetoric of Technique', *Critical Inquiry*, 4 (2020), pp. 719–44: 719, 725.
7. Sigmund Freud, 'Negation', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1925), Vol. 19, pp. 233–40: 236–237.
8. Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 15–45.
9. Michael Fried, *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 28–57, 295, 306.
10. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostok (London: Merlin Press, 1971), p. 77.
11. For a helpful discussion of the modernist 'implosion' of *Bildung*, see Michael Bell, *Open Secrets: Literature, Education, and Authority from J.J. Rousseau to J.M. Coetzee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). For a consideration of the Bildungsroman and modernist underdevelopment and/or failure, see Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
12. N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008). On the contemporary aversion to critical judgement, see Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

13. Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber and Faber, 2018); James Joyce, *Dubliners* (London: Penguin, 1992); Patricia Lockwood, *No One is Talking About This* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).
14. For a psychoanalytic account of scenes of reading, of how the image of the book holds a disturbing, fantasy-laden value as it relates the body of the reader to its environment in view of another, see Mary Jacobus, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
15. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin (London: Penguin, 1961), p. 114.
16. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (Oxford: World Classics, 1980), p. 60; for a helpful overview of reading in Austen's novels, see Katherine Newey, '"What Think You of Books?": Reading in *Pride and Prejudice*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 21 (1995), pp. 81–94.
17. John Mullen, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
18. Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 2020 [1986]), pp. 73, 227.
19. 'Agnes was self-consciously equipped to teach normals how normals make sexuality happen in commonplace settings as an obvious, familiar, recognizable, natural, and serious matter of fact'. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 180.
20. Pertinent critical articles include Colleen Lamos, 'Duffy's Subjectivation: The Psychic Life of 'A Painful Case', in C. Van Boheeman and C. Lamos (eds.), *Masculinities in Joyce* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), pp. 59–71; and Roberta Jackson, 'The Open Closet in Dubliners: James Duffy's Painful Case', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 37.1 (1997), pp. 83–97.
21. Anna Kornbluh, 'Freeing Impersonality: The Objective Subject in Psychoanalysis and *Sense and Sensibility*', in J. M. Rabaté (ed.), *Knots: Post-Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (Routledge, 2019), pp. 36–54.
22. Kornbluh, 'Freeing Impersonality', pp. 36–7.
23. 'Now for bisexuality! I am sure you are right about it. I am accustoming myself to the idea of regarding every sexual act as a process in which four persons are involved.' Freud in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess, August 1, 1899.
24. Kornbluh, 'Freeing Impersonality', p. 38.
25. In *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022), Timothy Bewes argues that free indirect is a term for the literary itself – a species of thinking which withdraws from any paraphrasable content or conventional worldview, but also from identification with any particular voice or perspective or instantiation of the social. I won't do justice to the intricacy of his argument here but suffice it to say that its apparent dehistoricization of the literary device nonetheless relies on a historically specific archive of 'postfictional' writers including Sebald, Coetzee, Cusk and Zadie Smith while at the same time for its theoretical support drawing from Deleuze's books on cinema, where cinematic thinking continues to resonate with the priorities of early twentieth-century modernism. This is not a fatal contradiction, but it does suggest that Bewes's development of literary thinking as especially postfictional remains in two-faced relation with modernism (and the novelistic realism modernism has been said to supersede) as well as with the contemporary age of the internet which has to some degree succeeded the age of cinema.

26. Though Burns cites the nineteenth-century novel as her major influence (not Beckett or Joyce), Milkman performs a modernist reading of realist fiction. See: 'Anna Burns in Conversation with Sheila McWade', https://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/seamus-heaney-centre/resources/WritersInterviews/AnnaBurnsInterview/ [Accessed 7 June 2023].
27. See Samuel Beckett, 'Film', in *The Compete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 2006), pp. 321–35. Middle sister in Milkman has plenty to say on shame: 'I didn't know shame. I mean as a word, because as a word, it hadn't yet entered the communal vocabulary. Certainly, I knew the feeling of shame and I knew everybody around me knew that feeling as well … Another thing was that often it was a public feeling, needing numbers to swell its effectiveness, regardless of whether you were the one doing the shaming, the one witnessing the shaming, or the one having the shame done onto you. Given it was such a complex, involved, very advanced feeling, most people here did all kinds of permutations in order not to have it: killing people, doing verbal damage to people, doing mental damage to people and, not least, also not infrequently, doing those things to oneself' (53).
28. Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London, John Calder, 1998), p. 29.
29. Clare Hutton, 'The Moment and Technique of *Milkman*', *Essays in Criticism*, 69.3 (2019), pp. 347–71.
30. Caroline Magennis, *Northern Irish Writing after the Troubles: Intimacies, Affects, Pleasures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 6.
31. Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, pp. 12, 113.
32. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams (1900)*; *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. 4, p.120.
33. See also the character Amelia in Burns's novel No Bones (London: Norton, 2001).
34. Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 3. Reading *Ivanhoe* in public carries another, more oblique reference to *Middlemarch*, the exemplary nineteenth-century realist and historical novel. In Chapter 57 of *Middlemarch*, Fred Vincy, on the run from books, encounters the Garth family reading aloud from *Ivanhoe*. The echo of *Middle*march in *middle* sister's non name speaks to her ambition to pass as ordinary and the simultaneous impossibility of ordinariness which her predicament explores.
35. This is how Lukács characterises Scott's novels in *The Historical Novel*. For a more recent overview of the historical novel, see Perry Anderson, 'From Progress to Catastrophe', *LRB*, 33.15 (2011).
36. Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Paranoia Running Counter to the Psycho-analytic Theory of the Disease', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1915), Vol 14, pp. 261–72.
37. Sigmund Freud, 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (1911), Vol. 12, pp. 1–82.
38. Freud, 'A Case of Paranoia', p. 264.
39. Freud, 'A Case of Paranoia', pp. 266–7.
40. Freud, 'A Case of Paranoia', pp. 269–70.
41. Jennifer Doyle, 'Rethinking a Case of Paranoia as a Workplace Complaint', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 18.1 (2017), pp. 4–12.
42. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction is about You', in Eve

Kosofsky Sedgwick (ed.), *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 1–37: p. 6.

43. Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuit of the Drive* (London: Polity, 2010), p. 2.
44. Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 297. Quoted in *Blog Theory*, p. 40.
45. *Blog Theory*, p. 40.
46. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile Books, 2019), p. 15.
47. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature*, p. 7.
48. Lauren Oyler, *Fake Accounts* (London: 4th Estate, 2021) p. 233.
49. John Guillory's recent work while not concerned with realism or modernism, or their important historical differences, does frame the question of the literary object and its disciplinary formation as bound up with the historicity of reading practices. See John Guillory, *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organisation of Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), p. 101.

## Disclosure statement

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