

# Book Review

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**Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2022.**

“The novel” (I’ll come back to that) is not what it used to be. This is the lesson Timothy Bewes offers in his remarkable and challenging, if also frustrating, new book, *Free Indirect*. Bewes is “primarily concerned,” he writes in the introduction, with writing from “the two decades since the publication of J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* (2003)” (5) (although in point of fact the book is also a lot about film, and mostly about films from a bit earlier, the latter half of the twentieth century, like Godard’s 1967 *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle*). Bewes sees “the novel” as evolving (the word is his: “an evolution of the novel is underway” [9]) toward a new mode of thought in these decades. *Elizabeth Costello* is not an origin point, he says, although there is a section later in the book titled “The *Elizabeth Costello* Effect”: “It does not inaugurate this mode of thought, nor does it bear any responsibility for it. [It] is simply one of the works from our own period that illustrates it most clearly” (5). Bewes calls this mode of thought “free indirect.” If cinema and critical writing on films take up so much space in *Free Indirect*, it is mainly because “Gilles Deleuze’s two books on cinema provide the most promising theoretical basis for understanding the decentering and deauthorization of literary discourse that [Bewes is] calling the ‘free indirect’” (11).

Postfiction, “the novel of our time” (6), “the contemporary novel” (19), “the twenty-first century novel” (74)—these are terms that Bewes gives to the works that interest him. They differ from, say, *Bleak House* in that, for Bewes, “the instantiation relation [that] is the basic organizational principle of every novelistic work” (27) is untroubled in Dickens. “Characters in Dickens are nothing if not exemplary” (50), he writes, and “we have long known how to read *Bleak House*” (183), whereas postfictional works have as an “overriding obsession” the “noninstantiability of the work’s idea” (74), and there is something about them we still have to grapple with. If Dickens writes his novel prior to the production of the “free indirect” logic that interests Bewes, Forster’s *Howard’s End* (another landmark for Bewes) stands well along the path to that logic’s emergence. One finds in Forster’s novel “a key event in the evolution of novelistic aesthetics in the twentieth century” (102). *Howard’s End* “makes transparent the centrality of the instantiation relation to the organization of the novel and . . . destroys the ‘balance’ that the instantiation relation depends on” (102–3). So *Bleak House* is before, *Howard’s End* is on the way to, and *Elizabeth Costello* is fully immersed in the novelist logic that according to Bewes underwrites “the works that are most directly expressive of the thought of the era” (71). Bewes obviously feels authoritative enough about this decentering and deauthorizing literary discourse to know where to find it and therefore to know which novels are, apparently, more fully evolved instances of “the novel form.”

My guess is that readers will be both fascinated by Bewes’s complex elaboration of this free indirect logic and also frustrated and disgruntled not only by the account he gives of various novels (including *Bleak House*—a novel the understanding of which is apparently done evolving—as well as “postfictional” works like, say, Patrick Modiano’s *Dora Bruder*) but also by his claims about “the novel” and its “evolution.” Let’s just note a few of the novels “of our time” that do not come up in *Free Indirect*: Toni Morrison and Amitav Ghosh are mentioned in relation to critical writing they have done, but their novels don’t come up. No South Asian novels do. Nor any African ones except the Coetzee titles, nor any Latin American ones or Caribbean ones. I can remember a moment a while back where, in discussions about the future of the novel, people would pair W. G. Sebald and Roberto Bolaño, not because they were similar but because as a contrasting pair they seemed to capture something interestingly divergent in novel writing. Only Sebald figures in *Free Indirect*. A few years later, similar discussions would invoke the contrasting pair of Karl Ove Knausgård and Elena

Ferrante as again somehow representing two different novelistic paths or practices. Both absent. Different readers of Bewes will call out other absences—no Thomas Pynchon, no Colm Tóibín, no Édouard Glissant or Patrick Chamoiseau, no Hilary Mantel or Margaret Atwood, no A. S. Byatt or Alan Hollinghurst, no you name it. Sometimes you might call out the name of a novelist that you think would annoy Bewes, a novelist he wouldn't have much time for. (*Free Indirect* does, after all, assert a canon; it suggests a taste profile; it's full of indexical clues to Bewes's reading habits and to the point of view on the literary field that he occupies.) Sometimes the name will be someone whom you feel should have been included, or perhaps someone who wouldn't fit and who might thereby call the model Bewes proposes into question. Or someone whose work will call into question the general idea that there is one singular evolution to the novel in the period Bewes is interested in or will argue against the view that Bewes has appropriately judged which works "are most directly expressive of the thought of the era."

Bewes has an answer to this, of course. He writes that none of the major claims of *Free Indirect*

can be historically substantiated or verified. Each would be easy to "debunk" by citing one or another novelistic work in which opposed tendencies to the ones identified in this book could be discerned or by invoking the many formal or syntactical elements in the works under discussion that imply a contrary significance to those suggested here. But this book is not about objective, formal developments in the novel or about a historical or philosophical stage to which the novel has brought us. [Given his own statements throughout the book, I think most readers could be excused for thinking differently!] It is about a logic of novel thinking that reaches its fullest realization in the continual emergence of a thought that is *not* verifiable or falsifiable, a thought that barely registers at the formal level, a thought that may not even be subjectively inhabitable but in which *the novel's refusal of prevailing ideologies is located*. (13)

It is this idea of a nonsubjectively inhabitable form of thought that is at the heart of *Free Indirect*, and it receives its most intriguing elaboration in Bewes's seventh chapter, called "What is a Sensorimotor Break? Deleuze on Cinema."

In that chapter Bewes seems to be making a historical argument but says he isn't. Apparently, it is an argument about an alternative logic for the novel that just happens to realize itself in historical time. Novels in general, Bewes says repeatedly, work on the basis of instantiation: "Instantiation is a logic that is inherent to the novel form, according to which an entity (a person, an object, a linguistic sign, an encounter, a fictional description, a character trait) is asserted as a *case* or *instance* of a larger category, property, or concept, to whose reality it attests" (188). In the background here is Catherine Gallagher's (2006) now-familiar argu-

ment about fictionality. Bewes's postfictional works are ones in which only a semblance of the instantiation relation exists. Across *Free Indirect*, he offers a plethora of ways in which in his view, the instantiation relation can be circumvented. At one point he writes: "Postfiction . . . is less a genre than a logic. . . . And what postfiction makes possible . . . is a nonanchored, nonsubjective thought, a *thought without perspective*, which is also to say, without a communicative function. Postfictional thought is located not positively, in any element instantiated in the work, but in the work's interstices" (141). "Interstices" becomes a keyword of *Free Indirect*. At another point, in discussing Zadie Smith, he observes that *On Beauty* is, like *Elizabeth Costello*, "a work in which the instantiation relation is no longer supportable, in which point of view itself is abandoned" (92). What he says he means by "abandoned" is that "despite Smith's own remarks about her work and about literature in general, *On Beauty* does not sustain any consistent perspective, *not even a perspective that puts perspective into question*" (92). It's not clear how he knows that to be the case, how he knows that point of view has been abandoned rather than abstracted or manipulated or played with. Bewes suggests that a postfictional reading of Smith notices "her extension of the principle of stylization to the framing narrative itself," with the result that "dialogue in Zadie Smith is not only relative, taking place between linguistic consciousnesses; it is also absolute, determining the very conditions of the evolution and operation of each represented language, including, again, that of the narrator" (94). But if I were to think about novelists from, say, the French tradition to which that description might apply (stylized framing gestures, no discourse that can't be viewed as dialogic), I could start a long train of names receding in time: Colette, Proust, Gide, Gautier, Balzac, Stendhal, Diderot . . .

Bewes turns to Deleuze on cinema because "for Deleuze . . . cinema is a form in which . . . a thought outside the logic of instantiation becomes possible, albeit at the cost of transposing the seat of thought outside the human subject" (192). This is where the "sensorimotor break" (the term "sensorimotor system" is taken from Bergson) comes in. From Deleuze, Bewes borrows "an image and a concept (a philosophical image) for a decentered and deauthorized thought" (195–96). What breaks, Bewes says, is "the very principle according to which mind and body may be comprehended together" (196). Thought and perception become autonomous, desubjectified, independent of any embodied human action.

Bewes writes that according to Deleuze, "the sensorimotor break takes place at slightly different moments [in different national cinematic traditions], depend-

ing on national-historical conditions, especially in relation to the Second World War,” but quickly adds that “if the sensorimotor break takes place, it is because it had already taken place long ago, with the discovery of the cinematographic image itself.” That is, “the sensorimotor break is not only—and not primarily—a historical event but a figure of thought: the thought of cinema itself” (201–2). It is via the bridge of the free indirect that Bewes translates the nonsubjective and noninstantiating place of the camera into writing. To build this bridge he turns to Vološinov and to the use Deleuze and Guattari make of his thought in *A Thousand Plateaus*. He cites Deleuze and Guattari, who comment that “language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 76), to which he adds, “at the origin of language is not a sight seen or a sentiment felt but a moment of reported speech” (Bewes 220). This intriguing pragmatic stance does not fully permeate Bewes’s book, as I will endeavor to show, all too briefly, in a moment. In any case, it is the primary dialogicality of language in use that, for Bewes, gives it the potential to house something nonsubjective, like the nonsubjective camera in cinema: “For Vološinov, internal voices are dialogical long before the dialogicality is experienced subjectively . . . indeed, *irrespective* of whether it is experienced as such” (222).

This leads to the final statement in his conclusion of what Bewes means by his title:

For Deleuze and Guattari, as well as for Vološinov, free indirect discourse is both a mode of representing speech and thought . . . *and* an element that precedes, and survives, the constitution of subjectivized discourse. It is thus a theory, or a thought, that can operate in the absence of personal attribution. Free indirect is not only, and not primarily, a particular *use* of language; it is also an experimental hypothesis, advanced by literature itself, about the capacity of language to function in an interstitial or nonsubjective space. (257)

His final example is from Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* trilogy, one of a group of works in which “the narrative position . . . is subjectively uninhabitable . . . [because] they relate their stories in a voice bereft of affective resonance” (259–60). No “Only connect!” for Cusk. And in Bewes’s view, Forster’s “Only connect!” refers to instantiation in general. In postfiction, interstices trump instantiation, interstices between “fiction and reality, actual and virtual, narrator and character, or within a single character” (259). By finding a free indirect voice that refuses resonance or connection or convergence, or subjective ground, “literature discovers a way to imagine itself as no longer a subjective form at all” (260). But on the one

hand, according to whom? And on another hand, is this really the most compelling thing to say about Cusk, or Muriel Spark, or James Kelman (her novelistic companions in Bewes's final paragraph)?

To put it another way, are we sure that even once we know what "free indirect" *is*, we know everything it *does*? And while I'm fascinated by Bewes's project and grateful for its provocations, I'm not sure all his examples cohered for me—Cusk, Modiano, Sebald?—and so not sure yet whether "free indirect" even *is* any one thing. Pragmatically speaking, how could we be sure that it would always and everywhere do and therefore mean (entail rather than presuppose) the same thing when it occurs? Suppose, for instance, that we decide that there is something intriguingly similar about the difficult "narrative position" of Cusk's *Outline* trilogy and the work of someone like Marie NDiaye, perhaps her novel *Ladivine*, which also often seems "bereft of affective resonance" like Cusk or absolutely dialogical in the way Bewes described Smith's *On Beauty*. Are all these works therefore like each other? Are we done when we say "literature discovers a way to imagine itself as no longer a subjective form at all," or is that even a place to begin to understand all of the different things that might be going on in novels like these? And really, did no one ever think or experience anything like that about novelistic writing in earlier times and places?

In one of the early articles by a linguist (Charles Bally) on free indirect discourse, we see Bally (1912: 605–6) worrying at the question whether the technique is present in the minds of the reader or is present, as he puts it, grammatically, and what kind of a relation that might be: "The indirect style is a *form of thought*. . . it is not a grammatical form, it is a mental attitude, an aspect, a particular angle from which it perceives things; and—something it is important to note—it is not by purely psychological observation that this form is discovered; it can be deduced from the study of language itself" (my translation). For Bally, the presence of a linguistic fact is the index of a form of thought (where a "form of thought" would seem to be a widely shared act of cognition). Bally notes that "were one to account in the first place for the manner in which free indirect discourse is thought, and then to look into how it is expressed, it is probable that its description would be more systematic" (606). Moving from linguistic convention to meaning is the wrong direction, Bally says:

If to the contrary one takes as a point of departure a typical form of thought, but not one posed a priori, a form that the usage of a language reveals as characteristic of a group that speaks that language, if then, but only then, one looks for the

procedures through which this form of thought is reflected in the idiom one is describing, then everything changes and linguistic facts appear in their true perspective. (605)

Bally is worrying, we might say, about which way the index points when we ask what kinds of cognition certain linguistic phenomena relate to. We might expand this to a question regarding what kind of index we are talking about, a presupposing one or an entailing one? These are different problems than the problem of instantiation versus interstices. Presupposing indexes, Constantine Nakassis (2018: 294) has observed in a recent article on Michael Silverstein's work, in order to be interpretable, point to something that, so to speak, already exists, whereas in relatively entailing ones, "indexicality is re-grounded in cognition." He quotes a passage from Silverstein's classic essay on "Shifters, Linguistic Categories, and Cultural Description" to the effect that "under these [relatively entailing] circumstances, the indexical token in speech performs its greatest apparent work, seeming to be the very medium through which the relevant aspect of the context is made to 'exist'" (Silverstein 1976: 34; quoted in Nakassis 2018: 294). Among the many things free indirect discourse is, it is also a cultural concept; in its use, it is an entailing index. Whatever Sartre and de Beauvoir thought they were doing with the free indirect discourse they said they learned from Dos Passos, for instance, it is probably not what Austen was doing, nor Flaubert. The entailments are different. NDiaye's practice might look to some eyes like Flaubert's, but how would anyone know that it is? It's not in the form but entailed by the practice. In the end Bewes can't help, it seems, but to grammaticalize or to propositionalize the phenomenon he has examined for us with such vigor, to presuppose its purport. But pragmatically speaking, it seems more likely that we are still waiting to know what many of these curious novels entail.

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