What Does It Mean to Write Fiction?
What Does Fiction Refer to?

Timothy Bewes

Abstract
Through an engagement with recent American fiction, this article explores the possibility that the creative procedures and narrative modes of literary works might directly inform our critical procedures also. Although this is not detailed in the piece, one of the motivations behind this project is the idea that such procedures may act as a technology to enable critics to escape the place of the “commentator” that Michel Foucault anathematizes in his reflections on critical discourse (for example, in his 1970 lecture “The Order of Discourse”). The article not only theorizes but attempts to enact these possibilities by inhabiting a subjective register located between fiction and criticism—a space that, in different ways, is also inhabited by the two literary works under discussion, Renee Gladman’s To After That and Colson Whitehead’s novel Zone One. (Gladman’s work also provides the quotations that subtitle each half of the essay.) Readers may notice a subtle but important shift of subjective positionality that takes place between sections I and II.

1 “What Does It Mean to Write Fiction?
What Does Fiction Refer to?”

These two questions are not mine—which means that they are not yours, either. They are taken from a work of fiction entitled To After That by the American writer Renee Gladman. I hesitate to call them a quotation, for, although they appear in Gladman’s book, the questions do not exactly belong to her narrator; or rather, they do not belong to the moment of Gladman’s narration. They appear, rather, in free indirect discourse, as questions that occur to Gladman’s narrator (who, like the book’s author, is a writer of fiction named Renee Gladman) at a particular moment in the recent past, after she invents a film (entitled Carla and Aïda) to explain to her friends one of the sources of inspiration behind the novel she is writing. “I knew my lie was safe,” she says; for “[p]eople did not Google as they do now.” Lying, she continues, “can give one a much better high than can fiction. Plus, what does it mean to write fiction? What does fiction refer to?” (31).

The two questions, then, are “rhetorical,” meaning that they contain their own answer (presumably “nothing” or “who knows?”). Their articulation in Gladman’s text is a moment of what the critic Ann Banfield
calls “represented speech and thought” (12), a moment of indirect rather than direct discourse. The passage is an example of a kind of speech act that occurs nowhere else but in fiction; a sentence that, in Banfield’s terms, is “unspeakable.” If such sentences are spoken aloud, transferred from the reported discourse of a third party (who may be no one other than oneself at an earlier or imaginary moment) to the situation of one’s own present, their meaning changes radically. They cease to be represented speech and thought and take on the task of representation directly.

This distinction—between direct and indirect discourse, representing speech and represented speech—is important to the paper I am going to read, here and now, in this space, the Murray Hill East conference room at the New York Hilton, at this time, the afternoon of January 5, 2018, to you the audience and my fellow panelists at the Modern Languages Association annual convention. For the question I want to ask in this paper, about the distinction between critical discourse and fictional discourse and about a certain ambiguity in that distinction (an ambiguity that, I want to claim, is playing an increasingly significant role in the formal qualities not only of contemporary writing but of criticism), could also be phrased in terms of the distinction between direct and indirect speech. Perhaps, then, we could rephrase the two questions in my title using Banfield’s terms, as follows: what is the meaning of “represented speech” (as opposed to, say, the direct speech that I am undertaking right now)? And what does “represented speech and thought” (as opposed to my own supposedly direct speech in the present instance) refer to?

A lot is at stake in these questions, for they touch on the very procedures and principles of our discipline. We ask them all the time in our work; they justify our professional existence. And we do so in the confidence, or assumption, that the language in which we ask and do our best to answer them—always acknowledging, of course, that our answers are unlikely to be definitive or to be universally adopted—is, at the very least, “direct”: that when we put forward interpretive hypotheses about a fictional text, say, it is at least we who are doing so, rather than some character or narrator internal to our discourse; that the hypotheses are our own, even if we are unable to prove or establish their validity; that the words we speak come “from one’s own mouth” (Vološinov 159); that we are the ones doing the representing; and that we can be sure—if nothing else—of our own nonfictional status.

The problem comes, however, when a temporal or circumstantial gap opens up between the composition of the discourse and its occasion. For example, the words I am speaking at this moment—right here, right now—were actually written on my computer seven days ago, on Friday, December 29, in my home office in Providence, Rhode Island, a day after returning from a trip to the United Kingdom. The speaking I that I was inhabiting as I wrote this text was thus, in the very moment I inhabited it with the most intensity, an entity that is very difficult to distinguish from a fiction, projected one week into the future, its quotient of fictionality
increasing the more strenuously I invoked its presence and immediacy. The plural you I am addressing, right now, is a similarly imagined construction, based on hope and optimism, like the image I entertained of the magnificent auditorium in which we now think and reflect together.

This, then, is the problem of reference posed by Gladman’s rhetorical questions when it comes to fiction—the problem being that it is difficult to identify the precise moment in time, or the necessary duration, in which the words in question pass from a condition of representing (direct) speech to a condition of represented (indirect) speech; the moment, in other words, at which they no longer mean what they say and enter the zone we call fiction or fictionality: “represented speech and thought.” Indeed, what I want to suggest in this paper—even though the word “suggest” will seem to establish my own discourse firmly and conceptually in the realm of direct speech—is that the boundary or barrier that separates the discourse of the speaking subject from that of the spoken subject is not a conceptual one but is primarily temporal, and thus, in a state of constant instability. The problem of fiction is not, then, a problem of “discourse,” or “register,” or “tone,” or “syntax.” As Bakhtin tells us, there is nothing syntactically distinctive about fictional discourse; the problem of fiction is rather—as Renee Gladman puts it in To After That—the problem of “the person in time and space” (9). All narration—whether in fiction, where this quality is so naturally present as to have no need of acknowledgment, or in criticism, where it must not on any account be acknowledged—takes place in a zone of indiscernibility, or rather contiguity, between the two states of, on the one hand, represented, and, on the other, representing speech. The claim or assumption of direct speech is always haunted by an adjacent condition of indirect discourse, or represented speech, that threatens to invade and displace the first at every moment. The intelligence of fiction, and the stupidity of criticism, is nothing but a measure of the degree to which these forms acknowledge the continuity between indirect and direct discourse, between represented and representing speech and thought.

I want to talk about two works of fiction, both of which exhibit an extraordinary degree of novelistic “intelligence” in this sense. Gladman’s To After That is a text about an earlier work, entitled After That, which Gladman worked on for several years and finally discarded. To After That thus contrasts two works, which is to say, two approaches to the writing of fiction. One is represented by the work of fiction we are actually reading, the other by a work that is present only as a fiction: present, that is to say, precisely in its absence. The former—the work we are reading—is about an earlier moment of writing that was not successful, produced at a time when the narrator thought of “fiction” and “life” as two separate domains. The process that is both narrated and dramatized in the later work—i.e., in the real work of fiction, as opposed to the fictional work of fiction—is that of coming to a fuller, more complete realization of what a successful fictional practice might be. Gladman writes:
The book I was writing [After That] was scored in the key of leisure, in the way I had leisure as a student. But at no time in the year of that first draft did I actually have leisure. Then, I explained the discrepancy to myself as “There is fiction and then again there is life.” But I knew it was ridiculous and even trite to think in such a way. Because, before I had the time to complete such a thought, the one had already become the other. This is another thing I wanted to say in the novella After That. (15; emphasis in original)

This statement—a quotation from To After That—says everything I want to say in this paper. What follows is nothing but an attempt—in the key of criticism, which can only botch the task—to elaborate its profound truth. “Before I had the time to complete such a thought, the one had already become the other,” says Gladman’s narrator. That is, the very thought she has just had, precisely in being thought—or rather, in becoming present to her narrator as a thought—enters into the world of her fiction, the world of represented speech and thought.

Transitioning from artistic failure to artistic success (from After That to To After That) involves, for Gladman, overcoming the fiction / life opposition (we might call this the “fictionalization” schema) and discovering another schema in which representing and represented discourse—but also failed writing and successful writing, literature and nonliterature, the novel and criticism—are continuous. In this new schema, the discourse of direct speech, which is to say, criticism, is unable to find a foothold. The continuity of the registers of the novel and criticism is a truth that is known by literature. Its clearest expression in the world of criticism is found in an observation by Bakhtin, in his essay “Epic and Novel,” that “the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, literature and nonliterature and so forth are not laid up in heaven” but are rather “historical” (33). This truth, I will claim, is just beginning to be apprehended by criticism in ways I am unable to detail today, even though the survival of critical discourse, in its constitutive stupidity, requires that we not acknowledge it.

In this way, contemporary fiction—or at least, a certain strand of contemporary novelistic intelligence—works by placing characters in a fictional world that is not conceptually parallel to our own but temporally continuous with it, in such a way that our own world, the world of direct speech, which is also the world of criticism, is present only as a fiction. The relation between fiction and life is thus inverted so as to reveal, in fiction, the fictionality of the world we currently inhabit. This is the structure of such texts as Colson Whitehead’s Zone One and The Underground Railroad, Chris Kraus’s I Love Dick, Ben Lerner’s 10:04, Teju Cole’s Open City, and Percival Everett’s Erasure, among many others.

The second work I want to talk about briefly is Colson Whitehead’s Zone One, a zombie narrative set in a post-apocalyptic New York in the near future, which addresses these questions by perpetually putting forth, within the diegesis, multiple critical interpretations of itself—plausible micro-interpretations, from the points of view of vari-
What Does It Mean to Write Fiction? What Does Fiction Refer to?

Amst 64.4 (2019): 533-48

ious characters—only to, at the moment of the novel’s final, disastrous denouement, reveal each to be a fantasy. *Zone One* is a story in which not only civilization but meaning—the world of interpretation, the very possibility of direct speech—is in free fall.

In one of numerous possible examples of this formal conceit, late in the novel Mark Spitz, the protagonist, remembers his tendency, in the years before the collapse, to “mak[e] his girlfriends into things that were less than human.” “There was always a point,” he reflects, “sooner or later, when they crossed a line and became creatures.” Once, he remembers,

it was only a look, a transit of anxiety across her eyes in which he glimpsed some irremediable flaw or future betrayal. And like that, the person he had fallen in love with was gone. They had been replaced by this familiar abomination, this thing that shared the same face, same voice, same familiar mannerisms that had once comforted him. To anyone else, the simulation was perfect. [...] But he would know. He knew where they failed in their humanity. He would leave. (241)

The memory is, of course, an allegory, one that it is tempting to hold onto in order to give significance to the nightmare scenario of Whitehead’s novel. The passage suggests an ethical reading of the novel’s central narrative image—the proliferating zombie horde—as a parable about the failure of empathy, or the crisis of human connection in an age of (say) advanced capitalism. Could not the novel thus be seen as a work that teaches us about the perils of allowing human connections to ebb away—that warns us of the risk of thereby turning each other into objects, monsters?

Over the course of the narrative, many such possible interpretations of the novel are put forward, only to be discredited at the end of the work, revealed as nothing but a desperate clutch at significance. All horizons of meaning, all moments of potential “fixity” that might “fuse[ ] the world inside the novel with the world outside,” in Benedict Anderson’s famous phrase (30)—such as the narrative of “reconstruction” peddled by the politicians of the temporary government that has been set up in Buffalo—are undermined as naive “straggler thinking” (the term “straggler” refers to the most pathetic of the plague victims, those whom infection renders immobile; the others, far more dangerous, are known as “skels”) (Whitehead 271).

The most disturbing voice in the novel is that of the “Lieutenant,” a cynical, disenchanted senior military officer who is in charge of the operation to defend the barricade on Canal Street that separates the skel-free territory of lower Manhattan—the eponymous Zone One—from the rest of the city, where there is (to put it mildly) more work to do. The Lieutenant offers the most important of such self-interpretations, one that concerns the barricade itself: “The barricade is the only metaphor left in this mess. The last one standing. Keep chaos out, order in” (121).

But a metaphor for what? Every barricade, we learn in the course of Whitehead’s narrative, falls eventually; the only question is when. Like
the barrier between nonfiction and fiction that is my topic today—or the *cordon sanitaire* between direct and indirect speech that every procedure and principle adhered to in the discipline of Literary Studies is designed to keep intact—the separation between Zone One and the rest of the country, between the thinking humans and the skels and stragglers who are assembling “in massive piles on the other side of the wall” (304), is temporal, not ontological. If we can take the precarious barricade in *Zone One* as an incomplete depiction of the continuity of direct and indirect speech—incomplete because, unlike Renee Gladman’s *To After That*, the fictional structure of Whitehead’s book remains intact—that is because this is the one allegorical interpretation of the novel that survives the final triumph of the zombie horde, even as civilization itself falls into the “sea of the dead” (322).

And this last allegorical reading is also why the present paper, too, is incomplete: a last grasp at the hypothesis that direct speech is still possible—a hypothesis that everything in its own analysis (not least, the metaphor of the barricade in Whitehead’s *Zone One*) insists is nothing but “straggler thinking.”

2 “The Problem of the Person in Time and Space”

With the single word “thanks,” I ended my presentation. Polite applause followed. A minute or two later its muffled echo was heard through the partition separating the room (a spacious though hardly “magnificent” chamber on the second floor of the Hilton) from its neighbor to the west as another panel neared its conclusion. I was the last to speak—the two other panelists, Gerald Prince and Toril Moi, had given their papers already—and so the time remaining in the session, a mere fifteen minutes, was for questions from the audience.

In his paper, Prince, a seasoned scholar who made his reputation in the 1980s and 1990s with a series of books and essays exploring narratological approaches to modern French literature, had addressed the conceptual difference between fiction and nonfiction, and summarized the grounds on which such a distinction might be established as falling into three main categories: semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic. Prince’s talk argued for a “pragmatic-rhetorical” (PR) approach; he was drawing partly on a paper recently co-authored by a group of researchers in the field of narrative theory, “Ten Theses about Fictionality,” which had been generating some discussion in narratology circles. Prince was sympathetic to this co-authored paper, which, as a first step, differentiated between fiction as a genre category and fictionality as a mode of discourse, and went on to focus on the latter as a specifically “rhetorical” form, the “purposes” and communicational objectives of which were, in principle, always identifiable (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 62).

Two examples important to the authors of “Ten Theses about Fictionality” involve moments in the presidency of Barack Obama. Read-
ing the piece a few days after hearing Prince's paper at the MLA panel I found myself especially interested by this detail, primarily because, since the inauguration of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States, the question of fictionality had become a matter of troubled reflection among Literary Studies academics. This situation had been part of our framing of the panel when it was first proposed as a special session at the MLA, and again in the introductory remarks which, as the organizer of the session, it fell to me to give. At least five other panels at the conference had been organized around themes of fiction or fictionality in the contemporary context, and almost all alluded in their titles to the “post-fact” world of Trump's presidency (Program).

In my opening remarks I, too, spoke of the “so-called crisis of truth or facts in American political life,” a reference both to Trump’s consistent application of the term “fake news” to the traditional news media and to Trump’s own incessant lying.

In the first of the episodes dwelt on by the authors of “Ten Theses,” Obama, during his 2012 re-election campaign, jokingly coined the term “Romnesia” to designate his opponent Mitt Romney’s habit of forgetting positions he had previously held that seemed incompatible with those he was now campaigning on. The second example involved one of Obama’s comical addresses at the annual White House Correspondents’ Association dinner. At the 2013 dinner, Obama joked that Steven Spielberg was going to follow his successful film *Lincoln* with another political biopic called *Obama*, also starring Daniel Day-Lewis in the title role (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 61-62). Obama showed a short, fictional promotional film featuring Spielberg describing the project and himself, Obama, playing Day-Lewis playing Obama.

Such episodes, the authors seek to show, help illustrate the “rhetorical” nature of fictionality: its quality of being a means to an end. Considered as “the ability to invent, imagine, and communicate without claiming to refer to the actual,” fictionality is “pervasive” within all forms of language use, including political discourse (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 63), and Obama’s objectives in using it are not in doubt. Fictionality not only applies, for example, to the mischievous assumptions behind Trump’s baiting of a Mexican-born district judge, or to the disturbing humor evident in comments such as the one Trump made after President Xi Jinping eliminated the two-term limit for the Chinese presidency (“I think it’s great. Maybe we’ll want to give that a shot someday”) (Perlez). Any political discourse that deals with “hypotheticals, counterfactuals, speculations, and other deviations from the actual,” any discourse that dreams of a world to come, or that looks at the present from the point of view of some future emancipation, is trading in the *rhetoric* of fictionality (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 64). For the authors of the “Ten Theses,” then, the “pervasiveness” of fictionality also entails the suggestion of “degrees” of fictionality. Advocates of the PR approach want to claim that all utterances make use of factual and fictional elements, and that some flights of fancy “have higher and longer

---

1 For example, “Fictionality in a ‘Post-Fact’ World” (837); “Alternative Facts and Fictions: Multiplicity and Indeterminacy in the Aftermath of the 2016 Presidential Election” (851); “Nonfiction Prose in a ‘Post-Factual’ World” (882); “Rhetoric in Post-factual Times” (956).

2 According to Perlez, “Chinese analysts took [Trump’s comments] seriously.”
The word “canker” is taken not from “Ten Theses about Fictionality” but from a 1991 article by Amélie Rorty. Rorty refers to “the canker in the very heart of action” that is revealed, in tragedy, by the misfortunes of the protagonist, at which point the transcendental intelligence organizing the whole (as opposed to the relatively limited local intelligence that directs the actions of the characters) is brought into the open. I was alerted to Rorty’s phrase by another talk at the same MLA conference by Yoon Sun Lee, in which Lee extended Rorty’s observation about tragedy to novelistic plots and to Georg Lukács’s famous distinction between “description” and “narration” (“Action Figures”). For Lee, the “canker in the heart” of a passage of novelistic narration is the sense of totality in which the attentive reader (unlike the character, who, according to Rorty, is separated from the totality by an “opacity” of subjective particularity) is able to locate what Lukács calls “the real causality of the epic events” (133). Lee’s perspective presumed an identifiable relation between the “transcendental” intelligence and the limited, local one, even if the former is hidden from the latter. The “intimate tension” (as Lee put it) between these elements is resolved by the “true, wayward nature” of the characters as revealed in the larger plot. In the works by Gladman and Whitehead I was concerned with in my paper, the possibility of such a relation, and thus of a readerly position capable of reconstructing it, seemed to be dissolving. Thus, the nature of my attraction to Rorty’s word “canker” is the opposite of Lee’s, and perhaps also of Rorty’s; for to me, the word conveys something corrosive, even poison-

orbits than others” (67). The two examples from Obama’s discourse can be differentiated along such lines, say Nielsen et al. Thus “Obama’s riff on Spielberg’s new movie has a greater degree of fictionality than his charge that his rival in 2012 suffers from Romnesia” (67). The rhetorical effect of fictionality in such contexts is to create a “logos-immunization” of the discourse, such that logical or fact-based refutation is rendered ineffective; counter-argument must be undertaken “on other levels and with other forms of appeal” (69). Months after the MLA panel, the Massachusetts senator Elizabeth Warren took a genetic test to try to refute Trump’s fictional (according to the PR view) insinuations about her purported Native American heritage. Her subsequent walk back and apology to the Cherokee Nation for taking the test (Herndon) illustrates the point being made in “Ten Theses.” Trump’s fictional name for Warren, “Pocahontas,” is an effective “action,” immune to factual refutation, and exemplifies the “canker” of rhetoricity at the heart of all fictionality.  

Like “Ten Theses about Fictionality,” Prince’s paper made few references to specific works of fiction; his examples were mostly drawn from “homegrown sources.” For example, a statement such as “Gerald Prince was at the MLA and had dinner with John, Aramis and Claire” could be divided into its fictional and nonfictional constituents. And yet, he insisted, the possibility of differentiating fictional and nonfictional elements must also apply—“according to the logic of the PR view”—to works of fiction. Thus, said Prince further, Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” although a much shorter work than, say, The Name of the Rose, may be considered to be proportionately “more fictional” than Umberto Eco’s novel.

Clearly, this quantitative understanding of fictionality was at odds with my elaboration of the term to mean “represented speech and thought,” an elaboration whose endpoint would seem to be the dissolution of the concept of fiction as a syntactical, formally identifiable register. My definition was not amenable, then, to the suggestion of “degrees” of fictionality in Prince’s analysis. The period of time during which a speaker may plausibly believe her words to be her own, when she can be said to be speaking in the absence of any normative or social pressure on the meanings of her words, when she and her interlocutor participate with equal implication in the event constituted by their interaction (despite any social inequalities that may exist between them), lasts no longer than the discursive event itself. The “natural utterance,” a category Barbara Herrnstein Smith opposes to “fictive discourse” and defines as “the verbal acts of real persons on particular occasions in response to particular sets of circumstances,” occupies, like any historical event, “a specific and unique point in time and space” (15). Valentin N. Vološinov compares such an event of discourse to “an electric spark that occurs only when two different terminals are hooked together” (103). To later clarify, disavow, nuance, explicate, or qualify such an event is, Vološinov continues, like “turn[ing] on a light bulb after having switched off the
current” (103). Analogously, and contrary to the principles of pragmatic-rhetorical analysis, the division between fictional and nonfictional discourse is absolute; or rather, like Henri Bergson’s notion of the present, it is constituted not positively but negatively, as a moment of splitting (“Mind-Energy” 147). The category of fiction can only be used in the aftermath of the utterance, or from outside it, i.e., once the split has taken place. The term “fiction” is thus the epitome of what Vološinov calls an “alien” discourse (73): a category that is by definition foreign to the discursive conditions it designates. Fiction is never what one is doing in the moment one speaks of it. And just as there is, for Bergson, an ideal present, “a pure conception, the indivisible limit which separates past from future” (Matter and Memory 176), so, perhaps, the concept of “natural discourse” too is an ideality, its very concreteness evanescent, existing outside the logic of representation, of “represented speech and thought.”

In holding to this sense of fictionality, my view—the view I advocated in my MLA paper—also decouples the question of the work’s fictional status from the speaker’s intentions. No matter what I may think I meant at an earlier moment of writing or speech, my access to that meaning is obscured by the conditions of retrospection itself—obscured so completely that intentions are no longer producible or actionable as critical data. In February 2017, after his PewDiePie YouTube channel was widely criticized for a sketch that involved people holding up signs reading “Death to all Jews,” the Swedish internet star Felix Kjellberg said: “I think of the content that I create as entertainment, and not a place for any serious political commentary. I know my audience understand [sic] that, and that is why they come to my channel” (Herrman). But does Kjellberg really know what he thinks of the content he creates? Is not the verb “think”—like the word “intentions,” or the phrase “communicative agent” with which Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh designate the subject of all discourse—simply too capacious to cover both the moment of the utterance and the moment of its later knowledge? In March 2019, moments after killing fifty people in a shooting attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, a 28-year-old White Australian named Brenton Harrison Tarrant told viewers of the attack, which he had livestreamed on Facebook: “Subscribe to PewDiePie.” Writing on Twitter from his PewDiePie account, Kjellberg expressed horror and disavowed the violence: “I feel absolutely sickened having my name uttered by this person. My heart and thoughts go out to the victims, families, and everyone affected by this tragedy” (Chokshi). The statement attracted both support and derision. For how is it possible for Kjellberg, writing in the name of his fictional counterpart (but the question would apply even were he to nominally differentiate these personas), to establish that the disavowal, the “sickened” feeling, is not also part of that “class of verbal structures to which the assumptions governing ordinary speech cannot be extended because the suspension of those assumptions is precisely what defines that class” (B. H. Smith 136)—that is to say, fictional utterances?
The PR view would no doubt identify a quotient of “rhetorical” fictionality running through my MLA paper (as in every piece of critical discourse), an element that is evident, presumably, in the paper’s most “provocative” claims, which indulge in “hypotheticals, counterfactuals, speculations, and other deviations from the actual.” The “communicative agent” at work in my paper is thus an individual who may be referred to, unproblematically, by the name to which his paper was attached in the MLA program, and whose intentions are determinable and speakable as follows: to “blur the line between the fictive and the nonfictive status of [his] discourse” (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 64).

It seems to me, however, that the subjective space we refer to when we speak of a speaker’s intentions with respect to a particular utterance is as mathematically negligible as the temporal duration of the present in which it was uttered. Prince ended his paper by claiming—with a confidence that, to my ears, included an element of provocation—that “space opera” has a greater degree of fictionality than “autofiction.” Does Prince really think this? Recalling the passage now, I am doubtful; for the phrasing seems too rhetorical, the examples (particularly the choice of “space opera”) too amusing to take fully seriously. Were Prince later to insist that, yes, he really meant it (as he will have the opportunity to do when I show him the draft of this essay before publication), his insistence would hold little weight in the context of the present discussion, for, in my understanding, Prince has no more jurisdiction over the intentions behind those words than anyone else who was in the room at the time (including myself). The fictional status of a text has nothing to do with the existence of a historical complement to the events narrated, or the characters, or the setting, or the speaking person him- or herself, however many details, features, or names these may happen to share.

★ ★ ★

Toril Moi, a generation younger than Prince, is best known for her early work in feminist literary theory, but at the time of the MLA she had recently been giving academic talks taking issue with the apparent dominance of poststructuralist and other theoretical approaches to the study of literature. This change of direction had been formalized by her 2017 book Revolution of the Ordinary, which advocates that literary critics turn to “ordinary language philosophy,” the school of thought inaugurated by Ludwig Wittgenstein’s posthumous Philosophical Investigations. Moi’s view is that Wittgenstein’s conception of language not as a vehicle of meanings and representations, to be puzzled over by the reader or critic, but a “practice” in which any project of understanding is already implicated from the outset, enables us to recover a way of talking about literature without the theoretical apparatuses and specialist procedures that mystify the work and obscure its meaning. “The right
sort of reading will emerge,” she writes, “if we simply let ourselves read literature or watch films in much the same way as we read theory and philosophy” (*Revolution* 78)—that is, if we respond simply to such works as “the expressions of another,” framing our response as nothing but “an effort to understand those expressions” (216). This approach implies a break with the historical project that Moi calls “late modernist aesthetics,” and from its presupposition of the work’s formal thickness (214). Likewise, Moi sidelines the implications of a distinctively “literary” discourse. Generations of literary experimentation such as the French * autofiction* of the 1960s and 1970s, she argues, have made boundaries such as those between fiction and nonfiction or between “literary” and “nonliterary” prose of little relevance (197). Implicit in Moi’s argument is a literary history in which modernism and the critical approaches it bequeathed to us represent a gigantic, but correctable, wrong turn.

A couple of months before the MLA panel, Moi had published a short article on the Norwegian novelist Karl Ove Knausgaard, in which she argued, analogously, that the formal qualities of Knausgaard’s work necessitate “new criteria” for the reading of fiction, that Knausgaard challenges “a whole host of ingrained attitudes in contemporary literary studies,” and that his work requires critics to “unlearn a generation’s worth of literary theory.” Knausgaard’s works, most notably the six-volume series of novels entitled *My Struggle* (*Min kamp*), draw directly on the author’s life—not, especially, its major events and narrative turning points, but its everyday details, which are treated with the same studious attention his works accord to the narrator’s philosophical reflections, his accounts of his reading, and his struggles to write. Knausgaard, Moi wrote, “insists that he is writing about himself,” that what he writes “is true,” and that his characters are “real people.” Knausgaard’s protagonist, named (like the author) Karl Ove Knausgaard, shares the author’s date of birth; his family members (his wife Linda and daughters Vanja and Heidi) are identical in name, character, and feature to those of the author; and friends and acquaintances of the author’s, such as Geir, a fellow writer, appear prominently under their own names. According to Moi, we miss “the significance of Knausgaard’s project” if we retain from twentieth-century theoretical accounts the prohibition on “taking the book’s characters to be real people, and the novel’s world to be the real world.” Knausgaard’s most distinctive artistic achievement, she says, is to dispense with the assumption “that the world created by the novel must be fictional.” Instead, his work should be valued for its descriptions, which model an attentiveness to the narrator’s surroundings that, for Moi, is “moral, aesthetic or political” (“Describing”). Descriptions are the form of expression of Knausgaard’s work; they find their unity in the creator’s “presence,” which Moi wants to locate in such concepts as “style,” “integrity,” and “voice,” concepts that have all but vanished from professional critical discourse but that, according to Moi, are indispensable to any reading of *My Struggle*. 
At the MLA panel, Moi returned to the topic of description in Knausgaard, but in a more pugilistic register. Her primary targets were three theorists of literature whose practices of reading, she claimed, are incapable of grasping Knausgaard’s significance: Roland Barthes, whose notion of the “reality effect” is liable to reduce Knausgaard’s “love of the ordinary and the everyday” to an almighty, 3,600-page, assertion of the “referential illusion” (Barthes 148); David Shields, whose 2010 manifesto *Reality Hunger* discards the category of fiction (as Knausgaard also seems to want to do) but on the grounds of a radicalized “skepticism” towards reality rather than the simplicity of expression and observation of reality that Moi attributes to Knausgaard; and Georg Lukács, who, though aware of the impossibility of treating “form” apart from “meaning,” privileges narration over description. Moi envisaged subjecting each position to criticism from the perspective of Knausgaard’s novel, “rather than the other way around” (“Description”).

It was clear from the question and answer period that a large part of the sizeable audience was there for Moi and the prospect of a scholarly yet celebratory assessment of Knausgaard’s project. Many of those present, I suspected, were not scholars of contemporary literature but specialists in other fields who had been attracted to Knausgaard for reasons other than their professional expertise. The audience also included narratologists. A man Prince later identified as an esteemed narrative theorist and analyst of fiction asked Prince and myself to have a “fight” on the basis of my reference to the “intelligence” of fiction and the “stupidity” of criticism. “Gerry’s a very intelligent guy,” said the narratologist. Prince replied that he did not want to fight with me, saying: “I think Tim is telling a sort of fiction” (at which point it was all I could do not to give Prince a kiss). The fight he wanted to have was with Toril. Knausgaard, Prince said, tells us nothing whatsoever about anything. Reading Knausgaard is like reading the content of one’s own mind: boring!

Moi obviously relished Prince’s challenge. Many sophisticated critics, she had said in her talk (privately thinking, perhaps, of her two fellow panelists), find the popularity of Knausgaard’s work bewilder- ing, but that is because they bring outdated protocols to their reading of him. If you maintain, like Barthes, that the purpose of description is nothing other than to provide *l’effet de réel*, Knausgaard’s work will come across as “one interminable, repetitive, and utterly formless reminder that ‘this is reality’” (“Description”). Thus, she said now, it is no wonder that Gerry finds the work boring. Discard your protocols, she suggested, and you will find Knausgaard mesmerizing.

Reading Knausgaard’s novel later, I was surprised to see aspects of Moi’s argument anticipated at certain moments in the narrative. Geir, Karl Ove’s writer friend, is the author of a book about boxing, *The Aesthetics of a Broken Nose*. In Book Two of *My Struggle*, Geir’s book has a significant impact on Karl Ove’s thoughts about writing when, after an eleven-year estrangement, Geir sends him a copy:
Geir’s book was not only about independence, it was also enacted within its terms of reference. He described only what he saw with his own eyes, what he heard with his own ears, and when he tried to describe what he saw and heard, it was by becoming a part of it. It was also the form of reflection that came closest to the life he was describing. A boxer was never judged by what he said or thought but by what he did. (Knausgaard 128)

Geir’s work thus “puts into words” a series of “suspicions, feelings, hunches” that had been troubling Karl Ove but to which he had been unable to give any “direction,” “clarity,” or “exactitude” (127). Now he does so: “Ever since I went to my first school I, and everyone around me, had been urged to think critically and independently. It had not occurred to me until I was well over thirty that this critical thinking was only of benefit up to a certain point and that beyond this it was transformed into its own opposite and became an evil, or evil itself.” True independence, he concludes, is located not in “abstract thought” but in “concrete reality,” meaning “the world in which I lived, slept, ate, spoke, made love and ran” (127–28). The revelation seems to have informed the conception and composition of the six-volume work, a work whose descriptions, according to Moi, bring into unity “the voice of the subject” and his interest in “the object” (“Describing”).

However, like every programmatic claim or moment of description in My Struggle, this passage is in free indirect discourse. Yes, the focalization is with Karl Ove himself, but Karl Ove, the recipient of Geir’s book, is an object of representation, his thoughts removed in time and being from the moment of narration. A few pages earlier, in a passage on Dostoevsky, Knausgaard has written that the idea of nihilism in Dostoevsky’s novels “never seems real,” that the asserted nihilism is contradicted by a humanness that “bursts forth everywhere, in all its forms, from the most grotesque and brutish to the aristocratically refined” (97). The passage contrasts Dostoevsky—whose real theme, “depth of soul,” amounts to an exclusion of the world—with Tolstoy, in whom we encounter a “preponderance of deeds and events for their own sake.” Knausgaard would like to be thought of as a Tolstoy, and yet his very rejection of abstraction in the name of “reality” has an abstract quality, “a drama of the soul” behind it (97), insofar as it appears as a term in a fundamentally theoretical reflection by the work’s protagonist. Knausgaard’s text is telling us something quite different from what is being voiced by Knausgaard’s narrator: that My Struggle, too, will be a text whose every normative declaration and conceptual proposition will be contradicted by the form of the work. Thus, the presiding spirit of Knausgaard’s text is Dostoevsky, and never more so than when its protagonist insists it is Tolstoy.

Passages of description or reflection in Knausgaard do not betoken a special “presence” or quality of “attentiveness” so much as an irreducible fictionality inside all such notions of presence. This element radically differentiates practices of description in Knausgaard from those
that take place in nonliterary contexts, whatever the author himself may think. When Donald Trump, for example, recalls the “thousands and thousands” of people from areas of New Jersey with “large Arab populations” whom he saw “cheering” as the World Trade Center “came tumbling down” on September 11, 2001 (Kessler), isn’t he too “describing only what he saw with his own eyes, what he heard with his own ears”? “I was there, and I watched, and I helped a little bit,” said Trump later (Bump). How else to differentiate Knausgaard’s practice of self-narration in *My Struggle* from that of Donald Trump if not “formally,” on the grounds of Knausgaard’s fictionality? “The essential fictiveness of novels,” writes Barbara Herrnstein Smith, “is not just to be discovered in the unreality of the characters, object and events alluded to, but in the unreality of the *alludings* themselves. […] In a novel or tale, it is the act of reporting events, the act of describing persons and referring to places, that is fictive. The novel represents the verbal action of a man reporting, describing, and referring” (29; emphasis in original). The stupidity of Trump’s utterance “I was there” consists not in the fact that he was not there, or that if he was there he did not help, or that if he was there and helped he did so for the wrong reasons. Its stupidity is precisely its assertion of presence, its belief in its protagonist as a real person, its claim to a consistent subjectivity across time and space, and its attribution of a level of concrete reality to description—an attribution that has, as Moi puts it, profound “moral, aesthetic or political” implications (“Describing”). What differentiates Trump’s discourse from Knausgaard’s, in brief, is the quality of its alludings.

Knausgaard continues:

Misology, the distrust of words […]; was that a way to go for a writer? Everything that can be said with words can be contradicted with words, so what’s the point of dissertations, novels, literature? Or put another way: whatever we say is true we can also always say is untrue. It is a zero point and the place from which the zero value begins to spread. However, it is not a dead point, not for literature either, for literature is not just words, literature is what words evoke in the reader. It is this transcendence that validates literature, not the formal transcendence in itself, as many believe […]. The fact that paintings and, to some extent, photographs were so important for me had something to do with this. They contained no words, no concepts, and when I looked at them what I experienced, what made them so important, was something stupid in this, an area that was completely devoid of intelligence, which I had difficulty acknowledging or accepting, yet which perhaps was the most important single element of what I wanted to do. (128–29)

What Karl Ove calls “stupid” is, of course, intelligence—the “nonconceptual” intelligence of fiction. The intelligence of Knausgaard’s writing has nothing to do with the quality of mind of its author, just as the stupidity of criticism has nothing to do with the quality of mind of, say, Prince, Moi, myself, or the readers addressed by this article. There is a genius in Knausgaard’s work that survives the inanity of many of its details, and
a fictionality that survives even its protagonist’s claim that the work he will write will “tell the truth” (Book Six 43), or his reflection, days before the publication of the first volume, that its “names, places, events were all authentic” (55). The intelligence of such claims and reflections consists not in their quotient of truth or reliability, not in their vividness of description or their achieved “transcendence,” but precisely in their reversibility.

In the same way, the stupidity of the present article is the canker of self-belief that survives whatever cleverness has gone into it; its faith, which is inexpungable no matter how hard I try to erase it and however many layers of focalization I engineer, that what it says is said by it, in a voice that is tied to its author by nothing more than a quality of attentiveness.

Writing in the New York Review of Books shortly after the publication of Book Two of My Struggle, Zadie Smith acclaimed the power of Knausgaard’s work in the following terms: “What’s notable is Karl Ove’s ability, rare these days, to be fully present in and mindful of his own existence. Every detail is put down without apparent vanity or decoration, as if the writing and the living are happening simultaneously.” By using his first name, Smith makes clear she is referring not to the author but to the novel’s speaking voice. Nevertheless, if there is a quality of intelligence to Knausgaard’s work that takes it far away from Trump’s empty claims of facticity, it is surely not because of some canker of “presence” in Knausgaard. There is a non-identity to every claim of presence in Knausgaard’s work, a non-identity that persists irrespective of—which is to say, at the very heart of—the many diegetic conversations in which Karl Ove says exactly the opposite.

Works Cited


