THE END OF EMMA

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(for Louis Dudek)

LIKE EVERY OTHER FORM OF ACTION, narration finds its sources in the structure of being-as-such, and cannot violate that structure. It is axiomatic that grace builds upon nature and will not scar or obliterate it, nor reverse its pattern of growth. No matter how sweetly graced, a hollyhock never turns into a beaver or a Chevrolet. Some of us, of animistic tendency, hope and believe that when our cars get sick, if we leave them alone and avert our eyes, they will get better. This never happens.

Furthermore, later nature never violates or washes away earlier nature; the elephant resembles but is not the mastodon. Photography didn't drive out the painted portrait; indeed there are many situations in which a careful drawing is more acceptable than a photograph for the purpose of later study when the object is absent. A portrait painter may work from the presence of the sitter, or from pictures of the sitter, or from sketches of him. No mode of witness expels or expunges another valid mode, but some modes of witness have had effects assigned to them which it is impossible in nature for them to have. If you photograph an object from the front, you cannot get around behind it and photograph it from the rear simultaneously with the same camera; only the surface presented to the lens will be recorded on the film; this is a consequence of the three-dimensional location of physical objects, and the witnessing consciousness, in time. When a television camera pans slowly around an object, as much of that object disappears from the frame as is brought into it. You can't see all sides of a thing at the same time. That's a pity; we wish it were otherwise, but it is the case, and fact, we know, is the sum of "what is the case." It is a fact that none of us can see all around anything, and the fact has had immense and visible consequences for the plastic arts.

Even when all attempts to make a mimetic representation of the appearance of the visible world have been given up, as ostensibly in the work of Mondrian, or sometimes in Klee, or in the op-art movement or among the hard-edge painters, the action painters, or any other form of abstraction, the problem of viewpoint remains (as you wouldn't expect it to on the premises of abstractionism) and

bedevils both the painter and the onlooker. The most abstract design requires to be seen, and is ideally seen from a specific distance. There is no point in examining the work of Klee, for example, from a distance of sixty feet. Nor should you stand too close to those large liver-coloured Rothko panels in the Tate. The room those panels are in is a bit too small for them, as a matter of fact; they ought to be looked at from about thirty-five feet away to be seen at their best. Since you can't do that in their present exhibition room, you can't get a good look at them, as we say. Any work of plastic art, whether purely abstract, or purely representational, or somewhere in between, has a certain viewpoint from which it is best seen, because it is a "thing-to-be-seen." That is what a work of plastic art is, a "thing-to-be-seen."

In those works of Magritte which consist of four panels of equal dimensions arranged symmetrically on a single canvas, in which minute changes appear in the objects represented, from panel to panel, most of the function of the picture is to exploit this "being-seenness." Our eyes flick restlessly back and forth from one part of the canvas to another, trying to spot the man in the act of putting his pipe in his mouth, or the cloud beginning to float into the drawing-room, or the armchair mysteriously disappearing. The painting is about how we see, and how we draw inferences from what is seen. Magritte has made an intense study of the relation of consciousness to happenstance; the wit of his art consists in the exploitation of their discontinuity. Bonnard, more than any other painter of the century, has investigated the phenomenon of how it feels to see. That is what the extraordinary late work of the 1930's and 1940's concerns itself with. Those peculiar networks of diamond-or-lozenge-shaped forms which conceal themselves in Bonnard's designs, appear to have been for the painter a kind of visual short-hand, something like a geodesic grid, for the movement of the eye and the function of the optic nerve and our other equipment for seeing, as we apprehend space receding from consciousness. Perspective, in the later work of Bonnard, has nothing to do with line or geometrical form, as in the comparatively arid treatment of similar matters in Cezanne. Bonnard renders depth by colour relationships and their brilliant evocation of our blurred feeling-of-seeing; the picture is essentially a varying and deepening of perceived atmospheres, what is in the air, grasped by a viewer who is as nearly as possible in the picture. Of course Bonnard is too wise to paint the nose or the toes of this viewer somewhere along the edge of his two-dimensional space, for that would be to violate the nature of pictorial representation. All plastic art depends upon viewpoint and sight, sculpture as much, perhaps more, than painting.

Every sculpture is best seen from the viewpoint selected as the most favourable by the sculptor, usually the point from which he did most of the modelling of the form. In rendering, say, a human torso in three dimensions, the sculptor cannot

work on all sides of the form at once. He can see approximately two-fifths of the figure from any given standpoint, and he invariably selects, consciously or not, the best angle from which to approach the given plastic problem. It is remarkable how many works of sculpture betray immediately where the sculptor was standing when he felt most at ease with the form. Many, many sculptures have received very sketchy treatments of their "other side" or back parts. Most sculptors fudge the assholes of torsos. I know. I always check.

Similar, or perhaps strictly parallel, conditions prevail in all the other arts, indeed in every human activity. In music there is a perpetual question in the artist's mind about how much his listener can hear. Some listeners simply can't hear inner voices in music; some have no apprehension of rhythmic movement. Some are deaf to differences in timbre, but can notice changes in pitch or volume. Musicians spend their lives finding out what can be heard. Probably the most important development in European music, the gradual adoption of the tempered scale, enshrined and celebrated in Bach's great cycle of keyboard works, has caused generations of musicians with perfect pitch real discomfort, because of the way in which the various scales treat enharmonic sounds as *the same sound* for the purpose of easy modulation from one scale to another. They are not the same sound: C-flat in one scale may be several vibrations per second removed from B in an adjoining scale, which nevertheless treats the two tones as identical. If your ear is good enough, the failure of the two tones to coincide can cause genuine physical distress.

I remember trying to invoke a musical analogy in conversation with a veteran literary theorist. I put the idea forward that the novelist Iris Murdoch, by giving to certain minor characters very occasional lines of dialogue at different points in a long fiction, was able to suggest in the reader's mind a continuing impression of how those minor characters must behave when not onstage. The literary means is familiar enough; but when I said that this was strictly analogous to the way your thumb, say, or the little finger on your right hand, can strike very occasional notes in a keyboard piece by Bach, and that these notes then give rise to the continuing gestalt or impression of an "inner voice," I lost my hearer completely. This was because he simply never heard inner voices in music. What he heard was a uniform wash of sound, or at least that was what he reported to me when I asked him to describe his musical experience. My Murdoch/Bach analogy fell at once to the ground, which seems a pity because it is fundamentally accurate.

The composer is constantly thrown back upon the range of what can be heard by a representative cross-section of his potential audience. Mozart, writing to his father from Vienna, commented about his easy piano concertos, K413, K414, K415, that they were pieces which should find popularity amongst uninstructed listeners, "but there are things in them which will please the long-ears too." He

was able to write for distinct audiences, in the awareness that uninstructed listeners might with application find their way into the long-eared community. But he wrote no work which was scored for those dog-whistles inaudible to human ears. A work of music is always dependent upon what can be heard by somebody, connoisseur, fellow composer, the great public, and the composer is invariably faced with a series of decisions about what is audible and what is not. The most fundamental choice lies between the creation of a smooth seamless wash of sound, in which the listener is aware that there are individual parts, but cannot easily discriminate them, as in much late nineteenth-century orchestral writing, and the linear contrapuntal style of Bach or Haydn or (a much lesser artist) Reger. The options correspond roughly to the distinction between linear and painterly treatment of pictorial subjects originally proposed by Wolfflin and much exploited afterwards. It is a distinction which seems to correspond with the actual conditions of visibility and audibility. Paintings must submit themselves to the conditions of sight, music to those of sound.

LITERARY COMPOSITION IS SUBJECTED to strictly analogous conditions. In writing it is useless to attempt to realize the unrealizable, to tell the tale of the ineffable. Some happenings are simply inaccessible to literature: musical thought, perhaps metaphysical thought, sexual rapture, the interior world of conscience, private judgment. Poetry, fiction, and drama can deliver the seeable, audible, the recognizable, but not the private world of another, as we shall see.

This is because nature resists violation, and what is contrary to nature is contrary to art. For example, nobody can paint two hills without a hollow between them. If there is no valley between, there is only a single hill; I give a frivolous example intentionally, but I can provide others not so frivolous. You can't write a story about two persons who are indiscernible, whose bodies occupy the same space at the same time. For according to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles, if two beings were identical in every respect, they would be the same being. As it happens, I know of no attempt to write a story about two persons who are indiscernible in the philosophical sense, precisely because they would be a single person, and in nature even identical twins are different in many respects, always at least in one. There are stories about identical twins, and Siamese twins, and about children lying in the maternal womb, but none about twins who are coinstantiate, none about children who are their mothers.

Cloning is impossible, for if the most exact replica conceivable of some entity were to be produced, it would not have existed during the same period of time; it

would be much *younger.* My clone can never be born at the same moment as me, and even if only moments intervene our histories, our experiences, will be totally different. Tiny divergence at the outset leads to immense opposition in the end. Only consider family life!

Nor is it possible to write a story in which time runs forward, backward, and sideways, that is, with multiple modes of temporality. I know of stories with flashbacks, but as soon as a flashback takes place, time begins remorselessly to run in its familiar direction. There is that hilarious tale by Stephen Leacock, "The Retroactive Existence of Mr. Juggins," in which the unlucky Juggins grows younger and younger, to the point where, as Leacock admits, "he will back up clear through the Curtain of Existence and die, or be born, I don't know which to call it. Meanwhile he remains to me as one of the most illuminating allegories I have met." The story can only make its comic point against a background of temporality in which everybody but Juggins is getting older, as in fact we all are. We sure as hell aren't getting any younger, and if the fact is denied there will be no story and no comic point. Juggins is exactly an allegory of the fact that existence is not retroactive, and a subtly suggestive allegory at that, worthy of juxtaposition with the closing pages of *Le Temps retrouvé*, where related paradoxes are propounded. But of course time moves in all stories as it does in life. Story is vested in before/after relations, whether the most relentless work of literary realism, or the most ingenious fantasy of Borges or Nabokov, or the most tiresome "post-modernist" nonsense by Robert Kroetsch or somebody with similar opinions, in which time seems to stand still because of the intensely boring quality of the writing. Here the illusion of timelessness is not sought by Kroetsch, but comes unbidden and fatally, having nothing to do with the underpinnings of story.

A story then is necessarily a sequential relation about entities which obey the laws of nature, never, for example, violating the principle of non-contradiction. A few of the sillier deconstructionists have suggested recently that the law of non-contradiction is only a prejudice of the metaphysical tradition of the West, which ought, on the whole, to be repealed. "*A thing cannot both be, and not be, in the same way at the same time.*" Try to repeal that, and see what it gets you! It will buy you an atom of nonsense, a grain of perplexity, a hint of vertigo, and at length a soupçon of terror.

Certain literary laws follow hard upon an understanding of these fundamental truths about actuality. Nobody can take a bath for you. More generally, nobody can have your experience in life or art. No fiction writer, no matter how gifted, how richly endowed with sympathetic intuition, can do more than guess imaginatively at the inner truths of another person's experience, nor can any other artist or scientist do more. The writer who constructs literary contrivances which he proposes as likenesses of some other person's "stream of consciousness" or

"interior monologue" isn't doing what he believes himself to be doing, though he may be doing something extremely well. Nobody would give up Molly Bloom's soliloquy because Joyce wasn't doing what he pretended. What is present in that celebrated passage is a superbly poetic family history, never-sufficiently-to-be-praised, of what Molly and Poldy and Blazes and Rudy and Milly and the whole grand gang were doing over the previous decade, yes, yes, yes, but the only interior actuality delivered by the passage is that of James A. Joyce. "*Madame Bovary, c'est moi,*" admitted Flaubert. "*Madame Bloom, c'est toi, Jimmy.*"

It is an unshakeable axiom of human experience that no other being but God has direct access to the secret heart. My personal experience cannot be inspected by any commissar, by any interrogator or confessor. It is only given to me, and can only be witnessed and testified to by me. It would be useless for the interrogators to remove the top of my head to look inside to see what I'm thinking or feeling. All they might see would be a couple of pounds of squirming wet grey wormy stuff; they won't see me. Nobody can take a bath for me or make up my mind for me, or know what it feels like to be me, or judge my "motives," choices, and actions, except the Creator.

When this is understood, the desperate psychologism of the twentieth century dries up and blows away, the second gravest error of the time immediately preceding our own, say between 1870 and 1970, from the death of Charles Dickens to the end of the horrible 1960's. It was only in the 1970's that critics of narration began to notice that the distinction between the first and third person, workable and necessary in grammar, was illusory and false in narration, since any sentence in a narration is framed by the implied statement of the person telling the story, "I witnessed this." Narration is a testimony to witness before it is anything else. If, then, it succumbs to the psychologism of the age immediately preceding our own, it must either become autobiographical in form or pretend to an awareness which it cannot have, the awareness of "the psychological novel."

I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS IN COLLEGE around 1947, 1948, 1949, that many of my professors told me that the novel in English, during the course of its steady evolution through lower forms to higher, had advanced from the novel of Dickens to the novel of George Eliot and Henry James, a claim which struck me then, as it does now, as indefensible. "That can't be right," I told myself as I listened to these statements. It was so clearly a retrograde step from the work of Dickens to that of George Eliot and Henry James, so clearly an enfeeblement and a wasting of the power of the genre.

It's a step backwards and downwards from Dickens to Eliot and James. Think of it, the only writer in English worthy to be named beside Shakespeare, the creator of Todgers and Rosa Dartle and Miss Wade and the Circumlocution Office, the great Dickens, somehow or other to be placed below George Eliot and Henry James. Though I didn't know it, when I first listened to this nonsense in 1947, my professors were simply repeating the pieties of David Cecil's book on the Victorian novelists, in which he describes George Eliot as "the first modern novelist" because of her "acute psychological insight."

The same sort of person will praise Titian and Rembrandt for their "acute psychological insight," when the gift these painters have in common is the art of applying paint to canvas, or preparing underglazing, of the placement of the dot of Chinese white in the represented pupil of the eye. Neither would pretend to the least acuity of psychological insight.

Dickens was the first practising writer not in the secret to spot the female authorship of *Scenes From Clerical Life*, and he acknowledged the accomplishments of its author repeatedly in correspondence, in charming and honest compliment. He was to the end of his life unsparing in his admiration for the work of George Eliot; nothing he wrote about her suggests that comparison or rivalry between them was conceivable to him, and we do well to follow Dickens' example. You cannot compare oranges to potatoes with any profit. Neither George Eliot nor Henry James, nor Flaubert for that matter, possessed a tenth of the understanding of how fiction works, what its premises must be, of Dickens, nor did any of them produce anything which bears comparison with his best work, indeed his good average work. To put the matter clearly, there are no novels in any literature better than *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*, and at most half a dozen worthy to be mentioned in the same breath, in any literature. It was Dickens who effected a permanent change in mankind's notion of what a novel is, not Flaubert, not Henry James.

Tolstoi, Dostoievsky, Wilkie Collins, Henry James himself (in *The Princess Casamassima* and elsewhere), Proust, Conrad, Graham Greene, Faulkner, Mark Twain, P. G. Wodehouse, Stephen Leacock, Kingsley Amis, Evelyn Waugh, D. W. Griffith for the matter of that, all bear the stamp of Dickens in a hundred ways: the first great novelist of the urban underworld, the greatest literary portraitist of the criminal and aberrant in human life (from Bill Sikes to John Jasper), the unmatchable creator of scene and atmosphere, the superb imagist, the master of spoken dialogue, simply the greatest writer of comedy in western literature, and the subtlest writer of religious allegory in the English tongue. This is the novelist from whom it was considered that we must advance towards the work of George Eliot, "the first modern novelist."

George Eliot and Henry James and their celebrated examinations of "motive."

Around the year of Dickens' death in 1870, when George Eliot was preparing the excellent *Middlemarch* for publication, two beginning novelists were working towards their earliest genuinely novelistic conceptions, Henry James and Thomas Hardy. When Hardy's first major work appeared in 1874, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, Henry James reviewed it in the terms of sharp disapproval; he recognized the beneficent example of George Eliot in the dialogue scenes of rustics and yokels; the rest of the work he dismissed as vulgar and inconsequential. Later in life James would refer to Hardy as "the good little Thomas Hardy," wondering, in correspondence with R. L. Stevenson and others, how the clumsy Hardy managed to stumble upon his effects. This isn't a caricature of James' opinion: he put these views on paper himself, about the author of *The Woodlanders*, that intensely poetic, exquisitely realized evocation of charmed lives in that singular enchanted wood.

I have no wish to use against Henry James (whose work I admire immensely) any weapons not supplied by himself. This historian of fine consciences, upon whom nothing, he hoped, was lost, was in this instance losing everything. He could not apprehend what Hardy does in prose fiction that makes him as good a novelist as the English language has produced since the death of Dickens. Proust admired *The Woodlanders* almost excessively, and for these qualities which make us blink in wonder. Hardy nowhere pretends to dissect "motive" or trace the history of the fine conscience. He gives us Marty's haircut, her tears at Winterbourne's grave (and ours), what can be seen, heard, smelt, touched, tasted. He delivers what it is in prose fiction to deliver, appearances, not motives.

Nobody can know anything of any motives but his own, and these only dimly and with extreme difficulty. When you examine your notion of "motive," "a motive," "my motive," you find that it dissolves like quicksilver in your hands. Is not the label "motive" a necessary fiction much like the word "red"? So many different hues can be labelled red that we wonder what it is that they have in common. We can observe actions but cannot trace their springs. I have lived with my wife for more than a quarter of a century, and I have no more idea of the impulses that agitate her and the springs of her actions than I did before we were wed. What *is* a motive anyway? Is it something like what happens when one billiard ball causes another to move, something like the transmission of physical motion (itself pretty mysterious if you think about it) as the term "motive" suggests, what *moves* one to action?

In contemporary Canadian writing there is one author who is identified more often than any other as our greatest psychologist in fiction, Alice Munro. It seems just worth mentioning that when I read the following lines from Book Seven of *The Prelude* to Alice Munro, in the dining room of our house in Montréal in the summer of 1974, she began to weep.

As the black storm upon the mountaintop
Sets off the sunbeam in the valley, so
That huge fermenting mass of humankind
Serves as a solemn background, or relief,
To single forms and objects, whence they draw,
For feeling and contemplative regard,
More than inherent liveliness and power.
How oft, amid those overflowing streets
Have I gone forward with the crowd, and said
Unto myself, "The face of everyone
That passes by me is a mystery!"
Thus have I looked, nor ceased to look, oppressed
By thoughts of what and whither, when and how,
Until the shapes before my eyes became
A second-sight procession, such as glides
Over still mountains, or appears in dreams;
And once, far-travelled in such mood, beyond
The reach of common indication, lost
Among the moving pageant, I was smitten
Abruptly, with the view (a sight not rare)
Of a blind beggar, who, with upright face,
Stood, propped against a wall, upon his chest
Wearing a written paper, to explain
His story, whence he came, and who he was.
Caught by the spectacle my mind turned round
As with the might of waters; and apt type
This label seemed of the utmost we can know
Both of ourselves and of the universe;
And, on the shape of that unmoving man,
His steadfast face and sightless eyes, I gazed,
As if admonished from another world.

I will not offer a gloss on such lines, but I think I know why Alice Munro wept.

When it is done rightly, the writing of fiction is not an act of analysis of the motives of others, "psychological fiction." It can't in nature pretend to any such power. So good-bye Emma Bovary, and hello Alice Munro! Fiction written on the premises of the heirs of Flaubert and James is necessarily autobiography, and the historian of fine consciences is in truth the historian of no conscience but his own, which is why Henry James' policemen speak in the accents of Henry James. Narration, and especially prose fiction, must concern itself with the mysterious blind beggar and the sign on his breast, and neither more nor less.

My own motives are mysterious to me. I can't extricate them one from another. And about your motives I know nothing. But I can see you.