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ELIZABETH GASKELL: A DISCOVERED LINK

"Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" (3): with such an innocent third-person narrative opening to her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf springboards the reader into a text that teems with the thoughts of almost every character who enters a scene. From the free indirect thought of the second line of the book—"For Lucy had her work cut out for her"—to free indirect speech in the third paragraph—"What a lark! What a plunge!"—the reader is caught up in seeing the action of the narrative and the consciousness of the characters in focalization that shifts, literally, line by line (3). For example, at Lady Bruton's luncheon, first Hugh Whitbread is able to speak because he feels "completely sure of his standing," Miss Brush, the secretary, "resents [a] familiarity intensely," Richard Dalloway thinks of how "remarkable…in [Lady Bruton's] family the likeness persisted in women," and Lady Bruton says, indirectly, to herself, "Better wait to put before them the question that bothered her… until they have had their coffee" (104-5). This use of "singulative multifocalization" (692), as Goran Nieragden calls it, only intensifies with the passing pages. The sense of immediacy engendered by the rapidly moving focus creates an atmosphere similar to that of live theater.

Such use of shifting focalization is rather common in novels of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; indeed, one of the main emphases in the study of narratology is the study of focalization. Gerard Genette clarifies the concept of focalization when he asks the questions "Who speaks?" and "Who sees?" (186). Calling the difference an "almost universally disregarded distinction" (186), he uses the questions to indicate that the narrator may be the one "speaking" to the reader, but the center of consciousness, the one through whose eyes and ears the reader observes the scenes and characters, is the one who can erase the distance between reader and narrative. Working from his authoritative text, narratologists have considered every aspect of what is commonly called free

indirect style, which includes free indirect discourse, free indirect thought, free indirect speech, "narrated monologue," a term coined by Dorrit Cohn (494), "internal focalization of awareness," a broader term used by Theo Damsteegt (63), and a host of other alternative terms to indicate that a narrator cedes control of focus to one or more characters within the narrative. This focus can both limit access, in terms of first person, homodiegetic, point of view, and broaden access, in terms of third person, heterodiegetic, point of view, as Monica Fludernik shows in her excellent survey of the use of such terms (619-628).

On one point all the theorists agree: the first author to write extensively in English with free indirect discourse and internal focalization is Jane Austen, who uses the techniques most often in her final novel *Persuasion*. One critic, Louise Flavin, points specifically to a passage in which four perspectives collide (23). Besides agreeing that Austen is the first English author to use the technique, Cohn points out that she sets the "pattern" by which others, such as Flaubert, Zola, and James, "most decisively [abandon] first-person narration…, instituting instead the norms of the dramatic novel…[and] re-introduc[ing] the subjectivity of private experience…by imperceptibly integrating mental reactions into the neutral-objective report of actions, scenes, and spoken words" (503). Cohn continues that such use of "narrated monologue" appears in Virginia Woolf's works to such a great extent that "the narrative text appears as the adjunct of the narrated monologue, rather than the other way around" (503). Thus evidence abounds that focalization, as a technique, emerges in Jane Austen's work and later flourishes in Virginia Woolf's work. In between the works of these two authors, chronologically, lies a host of others, some of whom use third-person focalization. One of these, the novel *North and South*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, yields many instances of free indirect style, used in a sophisticated manner that Austen does not attain in *Persuasion*.

At the beginning of Austen's *Persuasion*, the third-person omniscient narration is focused on Sir Walter Elliot, who enjoys

reading the book of Baronetage: "there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect…there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally in to pity and contempt" (9). The narrator intrudes to add a criticism that "vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter's character" (10) and later emphasizes his thoughts about his own good looks and the lack thereof in others with words that most likely can be attributed directly to his consciousness: "Anne haggard, Mary coarse, every face in the neighbourhood worsting" (12). The point of view is omniscient, but the focus is particular, at this point, to Anne's father.

The focus then changes to Anne's older sister Elizabeth and Lady Russell, Anne's champion in the family. After Lady Russell is introduced, her thoughts become the focus, as she thinks about the financial situation of the Elliots: "They must retrench; that did not admit of a doubt" (17). Anne, the protagonist, then becomes the focal point, as the discussion concerning the Elliots' financial situation is recounted as indirect discourse: "She considered it as an act of indispensable duty…. She wanted it to be prescribed…. Her knowledge inclined her to think" that one sacrifice would be as painful as two to her father and Elizabeth (18). Immediately after the description of Anne's thoughts, however, Mr. Elliot's reaction is given as direct discourse, with quotation marks, even though the ending of the quotation includes words that indicate it to be indirect discourse: "No he would sooner quit Kellynch-hall at once than remain in it on such disgraceful terms" (18). Thus begins a book in which the third-person narration is often focalized through a particular person and almost as often includes either indirect discourse written as direct discourse or vice versa.

Primarily, the focalization and discourse is used to reveal the inner thoughts of one character about another, such as when Lady Russell encourages the Elliots to move to Bath because "she wanted [Anne] to be more known" (20), or to allow a character to provide description of another character through

reported discourse, such as when Mr. Shepherd's words on Admiral Croft are relayed: "[Admiral Croft] was a married man and without children; the very state to be wished for" (27). Even the introduction of Mr. Wentworth into the story, although it comes through Lady Russell's memory of Anne's and his early unfortunate engagement, segues into his past consciousness to provide the picture of him as he had been eight years earlier: "he was confident that he should soon be rich…he knew that he should soon have a ship….[H]e had always been lucky" (30).

From that point, the focalization centers mostly on Anne, revealing her to be a character who spends much time thinking about how she interacts with others: She "resolve[s] to avoid… self-delusion" concerning the Elliots' new circumstances in Bath (44); she "acknowledge[s] it to be very fitting, that every little social commonwealth should dictate its own matters of discourse" when she must remain with her sister Mary for some months (44); after questioning her ability to "set…matters to right" in Mary's household, she thinks that she can "do little more than listen patiently, soften every grievance, and excuse each to the other" (47). In all these situations, Austen's focalization with free indirect discourse or direct discourse that uses indirect wording reveals the thoughts of characters about their feelings regarding others.

Although Gaskell's third-person focalization begins on the second line of *North and South* with Margaret, the protagonist, observing her cousin Edith and being "struck afresh by her cousin's beauty" (5), Gaskell proceeds quite differently from Austen's form. Almost immediately, the focalization goes from thoughts and images to sounds, as "pieces of the conversation out of the next room came upon [Margaret's] ears" (6). Direct dialogue of Margaret's Aunt Shaw and other women fill the next few lines. However, the words, "[she] hear[s] her aunt's voice again, but this time it was as if she had raised herself up from her half-recumbent position" (7), secure Margaret as the focal filter through which the action is heard.

Within the next paragraph, the focalization becomes rather complicated, beginning with a third-person description of Mr. Henry Lennox, followed by Margaret's thoughts that he has a "slightly sarcastic" interest in the family gathering (13). The focalization immediately shifts to Mr. Lennox, who thinks "it a pretty sight to see the two cousins so busy in their little arrangements about the table" (13). The next section shifts to Mrs. Shaw's remembrance of her sister "[d]earest Maria [who] had married the man of her heart"; inside the memory, the focus shifts to her thoughts at the time of her marriage: "Mr. Hale was one of the most delightful preachers she had ever heard, and a perfect model of a parish priest" (14). Immediately the focalization shifts back to Margaret, who "only [knows] that her mother had not found it convenient to come" to Edith's wedding (15). A pattern emerges of narration focused on one character, usually Margaret, very similar to Austen's focalization that develops the character's thoughts about other characters. The sudden bursts of focalization on various other characters, however, are quite different from Austen's rather staid pace of focalization. Such abrupt, quick shifts in Gaskell's focalization create a sense of immediacy in the narrative.

An aspect of focalization that Gaskell uses in a way that Austen does not is her description of interior rooms. Besides the revelation of Helstone as a place "poor and faded" with "carpet [that] was far from new" and "chintz [that] had been often washed," as Henry Lennox first views it (22), the Hales' rented home in Crampton is seen through Mr. Thornton's eyes as one that contrasts favorably to his own home. Although his "[is] twice—twenty times as fine," it is not "one quarter as comfortable" (74). His thoughts include such positive aspects as "warm, sober breadth of coloring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers," "[p]retty baskets of work," a "table, decked out for tea, with a white table-cloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes," and a basket that held "ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves" (74). In the midst of his thinking are

words that can be attributed only to Margaret's thinking as she observes him viewing the room, for he could not know that the chintz-curtains and chair covers are from "dear old Helstone." In contrast, when Margaret visits Mr. Thornton's house for the first time, her mind's eye sees something that "impress[es] Margaret so unpleasantly that she [is] hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere" and sees only the "effect of icy, snowy discomfort" (105). The narrator's allowing the character's eyes to focus on a particular setting creates a sense of intimacy, just as the use of the character's thoughts creates immediacy.

Instead of focalizing on a character who sees a setting, in *Persuasion* Austen uses the third-person narrator to describe the Musgroves' house with its ornate decorations. The narrator, not Anne, shows discontent with the setting by using hyperbolic wording: "Oh! Could the originals of the portraits against the wainscot, could the gentlemen in brown velvet and the ladies in blue satin have seen what was going on….The portraits themselves seemed to be staring in astonishment" (42). Another example of the third-person narrator's control occurs when the young people, while visiting the seaside town of Lyme, are invited to the Harvilles' rented house. They find "rooms so small as none but those who invite from the heart could think capable of accommodating so many" (96). Those words are the words of the narrator, for the next sentence focuses on Anne: "Anne had a moment's astonishment on the subject herself" (96). Austen automatically turns to the omniscient narrator to see objects and places, whereas Gaskell sees through the characters and creates a more intimate, less distant impression. Such examples indicate how differently Gaskell uses focalization, allowing a character's eyes and mind to focus the narration.

Gaskell also uses focalization and free indirect discourse to develop ideas within the focalized characters. Early in the novel Margaret receives a marriage proposal from Mr. Henry Lennox, whom she knows to be "the pleasantest man, the most

sympathising friend, the person of all others who under[stands] her best in Harley Street" (28). Yet she is "annoyed" by the "whole tone" of his address and feels "a tinge of contempt mingle itself with her pain at having refused him" (28). Because she sees herself and her reactions, her character gains a consistency and integrity in the narrative. When Margaret reads her brother Frederick's letters that explain how he had been implicated in mutiny, she interprets the situation with words that can only be attributed to an internal monologue: "It might be—it probably was—a statement of Captain Reid's imperiousness in trifles, very much exaggerated by the narrator [Frederick] who had written it while fresh and warm from the scene of altercation" (101). Gaskell's focalization of Margaret shows her learning facts and gaining wisdom in direct ways.

In other words, unlike Austen, who focuses on Anne's emotional connection to Mr. Wentworth, this direct development of Margaret's character goes beyond the romantic connection to Mr. Thornton. For example, at a dinner in which she and Mr. Thornton recognize the worth of one another, Margaret reflects that she is "surprised to think how much she enjoyed this dinner" (152). The next words are not about Mr. Thornton, but about the fact that she knows "enough now to understand many local interests" and that she is pleased that the "eager mill-owners" speak "in desperate earnest,—not in the used-up style that" she had seen at parties in London (152). Margaret's maturity and developing insight are most notable when she returns to her Aunt Shaw's home in London after the tumultuous year in Milton-Northern. At yet another dinner party, she reflects on the superficial attitudes of the guests, seeing that they spend their talents and virtues "for fireworks; the hidden, sacred fire, exhausted itself in sparkle and crackle" (377). She thinks that they waste "their capabilities of appreciation into a mere flow of appropriate words" (377). Gaskell's ability to focalize on Margaret develops the character with no intrusion of the third-person narrator who may or may not be reliable and who, in any case, creates distance from the story.

Although Austen attempts to reveal character development with the focalization on a particular character, she seems not to trust that a reader will understand the process. For example, when Anne is playing the piano for the dancing at the Musgroves' home, she is "extremely glad to be employed, and desire[s] nothing in return but to be unobserved" (71). Moments later, Anne reflects that Captain Wentworth is in high spirits and that he has "every thing to elevate him.... If he were a little spoilt by such universal, such eager admiration, who could wonder?" (71). This passage rightly focuses on Anne and her thoughts, but the narrator feels the necessity, in the next line, to say just that: "These were some of the thoughts which occupied Anne" (71). On the other hand, one instance in which Austen's method parallels Gaskell's is the reporting of "the elegant stupidity of private parties" to which Sir Walter and Elizabeth are addicted, but by which Anne is "wearied" (170). The context, however, of Anne's weariness is, once again, that of her personal unrest concerning Mr. Wentworth, who is not invited to these parties and who, therefore, is not available for Anne to ascertain his feelings toward her. The development of Anne's character, then, is most usually limited to her emotions, especially her emotions concerning Wentworth.

Perhaps, therefore, the most telling instance of the difference in focalization between these two nineteenth-century authors is in the handling of the romantic scenes of the major protagonists. In *Persuasion*, the third-person narrator tells of Anne's and Captain Wentworth's final reunion with these words: "[S]oon words enough had passed between them to decide their direction...where the power of conversation would make the present hour a blessing indeed; and prepare for it all the immortality which the happiest recollections of their own future lives could bestow" (226). Their confession of love continues in indirect discourse, followed by lines of direct discourse. Only when Anne reaches her room later in the day does the narrator shift to the more intimate focalization on Anne with the words, "An interval of meditation, serious and grateful, was the best corrective of every thing dangerous in such high-wrought felicity" (231).

Austen had hastily written an earlier ending to the novel that she later replaced with the narrative of Anne's and Captain Wentworth's pledge of love, but it uses third-person narration, as well. Indirect discourse in the scene in Anne's room, however, creates the sense of intimacy: "It had been such a day to Anne!—the hours which had passed since her leaving Camden Place had done so much!" (Appendix 247). The words are in third-person narration, but the exclamation points are those of a first-person monologue. Because both versions of *Persuasion* then end with a tidy summary of the lives of the principal characters beyond the time span of the action of the novel, Austen reveals the tendency to control the narrative, ultimately, through the third-person omniscient narrator rather than through focalization of a particular character.

Gaskell handles her romantic ending much more directly with dialogue. The dialogue, however, does not begin with personal confession, but with the business transaction that Margaret wants to seal with Mr. Thornton. In fact, the focalization centers first upon Margaret with the words, "[S]he went on looking for some paper on which were written down the proposals for security; for she was most anxious to have it all looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement" (402). Even this late in the novel, Gaskell emphasizes Margaret's character development in the public sphere before turning to the personal development. The narration continues to focus on Margaret's thoughts until Mr. Thornton embraces her. Then the focus changes to him with these words of indirect discourse: "it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his" (402). With only a few words of interruption to make clear who is speaking, the rest of the narrative ends in direct dialogue. Thus, the focalization and the dialogue allow readers to be fully engaged in the moment of the narrative at its very end.

Austen ends *Persuasion* with the third-person narrator; Gaskell ends *North and South* with direct dialogue; Woolf ends *Mrs. Dalloway* with free indirect speech revealing Peter's thoughts—"What is this terror? what is this ecstasy?....What is

it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa"—followed by free indirect discourse that is still in Peter's focus: "For there she was" (194). Whereas Austen still clings to the useful third-person omniscient narrator to gain authorial control, both Gaskell and Woolf seem willing to relinquish that control. Instead of Austen's limited use of focalization and free indirect discourse that reveal solely a character's inner thoughts, Gaskell uses the techniques to create immediacy in a scene, intimacy in a setting, and development in a character's personality. Such diverse use of the technique points toward Woolf's writing, in which every scene, every setting, every personality is revealed through focalization of each character.

Referring to Gaskell's personal life, Woolf says, "She disappeared" ("Mrs. Gaskell"). She could have been speaking of her as omniscient narrator: as she disappears from the text, her characters stand clearly in focus. Woolf admired Austen as "the most perfect artist among women" ("Jane Austen"), but Woolf's style seems to point back to Gaskell's techniques, making Gaskell a natural link between Austen and Woolf.

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