Man in a Sidecar: Madness, Totality and Narrative Drive in the Short Story

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Abstract. Taking as its starting point the philosopher Stanley Cavell's brief reflections on Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" and writing as self-understanding, self-concealment and madness – and as its founding image Cary Grant speaking of love alone in a sidecar in *I Was a Male War Bride* – this paper considers the relation between totality and incompleteness in the short story, focusing in particular on the incompletion of desire as a way of discussing the formal issues involved. If the modernist short story is so often thought of as an emblem of formal closure (the single gesture or unitary narrative shape), it often deals with notions of interruption and nonpresence, and with a certain madness created by the inability to account for the other. The paper considers two classic modernist stories of incomplete desire – Joyce's "The Dead" and Katherine Mansfield's "The Stranger" – and compares them to two sets of postmodern short stories, the "chain stories" of the English writer David Mitchell and the stories of the American David Foster Wallace (in particular the title story of *Oblivion*), exploring the proposition that in the contemporary stories incompleteness is displaced from identity to the narrative in which the self is ostensibly located, radically changing the form itself. That suggestion can, finally, be related to the changed cultural position of the form within the publishing industry.

Keywords: totality, fragmentation, knowledge of others, domesticity, desire, subjectivity, madness, James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, David Mitchell, David Foster Wallace

In recent years, the modernism/postmodernism divide has increasingly come to seem a product of a rather local and often tendentious dialogue within a long twentieth century; one which in particular constructed modernism as the nervous, frosty and high-cultural other to a hipper and more relaxed postmodernism. In most ways, it has become more productive to think of a long process of incomplete and more complete modernity in dialogue with its others; and from that point of view postmodernism has become more of a

period term, dropping off university MA courses to be replaced by twenty-first century and contemporary literature, post 9/11 literature, and so on. But for all that, to abandon any account of shifts in literary form and its cultural logic over the last century is clearly impossible: we need ways to conceptualise differences between the early twentieth-century and the contemporary. This paper is a tentative attempt to do that in the field of the short story.

My understanding of the short story as genre is founded on its break with the tradition of the storyteller as described by Benjamin and its engagement with forms of commercial, psychological and stylistic modernity: the mass market; the registrations of intensities; nervousness; and formal control. We might take Edgar Allan Poe's letter to Charles Anthon in 1844 as emblematic of the emerging market:

> I perceived that the whole energetic, busy spirit of the age tended wholly to the Magazine literature – to the curt, the terse, the well-timed, and the readily diffused, in preference to the old forms of the ponderous & the inaccessible. (*Letters* 268)

Situating the short story in the context of the vibrant American print market, Poe describes an art conditioned by commodity status and by an audience whose attention span is limited. Its association with modernism, in contrast, derives from a formalist agenda which likens it to poetry. But this seeming opposition can, dialectically, be resolved in terms of the intensities demanded by the modern self: Poe's declaration in his review of Hawthorne that the story must be directed towards a "single effect" proposes an aesthetic which was to find an echo in Mallarmé and others:

> If his [the writer's] very first sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then in his very first step he has committed a blunder. In the whole composition there should be no word written of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design. (*Essays* 586)

The tale, Poe continues, needs a reader who "contemplates it with a kindred art"; the "unblemished" (*Essays* 586) transmission of its central idea contrasts with the diffuseness of the novel.

This essay considers the relation between totality and fragmentation in the short story, focusing in particular on the incompletion of desire as a way of discussing the formal issues

involved. "Totality" is not perhaps the best word for what I have in mind, though it bears some relation to the way the word is used by Georg Lukács, for whom what is at stake is partly a relation between subjectivity and objectivity, and between the commodity and the economic system it inhabits. The term might thus serve as an index of the way in which the short story presents itself in terms of an implied relation between the enclosed world of the story and the wider world in all its complexity; between solipsism and society.

What I don't mean, directly at least, is formal closure. Much of the recent criticism of the modernist short story – that by Dominic Head, and to some extent Adrian Hunter, Paul March-Russell and others – has stressed its fragmentary status over any notion of formal completion: Head speaks of "a simplistic emphasis on single effects, narrative stability and formal unity" (Head 185) in the tradition of criticism of the modernist story; March-Russell of "the enduring legacy of formalism within short story criticism" (March-Russell x-ix). They have also tended to stress the diversity of the form, to the point that, for Hunter and March-Russell, it almost ceases to exist as anything other than a series of sub-genres. Nevertheless, I think the tendency to emphasise the *adequacy* of the short story as an index of the modern – its status as a bright fragment of intense consciousness, signalling the modern predicament – tends to re-inscribe a certain closure on the genre. And of course in the period of modernism it *was* often described in terms of the single gesture or unitary narrative shape. At the same time, I'll suggest that it often deals with notions of interruption and non-presence, and with a certain madness created by the inability to account for the other. This is in part the problem of dealing with what is outside its borders, including the expanded forms of reference offered by the novel. The tension between totality and incompletion has, I will suggest, a legacy in the recent short story.

I want to begin with Stanley Cavell's typically wandering and lapidary essay "Being Odd, Getting Even", which meditates on Descartes's radical scepticism as a form of madness, and implicitly opposes it to an Emersonian pragmatism founded on an accommodation with the everyday. Cavell settles on Poe's tale "The Imp of the Perverse" as representing a kind of madness akin to Cartesian doubt; and on the idea of writing as a kind of cell or imprisonment. This is, for example, a "cell" in which the word "imp" and its myriad possible terminations – impossible, impetuous, impotent, imperial – exist:

> When we do note these cells or molecules, these little moles of language (perhaps in thinking, perhaps in derangement), what we discover are word imps – the initial, or it may be medial or final, movements, the implanted origins or constituents of words, leading lives of their own, staring back at us, calling upon one another, giving us away, alarming – because to note them is to see that they live in front of our eyes, within earshot, at every moment. (Cavell 315)

Joyce arguably registers the terror of the perverse which Poe sees, of that which cannot be contained in language and which ineluctably returns. This is from "The Dead", which I will discuss in a moment:

> A vague terror seized Gabriel at this answer, as if, at that hour when he had hoped to triumph, some impalpable and vindictive being was coming against him, gathering forces against him in its vague world. (199)

A subdued topic in Cavell's essay is what he regards as the historical issue of "the individual's failure at self-creation" (Cavell 302), which I take to be a form of the Hegelian unhappy consciousness – a creature of modernity indeed. A closely related issue is the Cartesian problem of knowing and living with others; or moving from one's own consciousness to any certainty that others have a similar consciousness. For Cavell this is part of an accommodation with the everyday; an abandoning of solipsism in favour of knowing or reading others and allowing oneself to be known and read.

One way in which Cavell sees these issues represented in popular culture is through the Hollywood genre he elsewhere, in his essay "The Same and Different", calls the "drama of re-marriage" – screwball comedies like *The Awful Truth* in which couples marry, unmarry and marry again, or see marriage frustrated and re-performed (Cavell 167-96). Cavell ends "Being Odd, Getting Even" with the startling claim that the solipsism and madness of Cartesian doubt can be equated with a scepticism about the domestic represented by melodrama as it interacts with marriage (319) – a topic he explores in his essays on film comedy.

As my own small homage to Cavell, I want to take as my emblem Cary Grant speaking of love, alone in a sidecar in Howard Hawkes's *I Was a Male War Bride*; one of those comedies Cavell loves. The reader probably remembers the scene: after bickering

across Germany in a sidecar driven by American Lieutenant Katherine Gates – that is Anne Sheridan – her French colleague Captain Henri Rochard (Grant) – dozes, wakes, and finally declares his love for her before crashing into a haystack – only to find that the motorcycle and sidecar have no driver; he has been alone the whole time. This mirrors that earlier scene in which the sidecar becomes detached and she drives off without him. Desire does not progress along an easy or parallel track, and the rest of the film becomes a comedy of sexual frustration: they have to marry in two churches and two registry offices; wartime bureaucracy delays consummation of the couple's marriage, and finally sends them to America, with Grant as the male war bride in drag in order to fit the category. The film constantly features people rubbing up against each other in enclosed spaces; foreplay, one might say; it also makes great play with repetition; both elements which might link it to the formal constriction of the short story – indeed the whole film is like an anecdote about sex which cannot develop towards the fuller world of marriage, family, work.

Film has always equated vehicular, narrative, and amorous drives – one might think or D. W. Griffith's early film *The Drive for a Life* (1909). In a similar way, I think there is little that is accidental about Cavell's seizing on Poe's story as a figure of a completed narrative shape – the successfully murderous plot of the protagonist – which is disrupted by a sense of entrapment, irritation and perversity. What I want to do is take the madness or impossibility which lies at the border on marriage and use it, reading Cavell backwards as it were, to serve as an emblem of the short story's sense of formal limitation and its own status as containing narrative drives which it cannot easily accommodate.

Two Modernist Stories: Joyce's "The Dead" (1914) and Mansfield's "The Stranger" (1921)

The short story has always involved an interplay between narrative movements and moments of stasis or symbolic order in which narrative is frozen into a shape, a rebus. The balance between the *nacheinander* and *nebeneinander* (Lessing's terms are of course invoked in the "Proteus" episode of *Ulysses*) is always towards the latter: the larger temporal frame is excluded; the arresting image – Gretta on the stairs – is privileged. Incompletion is registered by the framing which renders events from the past, or even the refusal of a

geographically expanded register of the kind signalled, for example, here:

> 'Gretta tells me you're not going to take a cab back to Monkstown tonight, Gabriel,' said Aunt Kate.
>
> 'No,' said Gabriel, turning to his wife, 'we had quite enough of that last year, hadn't we? Don't you remember, Aunt Kate, what a cold Gretta got out of it? Cab windows rattling all the way, and the east wind blowing in after we passed Merrion. Very jolly it was. Gretta caught a dreadful cold.' (Joyce 161)

The cold is what they both catch in this story, of course. "The Dead" is sometimes referred to as the greatest short story ever written; and despite the triviality of the claim there are good reasons for that, since it pushes so insistently at the boundaries of the genre and represents so carefully its formal correlatives. It is almost a novel, in the density and depth of the world it evokes; but it also includes a stretching towards a perfection of language at its limits – who cannot read the final passages without the hairs on their neck standing up?[1]

One central issue in the story is what can or cannot be known and controlled by discourse: of a situation or a song; of a politics; of a city; of another. The story of Patrick Morkan and his horse Johnny – of the grandfather who seems a mixture of the starchy and the glued – signals the possibility of failure of control; of the deliquescence of a narrative drive into circularity and stuckness. Gabriel tells that story, but it rebounds on himself; he too is the man in the sidecar; his amorous drives are essentially solipsistic, enacted in the absence of an understanding of his wife's desire:

> He was trembling now with annoyance. Why did she seem so abstracted? He did not know how he could begin. Was she annoyed, too, about something? If she would only turn to him or come to him of her own accord! To take her as she was would be brutal. No, he must see some ardour in her eyes first. He longed to be master of her strange mood. (196)

Or the fantasy of reciprocity here:

> Just when he was wishing for it she had come to him of her own accord. Perhaps her thoughts had been running with his. Perhaps

[1] See Singer; though the more general question of modernism's scepticism and desire to move beyond language to the "real" runs from Pound's ideogrammatic method to Beckett's works: see, for instance, Ross.

> she had felt the impetuous desire that was in him, and then the yielding mood had come upon her. (197)

It is Gabriel's desires which drive the narrative, through the dinner and speech to the scene on the stairs and on to the bedroom, at which point they are of course interrupted by the story of Michael Furey; by a story of madness which cannot be contained within the domestic. In the passage which follows that revelation, we experience a willingness to live with incompletion, with not knowing and not spelling out:

> Gabriel, leaning on his elbow, looked for a few moments unresentfully on her tangled hair and half-open mouth, listening to her deep-drawn breath. So she had had that romance in her life: a man had died for her sake. It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. He watched her while she slept, as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife. His curious eyes rested long upon her face and on her hair: and, as he thought of what she must have been then, in that time of her first girlish beauty, a strange, friendly pity for her entered his soul. He did not like to say even to himself that her face was no longer beautiful but he knew that it was no longer the face for which Michael Furey had braved death. (201)

This is what Cavell calls "the acceptance of human relatedness" (176); it is even a kind of remarriage in Gabriel's willingness to live on with a re-written and more open story; a ghost-written tale, one might say. In this, the short story reaches towards the wider temporal scope of the novel, even as it signals, in what to my mind is a wonderfully balanced way, what is outside its own generic drive towards that epiphany and the association of the perfected moment with the dead.

Mansfield's 1921 story "The Stranger" is in part a comic and I suspect quite conscious rewrite of Joyce's story; perhaps especially of one line, "When the others had gone away, when he and she were in their room in their hotel, then they would be alone together" (193). It describes a husband, John Hammond, anxiously awaiting on a wharf in New Zealand the return of his wife, who has been in Europe for ten months. Her boat is offshore, but there is delay – a series of interruptions, in fact, which carry on after her arrival, from stewardesses, doctors, porters and so on; like Cary Grant in the movie he can't seem to get her alone in a room and "get down to things", as he so nicely puts it. This is the realm of sexual comedy again, but also of anxiety about whether desire can ever be contained in the domestic sphere:

> But just as when he embraced her he felt she would fly away, so Hammond never knew – never knew for dead certain that she was as glad as he was. How could he know? Would he ever know? Would he always have this craving – this pang like hunger, somehow, to make Janey so much part of him that there wasn't any of her to escape? He wanted to blot out everybody, everything. He wished now he'd turned off the light. That might have brought her nearer. And now those letters from the children rustled in her blouse. He could have chucked them into the fire. (Mansfield 226-27)

When he does grab her, he does not get the perfect reciprocity he dreams of, though he composes the scene in the same way Gabriel does: "'Kiss me, Janey! You kiss me'. It seemed to him there was a tiny pause – but long enough for him to suffer torture" (227). The pause, *temps perdu*, signals a delay written into desire; the irrecoverable distance between one person and another.

Hammond in the story, it should be said, is the figure for the writer; he constantly composes the scene, attempting to push out everything including his own children, whose letters to their mother he puts aside. Janey's discovery of them is significant:

> "A-ah!" She gave a little cry.
>
> "What is it?"
>
> "Nothing, darling. I've just found the children's letters. That's all right! They will keep. No hurry now!" She turned to him, clasping them. She tucked them into her frilled blouse. She cried quickly, gaily: "Oh, how typical this dressing-table is of you!"
>
> "Why? What's the matter with it?" said Hammond.
>
> "If it were floating in eternity I should say 'John!'" laughed Janey, staring at the big bottle of hair tonic, the wicker bottle of eau-de- Cologne, the two hair-brushes, and a dozen new collars tied with pink tape. "Is this all your luggage?" (226)

Janey sees the marriage as the place of the everyday; of a pleasure that is reborn every moment, and which encompasses repetition, habit, absence and return, news, children, relations with others. Hammond's attempt to imprison her, to get her away from all that, leaves him at the mercy of interruption. His fixing of her, like Gabriel's composition of Gretta on the stairs, produces a solipsistic structure which unravels in the face of death; in the face of evidence of someone – and a larger story – outside the frame. It is when he gets her alone that he finds that the boat was delayed because a young man died, in Janey's arms, as

she was nursing him. For Hammond, this melodramatic scene interrupts the marriage, creating an irrevocable difference:

> "He was too weak. He was too weak to move a finger." And yet he died in Janey's arms. She – who'd never – never once in all these years – never on one single solitary occasion –
>
> No; he mustn't think of it. Madness lay in thinking of it. No, he wouldn't face it. He couldn't stand it. It was too much to bear! (230)

What it is that she has never done is not stated explicitly; but it suggested an imagined adequacy of desire; a little death in which self is abandoned to the other. The story ends with Janey hoping that the evening is not spoilt by the tale of death, and Hammond thinking: "Spoilt their evening! Spoilt their being alone together! They would never be alone together again" (230). Incompleteness is permanent. Here again is an equation of sexual consummation and death; the question of a heart; and for the husband a kind of truncated, castrated time:

> There was the great blind bed, with his coat flung across it like some headless man saying his prayers. There was the luggage, ready to be carried away again, anywhere, tossed into trains, carted on to boats. (230)

The accumulation of detail of material is declared to be meaningless; events will just flow away from this point, like the snow in Joyce's tale. Indeed, "Janey was silent. But her words, so light, so soft, so chill, seemed to hover in the air, to rain into his breast like snow" (230). They too have caught cold.

Fundamentally, this is – as in the Joyce story – the madness of the other; of the inability to account for, and the difficulty of accommodating to, what is beyond the borders of the domestic. It is also, I think, the madness of the short story, which must constantly deal with the fact that narration cannot be contained within its boundaries and desire-ridden incompletion; with the fact that death and melodrama are written into its solipsism.

Two Contemporary Collections: David Mitchell's *Ghostwritten* (1999) and David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion* (2004)

With all this in mind, I'll turn to the more recent examples. What interests me in both these stories is the way in which the motif

of interrupted desire and a displaced point of view which I examined in the modernist stories is present, but modified by another element, namely the issue of child abuse or child murder. If the stories which I use as examples test the boundaries of genre, they do so in a way which requires trauma to be written into the process; I'll try to suggest why.

Mitchell's story-sequences are often insistently described as novels (indeed, his 2004 book *Cloud Atlas* was entitled *Cloud Atlas: A Novel* in its American edition). One might want to protest that they are *not* novels in any recognisable sense, and that calling a work a novel does not make it one. Indeed, I will argue that his works represent the novel becoming short story rather than the opposite. But in a sense that inter-generic status is the point: they inhabit an uncertain zone in which the short story "mends" its own incompletion, as it were, by forms of connectedness. This too is not new: the short-story collection as a loosely unified totality is a modernist inheritance, conceived by Joyce in *Dubliners* and more designedly by Sherwood Anderson in *Winesburg, Ohio*.[2] In fact the story sequence has largely been an American tradition, with examples by Faulkner, Hemingway, Welty, Salinger and others through to Gloria Naylor – American I think because American exceptionalism as defined by Irving, Hawthorne, James and Wright means that the question of what binds people together in a nation without inherited ties, estates, allegiances is a particularly sharp one. That is to say that the sequence with its suggestion of lives touching other lives responds to modernity and its fragmentation of experience, a problem placed in a global perspective in Mitchell's sequences.

I said that Mitchell's stories expand the frame of the short story, but one might equally say that they express a frustration at the genre; a desire to overcome its subjectivism. Their connectivity has been compared to that of the internet, which I think is right only in one sense: namely that some of the links (or hyper-links) between stories are just traces or markers whose value is difficult to assign, because they cannot be conceived in narrative or causal, or even at times thematic terms. In *Cloud Atlas*, his later sequence, Mitchell's stories are linked by a strict intertextuality: each of the characters reads or watches the story of the previous character, which chance has

[2] See Kennedy for a partial account of this tradition. A related tradition is that of the story-cycle bound together by narrator rather than community.

brought to them; though he has also suggested that he thinks of them as in some senses incarnations of each other, linked by a comet-shaped birthmark on their skin. In *Ghostwritten*, the links are more immediate but also more intangible, a touching across distances: a phone call to a wrong number links the first and second stories; a glance across a restaurant in Hong Kong the second and third; pushing a stranger out of the way of a taxi in a later one in London. As well as these connections, there are links across the world of the stories: the wife of the banker who dies in Hong Kong in the third story sleeps with the central character of the seventh; who saves the life of the narrator of the next story in the taxi incident; who describes how earlier she saw the banker die by chance in Hong Kong. And so on. I should also say here that the plot is not unified, for all that it is founded on connectivity: the focus moves from a financial plot involving the Russian mafia and Hong Kong bankers to an unrelated set of tales about American political power and its future.

The "intruder" story in *Ghostwritten* – but also the story that acts as its keynote – is that of the ghost itself, the narrator of the Mongolian section. Some plot summary is unavoidable here. The narrator, who describes itself as a "*noncorpum*" (172), can move between human minds at a touch. It grew up near the Chinese Holy Mountain of the previous section, and for a period inhabited that section's narrator. It traces its earliest memory, a fable about "'three animals who think about the fate of the world'" (178), to Mongolia, where eventually it is reunited with its memories, stored inside the mind of an old woman (199-202). There, it finds that it is the soul of a young Buddhist novice. Faced with their execution in a Stalinist purge, the Abbot of the monastery had attempted to transmigrate the terrified boy into a young girl, but when the process was interrupted his memory and soul became detached, the former stored in the girl and the latter returned to China with a Chinese mercenary present at the massacre, to gradually grow again. This explains the immediately previous events in the episode, in which his host human was killed and he went for some months to a mysterious yurt which is a kind of space between incarnations; the Abbot had waited there for decades to fulfil his promise to see him, and the *noncorpum* is then reborn in the body of a baby. Though he migrates out of that body into the old woman's, he returns to the baby, as his soul is the only one it has; she (as the "it" now is) chooses to live a human life.

The first point I would extract is the obvious one that this is a metaphor for the narrative process, that is the ability of the writer to enter and connect the consciousnesses of others – though you might want to say "tour through" rather than "enter" here, since this is a book in which the figure of the tourist raises a question about spectatorship: "Backpackers are strange. I have a lot in common with them. We live nowhere, and we are strangers everywhere" (160). That the writer is in some sense the "same" is I think most strongly marked by the fact that though each story includes local details, the language remains fairly uniform: a Mongolian peasant speaks, internally, in RP. (There is a similar effect in Hawkes's film, where Captain Rochard's Frenchness is established by a sergeant reading out his identity card and offering an interpreter; he crisply says "Never mind sergeant, we'll get along alright").

The *noncorpum* is also a figure for textual connectivity – the tele-touch which takes on from one narrative vehicle to another – imagined in the stories. Though that raises a question, since after the Mongolian episode (episode 5 of 10) the connections seem to splinter and multiply, as if that figure of touch or exchange can no longer govern the text. The St. Petersberg story, which comes immediately afterwards, is noticeable for the way it seems to strain towards the scope of the novella, a complete little *noir* fiction in its own right, as if the writer is trying to find a new mode of narration.

But we also need to notice the role of trauma in the narrative process: the figure of the boy who is too young to die, the abused child ripped away from their own memories, enables the dislocation which is central to the text's imagination; to its rapid and indeed restless move between subject and subject. It is as if Michael Furey had come to life and stalked the text rather than haunting its boundaries. Indeed, the novice is not the only such ghost in the text, as the banker and his wife in Hong Kong in the third story have their hopes of parenthood and their relationship destroyed by another ghostly murdered child. But what does it mean to make that figure of the *noncorpum* – a person destroyed by twentieth-century history – a metaphor for global connectivity in the age of the internet? One might say that the non-corpum is at once a version of the displaced person, the *sans-papier*, and the modern global consumer, drifting through cultures and languages in search of a point of anchorage.

At issue in these stories and the relations between them is the short story itself: what does it mean to enter the minds of others in this

essentially fragmentary way? *Ghostwritten* opens and also concludes with an extreme version of the man in the sidecar, talking to himself: one of a Tokyo sect which has launched poison attacks on the underground; a man who believes that the unenlightened are not really human. Much later in the book we learn that the leader of the sect is inhabited by another *noncorpum*, this one a power-hungry and amoral *ubermensch*. If that is one extreme, the decision of the main *noncorpum* to enter and inhabit fully the body of the Mongolian child is the other extreme: a decision on favour of locatedness and the everyday – but a life that is simply left behind as we move on to Moscow in an only lightly connected story.

The question posed by the two *noncorpa* is thus that of the ethics of the everyday, a random life in Mongolia where the life expectancy is "forty-three, and falling" (202) as opposed to the fantasy of omnipotence. A third entity focuses these oppositions: the Artificial Intelligence we encounter late in the story-sequence – a product of "quantum cognition" (371) called the Zookeeper who can migrate through the internet and track and even destroy mankind from space, but who (or which) worries about the rules and complexities of its assigned role as guardian and watcher. Interfering in any situation, it suggests, creates complexities which cannot be held within the frame and plotted. Indeed, it seems to be toying with the idea of allowing a comet to hit the earth in order to send humankind back to an earlier and less complicated state – an apocalyptic wish which could be seen as another version of the perverse; especially since the comet is one of Mitchell's recurrent motifs for repetition and linkage. It is as if the AI cannot bear to deal with all these stories, and wishes for the certainty of the dead.

In this way, Mitchell thematicises many of the issues that we have been dealing with, and as he does so uses the short story's own agonies about what can be accommodated within its formal scope. We are presented in *Ghostwritten*, in an entirely bravura way, with a spectrum of figures for narrative action (I haven't discussed all of these): the megalomaniac; the traumatised ghost; the ghost-writer; the victim of a criminal plot; the fugitive; the talk-show host dealing with things as they come down the wire; the AI who tries to see all of humankind as one. None is settled on, and in the final section, where we return to the Tokyo underground, the "closure" offered is entirely trivial – we see, in an almost filmic manner, a variety of advertising posters, books, etc. which allude in turn to each of the episodes. What

this suggests is that Mitchell's own procedure in the story sequence is more about fragmentation than totality; a destruction of the novel which leaves us with the short story as the emblem of doubt about the shared reality created by the book.

My second recent example is taken from the late David Foster Wallace, whose corpus includes both a version of the American Epic in *Infinite Jest* and short stories and essays. There is throughout his writing a hyperconsciousness of the way discourse lives through us, threatening to render mental life a prison-house. In *Oblivion*, the collection I will be talking about, this includes the discourses of market research, therapy and of the magazine feature; elsewhere in his writings he examines the languages of tourism, pornography and even set theory, as well as the notion of "correct" English as it relates to class in America. His protagonists are typically locked into their linguistic worlds; like Poe's narrator in "The Imp of the Perverse" prisoners who confess to us the madness of their schemes, or their desire for revenge. Thus the opening story of *Oblivion*, "Mr Squishy", is partially (and increasingly obsessively) focalised through a market analyst who, we find in an aside, is manufacturing ricin to create a food scare he will then heroically manage; the closing story is about a features writer who ends up filming a man who can excrete statues. Both stories have puzzling extraneous elements – in the first one, a man climbing up the exterior of the skyscraper the story is set in, for what purpose we never discover; in the last, the fact that we are occasionally told that many characters will soon be dead, as the magazine's office is in the World Trade Center. Wallace's notorious footnotes have a similarly destabilising effect.

"Oblivion", the title story of the collection, picks up the thematic thread I have pursued intermittently, dealing with reciprocity between husband and wife; the story in fact takes many of its hidden motifs from "The Dead", not least the idea that a husband and wife can fail to know each other's innermost fears: "'My wife is now no one I know'" (210). The issue is a puzzlingly vehement dispute over which of the couple, Randall and Hope, is disrupting their sleep. By the end this question has lead them to the cell-like rooms of a sleep clinic, in search of proof one way or another. There are various subsidiary problems involving the overbearing stepfather-in-law, whom Randall hates and fears, and the couple's daughter Audrey (Randall's step-daughter in fact), who we are told has recently left for college. The story is narrated by Randall, who is mystified by his

wife's claim that he snores loudly, since he believes that he is always awake at the point of accusation – that she is dreaming the snoring. The madness of Descartes's skepticism as it is described by Cavell is precisely the issue – do I know whether I am asleep or dreaming? Or is it possible that none of my thoughts or actions are mine? How could one sustain domesticity and the everyday in the face of such doubts?

The story's wrenching ending is unprecedented in the history of the genre. At the end of the story, when the sleep clinic seems to be revealing both that Randall is asleep when he thinks he was awake and Hope is asleep when she thinks she hears him snore, we emerge from a horrific dream in which the clinic's personnel peel off their faces like rubber masks, and it becomes – no, it *seems* – clear that the narrator is not the narrator at all. Hope has dreamt a dream, with all its elaborate outrage and sense of victimisation, seemingly from his point of view. And that dreamed point of view is revealed as unknowable and unreal, though to an extent which the reader cannot really tell, since the waking Hope asks at the end "'who's this Audrey?'" (237), as if she does not know the child who has featured in the narrative. Not only that, but the dream ends with a gothic hint of child abuse on the part of her father-in-law – the man her husband is so hostile to, though at this point Randall and the step-father meld together: a vision of "him" ascending the stair with heavy tread (237). This in fact takes up a vein that has run through the story, including Randall's sexual fantasies (or at some points possibly actual memories) about his step-daughter and her nubile friends; and about his own wife and her step-father. (At this point a second model for the text emerges, which is Nabokov's *Lolita*).

What are we to make of all this? Firstly, that the incompleteness of the short story, which is the occasion of a kind of allegorical discontent expressive of the modern subject in earlier examples, has become a deep pathology for Wallace. The "truth" of the story is almost entirely outside its frame, in the radical perspectivism and madness of its final moments. We can comb back over it for clues about the denouement – and might find them in relation to the incest in particular. There are references to the golf clubhouse as "over-confined, not unlike the lap of a dominant adult" (191), and in particular in two episodes, a hallucination Randall reports about himself as "a boy or small child" (210) looking up at a godlike statue and a hand on his shoulder "pushing or shaking" him (211); and a later direct fantasy about the stepfather's incestuous acts.

But such readings cannot offer much balance: too much is outside the frame for us to be clear about the status of such stories. And for all that Brian McHale suggests that us postmoderns are relaxed about ontological dissonance or clashing worlds (10), what is real here does matter – to us, to the characters. All the reader can really do is hypothesise something like a displacement effect in which Hope cannot think her own thoughts; they are distributed elsewhere, in a nightmare that overwhelms her and everything around her. The most convincing interpretation of the story, to my mind, is that which sees it as an allegory of a masculine power and violence which insists that it defines the "real", whether at the level of discourse or desire – with incestuous rape the terminal point. The focus on snoring and grunting seems to mark the auditory accompaniments of rape; but might also suggest the primal constituents of language itself.

Finally, some comments on formal issues. This is also a linguistic predicament; a matter of word imps, to borrow Cavell's phrase. In "Oblivion" the boundary between sleeping and waking (or fantasy and the real) is figured in part by the quotation marks which pepper the discourse of the narrator and represent a fear of the figurative itself: the narrator puts anything in quote marks which is the stuff of common language but which carries a metaphorical weight: a "'shot'" for a remembered scene (214); a "'complex'" of buildings (210); a car "'jumping'" the central meridian (224); seeing something as it being "'made out'" (211) and so on. A sensitivity to the voice of others that lets him quote a colleague who had "'Throw[n] out [the] idea [of]'" the sleep clinic (215). The question of where the quote marks are is the question of who we are listening to, or who is trapped inside whose voice.

In that sense, the issue I have examined throughout, that of the short story as a figure for confinement and solipsism, reaches a kind of apotheosis. The old story of incomplete desire is conveyed under the heading of abuse rather than death. What comes between husband and wife is not the melodramatic scenario of love perfected by death or the comedy of remarriage, but the fear of the terrors of night, of the Furies themselves invading everyday life. The sudden unbalanced, unanticipated wrench in focalisation – which no reader could ever anticipate – is in part a mockery of the conventions of point-of-view; in part a representation of displacement in which the self can never be negotiated or settled. And with it, the short story comes to an end; it

cannot do the work it has always done, of negotiating between fragmentation and implicit totality.

Some Conclusions

The modernist stories deal with the fragmentation of individual experience and the imagination of others. In the postmodernist stories the madness which briefly assaults Joyce and Mansfield's characters, their sense of being displaced from the story they thought they were in, has become a full-blown narrative mode – a ghost-writing. Trauma signals a self that it is fragmented, distributed across persons; it signals point-of-view not as a flexible vehicle for the negotiation of others, but rather a potential pathology. And least this seem like too small a sample, I'd mention that Wallace's collection has two stories in which children are burnt to death – one provided the title for the 2003 new-generation anthology *The Burned Children of America* – and another in which they are threatened by a maniac, and another in which a child is bitten to death by a spider. This as well as teenage suicide; the tormented childhood of the statue-shitter, and so on – abuse is pervasive.

If the short story begins by expressing the problem and shock of the modern self – partial, imprisoned within a world which is imposed on it, confronted always with its own limitation, sceptical about its linkage to others and about the domestic – then in the contemporary short story we have seen a traumatised relation in which one self melts into others; or refuses others; or wishes to destroy the other. Modernism gestures towards a balance between the drive of the story (whose limitation is signaled by death, madness) and a larger world of the everyday and historicity. The recent stories offer versions of the death of the subject in trauma; they signal the impossibility of negotiation between these positions in any one story; madness enters the narrative mode. The sidecar is de-coupled permanently and the perspectival shift which in modernism is a moment of epiphany – and encounter with the other – is a violent rupture.

How do we historicise this shift? John Frow writes that

> [t]he semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains – implicit realities which genres form as a pre-given reference, together with the effects of authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre. (19)

This is to say that the shift in the framing of the short story signals wider cultural shifts. Here is one possible route into these issues, flagged in my early comments about the market. Mansfield's story appeared in the *London Mercury*; Joyce's collection already registering (as book) the difficulties of the market. More recently, the loss of traditional market for the short story has been often commented on: outside the *New Yorker*, *Esquire* and a few other publications (especially women's magazines with their highly-profiled markets), it is difficult to receive real payment for literary stories. Wallace, whose own writing repeatedly touched on the world of profiling, fandom and segmented markets, made his name as *essayist* for more mainstream publications: the essays in *Consider the Lobster* appeared in *Harper's*, *Rolling Stone*, *New York Observer*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Village Voice*, *Gourmet*. The stories of *Oblivion*, on the other hand, mostly appeared in small magazines: *Conjunctions, Black Clock, Colorado Review*; despite his fame, a posthumous story in the recent *Mechanics Institute Review* (the excellent but undoubtedly specialised journal of the creative writing students of Birkbeck College, London). Mitchell's stories were not separately published: in a sense he has "solved" the problem of the short story at the level of the book, the "novel" – though as I have suggested, doing so at the level of the assertion rather than any formal shift in the work.

What now supports the specialised literary market is, arguably, the economy of the creative writing school. That is a market which supports a commodification at the level of *performance* as a writer – applicable in culture generally of course, whether or not the writer actually teaches. In which case the "moves" made within the genre are crucial; there is a stress on the deformation of genre; on the experimental.[3] For Wallace, this suggests the problem of keeping it up; keeping writing in a way that responds to the prison-house of discourse, and cuts across its the literary fetishisation of the character. For Mitchell it seems to mean a move into genre (SF, teen fiction, historical novel) and the exploration, at the generic level, of viewpoint.

A more general account of the changes I have described would be to consider the utopian element in modernism, and the fact

[3] See the recent controversy created by McGurl's *The Programme Era*: for instance, Batuman and the subsequent letters archived at http://www.lrb.co.uk/v32/n18/elif-batuman/get-a-real-degree.

that the stories intimate a totality which they cannot represent (to roughly paraphrase Benjamin). In the recent stories this is almost reversed: they directly represent a totality: that of globalisation. But their focus on discourse – which they cannot gesture beyond, except in the realm of science fiction – means that there is nothing outside the text, because the outside is inside (as it were), in the agony of self as it dreams its dreams within these larger processes.

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