

# Thought without thinkers

Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). 336pp., £28.00 pb., 978 0 23119 2972

A bold question motivates Timothy Bewes' *Free Indirect*: Is a non-subjective thought possible? Bewes looks for an answer in recent developments in the novel. His contention is that the novel is a mode of thought which operates not only beyond the ideas represented within it – those of a narrator, protagonist, character, or author – but also beyond novelistic form itself. Form is only the first of many common literary concepts with which Bewes dispenses in his remarkable reexamination of novelistic thought. In fact, according to Bewes, very few existing concepts can help us grasp the fundamental reconfiguration of the novel's relation to reality that has potentiated, in his words, 'a thought that cannot be inhabited subjectively.'

One name that Bewes proposes for this reconfiguration is 'postfictional aesthetics'. If fictionality is the logic whereby the novel maps onto but does not coincide with reality, postfictional aesthetics identifies a breakdown of this logic, such that characters and situations no longer simply typify or index aspects of the world but directly constitute forms of relation. But to phrase it this way is to suggest a periodisation – fictionality and its aftermath – that Bewes immediately complicates in his pursuit of a fine-tuned analysis of the limits of fictionality. In the central terms of *Free Indirect*, these limits are set by what Bewes, borrowing from David Armstrong, calls the 'instantiation relation'. By instantiation, Bewes means the function by which any normative discourse makes an entity serve as a case of a larger category, as when fiction is understood to schematise or exemplify some aspect of reality. In the instantiation relation, then, the novel makes sense of the world by tempering its indeterminacy in forms. For Bewes, however, only in the gaps between what is instantiated in the novel is it able to think what Lukács called 'the fundamental dissonance of existence'. Without the instantiation relation, that is to say, novels' ideas can only exist as negations of themselves, or in Bewes' preferred terms, in their 'interstices'.

To articulate the novel's unique kind of thinking, Bewes turns to one of its distinctive innovations: free in-

direct discourse. The opening lines of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* provide a well-known example:

Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

Where do these words come from? They constitute what Ann Banfield calls 'unspeakable sentences', mixtures of direct and indirect speech that evince an indistinction between the consciousness of the narrator and that of the character, if not a thought completely unattributable to any subject. Though the title suggests otherwise, *Free Indirect* is not a book about such ambiguities of free indirect style, nor an argument that it or any other narrative device is capable of evading the aesthetic ideology of instantiation. On the contrary, it is only worth paying attention to free indirect style, Bewes claims, because contemporary thought has witnessed the 'universalisation' of its inner logic, the separation of thought from thinker.

*Free Indirect* is therefore not concerned with the logics of instantiation or representation, but rather with a kind of relationality that persists at the edges of fiction after the collapse of literature's ability to produce meaningful categories. For this reason, it is not possible to recognise the persistence of thought that Bewes claims for the novel within existing interpretive paradigms, which he identifies with the help of Rancière's 'regimes'. Whereas the representative regime secures a relation between word or image and reality, the aesthetic regime both expands the realm of what can be aesthetically expressed and inaugurates a rift in representation that makes it prone to irony and the sort of second-order judgement endemic to the vagaries of implication. Most prominently authorised by Flaubert, the aesthetic regime relies on the instantiation relation, that is, what is formalised or made manifest in the novel precisely by remaining left unsaid ('show' rather than 'tell', the

unstated love between Frédéric and Mme. Arnoux that one gathers simply from the atmosphere of the sitting room in *A Sentimental Education*). The resulting ambiguity anticipates and requires the work of interpretation to render its meaning legible, leaving some critics to wonder whether *Madame Bovary*, to take another example from Flaubert, is a stupid novel or a novel about stupidity.

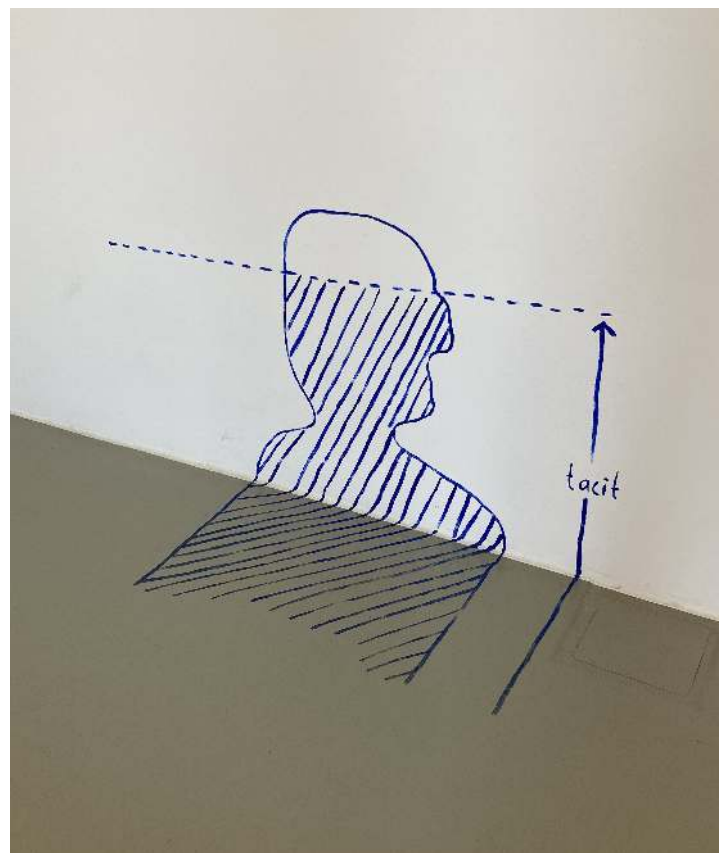
In the contemporary novel, however, Bewes identifies a kind of thinking which is increasingly inaccessible to the practices of criticism or paraphrase that rely on such rifts within representation. The narrator-author of Rachel Cusk's *Transit*, for example, simply presents the disparate episodes of her life without the slightest attempt at synthesis or even the suggestion that one is possible. The ghostly voice of J. M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*, to take Bewes' preferred example, may interject a thought, but only if it is just as soon disproven in the narrative itself. But since these novels no longer think in the mode of instantiation, how do they think in its absence? What can a critic say about a work when its thought does not deign to appear in the text?

At this point, Bewes leads his readers into the jaws of a profound paradox: how can the novels that most exemplify the present be those that reject the logic of exemplarity itself? Another way of asking this question would be to ask how to historicise the thought of a moment at which historicisation – including the conceptual work whereby parts are related to wholes, instances to their historical 'moment' – appears untenable. For the critic, this poses a difficult problem, since to say that works in which the instantiation relation does not obtain also instantiate their era is already to reestablish the very relation whose abandonment they express.

Bewes tarries as patiently with this critical impasse as he does with the novels that induce it. Their insistence on irresolvable difference comes to a head in the final section, where Bewes shows that the thought of such novels – irreducible to form, the interpretive possibilities of criticism, or the thought expressed within the novel itself – is like that of cinema in the work of Deleuze: it is a thought unthinkable by us, a thought in which the universe thinks itself. At this point it becomes difficult not to ask: what good is a thought if no one can think it? Or more to the point: why write a book about a kind of thought that it can't think?

Perhaps for Bewes it is enough simply to suppose that

such a thought exists. This might still seem a bleak prospect for criticism, but there are plenty of moments when *Free Indirect* becomes more than an elaborate exercise in its own futility. The irony is that, by confronting these and many other paradoxes of contemporary criticism head on, Bewes has made the present newly thinkable (so much so that one might well suspect that if the logic of fictionality was indeed to break down, and with it the practice of critique as such, it would be impossible to write a book like *Free Indirect*). In tracing the autonomisation of thought from thinker, Bewes makes significant headway not only in conceptualising the contemporary novel, but also in identifying the theoretical problems that have made that task so difficult.



In the terms of *Free Indirect*, however, it remains impossible to theorise contemporary novelistic experiments (and the novel as such) because their mode of thought cannot be instantiated. Far from lamentable, Bewes suggests, this is novelistic thought at its purest; because it is irreducible to an example of or an isolable proposition about reality, it is able to make difference itself immanent to the novel. Bewes thus reads the contemporary novel as nothing short of an overcoming of perspective and point of view, the guarantors of form

as much as of ideology and subjectivity. For Bewes, this has always been the promise of the novel – whether in the dialogic quality that Bakhtin praised in the works of Dostoyevsky or in the possibility of an ‘ultimate futility of man’ that the novel made visible to Lukács – though only recently has such a promise been actualised.

In a discourse (novel theory) obsessed with its own obsolescence, it will likely come as a surprise to encounter a book that not only refutes its object’s death but even suggests its apotheosis. If it is indeed an apotheosis, however, it is of a very particular sort, which is to say, it is only an apotheosis if one assumes that the escape from ideology at which Bewes says the novel is arriving is not in fact simply another version of it. Little in *Free Indirect* compels one to share this assumption. Its fantasy of fleeing subjectivity is perhaps most troubling when the book’s argument for a novelistic thought beyond the instantiation relation also insists that it be understood as a version of intersectionality, envisioned by Kimberlé Crenshaw as resistance to ‘static representations of people’s identities’. There is much to be contested in such a comparison. To suggest that an aesthetic practice or a mode of thought can autonomously achieve an ‘essence’ which somehow exists outside the histories that have produced such identities, even if in the speculative realm of a non-subjective literature. The most symptomatic version of this claim comes in an ‘interlude’ in which Bewes likens

the instantiation relation to the practice of ‘profiling’ – from racial profiling to the Cambridge Analytica case – without recognising that the objectification and ‘absolute heterogeneity’ with which he credits an escape from such practices can just as easily be seen as the historical outcome of their justification.

For anyone familiar with Bewes’ earlier work, it might come as a surprise that these problems are never posed in terms of reification, and further that the problematic of reification has all but disappeared from *Free Indirect*. As an earlier essay of Bewes’ attests, the instantiation relation is clearly a close relative of reification, one that lacks its cousin’s rigorous articulation of commodification and the division of labour. Without these historical reference points, *Free Indirect* must seek its escape from thought as conceptuality and schematisation rather than from the historical structures that produce it as such. Even so, the thought Bewes attributes to the novel intimates that provisional escape from commodification and instrumental reason whose last refuge Adorno located in the aesthetic realm. In such a reading, Bewes could be credited with an impressively innovative method of tracking down, albeit in an unrecognisable form, the utopian dimension of the novel, if not of art more generally. Since the novel’s utopian promise is not ‘inhabitable’, however, whatever hope it preserves is not for us.

Carson Welch

## Who cares?

Boris Groys, *Philosophy of Care* (London and New York: Verso, 2022). 106pp., £9.99 hb., 978 1 83976 492 9

Boris Groys’ *Philosophy of Care* is comprised of twelve short, pithy sections that plot an abbreviated history of mainly Western philosophy from ancient to modern times. Also included are two diversions into Russian intellectual thought, Groys being an expert on Soviet-era art and literature, as well as a philosopher and media theorist. The course he steers from Socrates and Plato to Hegel, Nietzsche, Kojève and finally to Heidegger, while selective, is a familiar Western philosophical narrative of how the subject negotiates its relation to mortality and immortality through transcendent organising principles,

whether God, History, Being or the Future. But, in another sense, the course steered is strikingly unfamiliar given its reframing in terms of care and self-care and the question of health.

Groys’ use of the terms care and self-care is unrelated to their common parlance in current art theory and practice in which they infer specific historical lineages: respectively, socialist feminisms’ calls to revalue the contribution of social reproduction to labour power, and pedagogic well-being practices in activist struggles, e.g., the Black Panther Party in the 1960s/70s. However, since