

CHAPTER ELEVEN

EXPERIMENTS WITH ETHICS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FICTION: THE LACK OF A STABLE FRAMEWORK IN IAN MCEWAN'S *SATURDAY* AND JULIAN BARNES' *ARTHUR AND GEORGE*

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Abstract

This essay challenges the assumption that, as far as British writing at the beginning of the twenty-first century is concerned, experimental writing is synonymous with postmodernist writing. It is argued that two novels by Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, both published in 2005, achieve indeterminacy as well as instability and evoke the experience of alterity by using seemingly traditional narrative conventions, thus opening up new ways for the exploration of ethical concerns in contemporary fiction.

Post-modernism and the Ethical Implications of Alterity, Indeterminacy and Sympathy

The discussion of ethics in contemporary fiction is usually conducted within the larger sphere of the debate about Postmodernism. While the proclaimed pluralism, fragmentation and dedifferentiation as well as the parodic and self-conscious games played by experimental fiction were often thought to be linked to an ethical indifference, scholars nowadays tend to adopt a more balanced view and try to single out ethical concerns in postmodern English and American literature.¹ Quite often they proceed from the premise that postmodernist

¹ The importance of ethical indifference for several theories of postmodernism is expounded by Zima (2001). Nowadays, ethical concerns and didacticism are even claimed to be characteristics of the work of Martin Amis, whose stories abound with violence, victimisation and abuse. See Diederick (1995). The return to ethics in American

devices—like metafictional comments or other forms of defamiliarisation—are to be classified as experiments with older conventions, and that one should look closely at any ethical functions they might have. That realist fiction could and did pursue ethical aims is taken for granted; the challenge lies in claiming the same concerns for experimental fiction.

This assumption has, however, led to a neglect of quite a lot of the fiction that has been published in the last decade. Many contemporary English novels do not show the postmodernist features that radically challenged reader expectations from the 1960s onwards.² Even novelists who played with realist conventions, whose work abounded in metafictional comments—like David Lodge, Julian Barnes and Martin Amis—seem to have returned to the conventions of realism. But before we bemoan this alleged step back to an older aesthetics, we might question our premise and ask whether it is adequate to identify experimental writing with the use of postmodernist techniques. After all, the experience of defamiliarisation wears off after a time; what was unconventional and strange in the 1980s has ceased to be so by the turn of the century. As readers became familiar with more and more experimental devices, the process of renewal had to be accelerated, since the “repetition of radical change leads to a heightened ability to accommodate strangeness” (Grabes 1996: 24).

It may thus be possible that, forty years after the introduction of postmodernist, experimental features into British writing in the 1960s, these devices have lost their power to denaturalise and serve as a criticism of received truths. Some scholars like Malcolm Bradbury and Richard Ruland claim that postmodernism was already on the wane in the 1990s,³ and according to Barry Lewis, the postmodernist phase ended before the turn of the century, when the “use of [postmodernist] techniques [was] routine and no longer radical”.⁴

If most of the devices introduced from the 1960s onwards are neither new nor disconcerting any more, we should reconsider older definitions of

contemporary literature and philosophy is the topic of the collection of essays published by Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung (1996).

² For a succinct list of postmodern stylistic devices see Hassan (1987: 91f.), and Lewis, (2001/2005: 113-121).

³ See Ruland and Bradbury (1991: 325). A different view with regard to the demise of Postmodernism is held by Steven Connor (2004: 1), who is of the opinion that Postmodernism deferred its ending and renewed itself from the mid-1990s onwards. Connor, however, defines Postmodernism mainly as a genre of theoretical writing, as “the name for the activity of writing about postmodernism” (ibid., 4).

⁴ Lewis (2001/2005: 113). Grabes (1996: 23f.) also claims that the aesthetic that was geared towards shock and provocation—and led to the experience of alterity—resulted in a rapid change of avant-gardisms in the twentieth century.

experimental writing. As David Lodge (1992: 209) wrote when returning to the theses of his famous essay “The Novelist at the Crossroads”, writers nowadays seem to be placed in “a supermarket of styles”, where all of the techniques developed in the last centuries are at their disposal. In such a situation, employing and functionalising older techniques in innovative ways seem to be distinguishing characteristics of experimental writing. It might therefore be premature to regard contemporary novels which use “traditional”, realist or modernist techniques as “un-experimental” or “pre-postmodernist”. Perhaps we should look less for the presence of specific experimental devices and more for new ways of employing different (even seemingly “traditional”) techniques.

Since postmodernist narrative conventions have been said to be ethically valuable, it seems reasonable to explore how postmodernist ethical concerns are replicated in British novels published during the last few years. According to Herbert Grabes, postmodern aesthetics is inherently ethical, because postmodern devices like defamiliarisation, metafictional comments or the presentation of the grotesque initiate an experience of alterity:

If multiplicity, heterogeneity or alterity are the predominant features of this period, as regards both society and individual search for identity, contemporary ethics must [. . .] promote an ethical stance that will [. . .] enable us to live in it with dignity. [. . .] Thus, if the aesthetics of postmodern art furthers the development of a sensibility which not only allows us to endure, but also enables us to find pleasure in a high degree of alterity, and if a little of this would trickle through into ethical sensibility, this would already be an enormous improvement. (1996: 25-6)

One might well argue that fiction enables readers to “develop a sensibility” that allows us to appreciate multiplicity and alterity; but nowadays it is difficult to reach this end by employing techniques of defamiliarisation. In this paper, I want to suggest that in a number of contemporary novels the experience of alterity is produced by different means. Firstly, there is a tension between two different attitudes towards protagonists, who remain “other” and in many ways strange, while additional narrative devices evoke sympathy for them. Secondly, there is a destabilisation of an accepted ethical framework, thus creating an indeterminacy with regard to interpretation and meaning, which has often been regarded as one of the key features of postmodernism.⁵

The narrative features of these novels, which highlight indeterminacy, alterity and sympathy, have ethical implications. They are in accord with a Levinas-inspired ethics which has moved away from the prescriptive dimension of traditional humanist values towards a more tentative and open postmodern

⁵ See Grabes (1996: 25); see also Ihab Hassan (1987: 87, 92).

ethics. The difficulties of deciding what the fictional facts are and whose view of the world we can believe raises the question of whether there are any absolute ethical values—or whether, as for instance Alain Badiou (2003: 43, 61, 65-81) claims, there is no ethic “in the abstract” but only an “ethics of truths”, which acknowledges that truth can only be related to (come into being in) particular situations and particular individuals. The representation of key characters allows us to feel empathy with them and to develop an understanding of and sympathy for different, even contradictory viewpoints, which renders it more difficult to condemn their limitations. The narrative form thus induces us to comprehend contradictory positions, making alterity more acceptable and moving towards an “ethics of alterity”.

The new conceptualisation of the aesthetics of contemporary fiction eliminates two problems involving the assumption that defamiliarising devices have ethical qualities. After all, it is questionable whether there is an analogy between the experience of alterity produced by an aesthetic form and the experience of and attitude to individuals who are perceived as other. While our responses to reality and to literature of any kind belong to different realms, it seems to be particularly implausible to postulate that this gap could be bridged by postmodernist texts. Postmodernist devices usually create a distance between characters and readers, and it is difficult to understand why this should lead to an acceptance of pluralism and alterity in daily life. For Christopher Butler, this distance towards others has had detrimental effects; he therefore criticises “those who have been so vigorously concerned for the liberation of the group in attacking stereotypical prejudices [because they] have let slip a viable notion of the individual with which one *can have sympathy*. In so doing they removed one of our strongest motives for moral action”.⁶

In contemporary British fiction, the experience of alterity that is linked to both destabilisation and the evocation of sympathy is brought forth by different narrative forms. First, some novels concentrate on a character’s view of the world which is not corrected or evaluated by a narrator’s explanations or comments; instead, the opinions and moral attitudes of the focaliser (which are often less than homogeneous or coherent in themselves) remain unchallenged by the narrator, but are destabilised by other devices. The reticence of the heterodiegetic narrator, who refrains from both epistemological and ethical guidance, is more pronounced in a second type of novel that employs the similar, but more unusual narrative device of juxtaposing the stories of different homodiegetic narrators without connecting them. These novels lack a homogeneous level of discourse, since the narrators’ voices and mind-styles are

⁶ Butler (1996: 69; original emphasis). Butler is thinking of important theorists like Barthes or Foucault, who nonetheless devoted much of their time to social causes.

often quite contradictory, thus emphasising the fact that there is no stable ethical framework.⁷ Thirdly, there is a new use of the device of unreliable narration, which is rendered ethically even more complex in so far as the reader is not able to construct “the story” behind the narrator’s back any more.

The first type of novel, which will be the focus of this paper, seems least innovative; it might be regarded as a rehash of modernist conventions, which emphasise the epistemological limitations of several characters by highlighting their differences—as Virginia Woolf famously did in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The fact that some novelists who in the 1970s and 80s employed “postmodern” narrative devices are now turning to this very traditional way of writing should make us suspicious, however. If authors like Julian Barnes, who played with pluralism, parody, metafiction, authenticity, fragmentation and dedifferentiation in novels like *Flaubert’s Parrot* (1984), *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) and *England, England* (1998), and Ian McEwan, one of the (in)famous *enfants terribles* of the 1980s, revert to such old-fashioned techniques, it seems worthwhile to look at them more closely.

Alterity and Indeterminacy in Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*

In Ian McEwan’s latest novel *Saturday* (2005), all of the by now familiar postmodernist devices are conspicuously absent; instead, we are faced with a modernist narrative resorting to a narrator who uses the protagonist Henry Perowne as the internal focaliser of the events that take place on a Saturday in London, in February 2003. The covert heterodiegetic narrator, who provides the information on characters and setting in the usual detached and authoritative manner, imbues the story with the aura of reliability and authenticity. The main focaliser Perowne, an informed and rational physician, is unlikely to produce any experience of indeterminacy or alterity. At first sight, the novel seems to be even less experimental than a work like *Mrs. Dalloway*, with which it shares a number of characteristics.⁸ After all, in McEwan’s novel we have only one

⁷ This mode of narration is employed in a number of recently published novels, for instance in Matthew Kneale’s *English Passengers* (2000), Sarah Waters’ *Fingersmith* (2002) and Nick Hornby’s *A Long Way Down* (2005). These novels also raise the question of the unreliability of the respective narrator—but I think it worthwhile to separate these two issues, since there are a number of novels which question the notion of unreliability without using several narrators. I have tried to explore the ethical implications of possibly unreliable narrators in Nünning (Forthcoming).

⁸ The most noticeable similarities to *Mrs. Dalloway* pertain to structure, topics and the style of narration. *Saturday* deals with one long day in London in February 2003, whereas *Mrs. Dalloway* covers a long day in June, 1923. Perowne’s world is shaped by

focaliser, and not many different ones which, taken together, make it more difficult for the reader to arrive at a simple judgement of what happened.

Moreover, the only internal focaliser⁹ seems to be the very model of a rational and sensitive character, very observant and not prone to get anything wrong. It is difficult to attribute any shortcomings with regard to factual accuracy or moral evaluation to Henry Perowne, who is successful in every way, a renowned neurosurgeon as well as a loving and caring husband and father. If anything, he is too perfect: his ethical awareness is exemplary and surfaces in his worries about his great wealth and his flash car, or about the political situation in the aftermath of 9/11 2001, with its consequences for the future of Western life under the threat of terrorism. Perowne tries to understand his wife and children, keeps thinking of the victims of violence and torture he is told about, and has chosen an occupation which makes it possible for him to save lives. His conscientiousness figures in his musings about his old mother, whom he visits though her illness renders her unable to recognise him. His behaviour is exemplary in many ways when, at the end of the very long *Saturday*, he operates upon a thug who just an hour before had threatened to kill his wife and rape his daughter. There are thus many factors that can prompt readers to sympathise with the protagonist: Perowne is impeccable as far as intelligence and morality are concerned,¹⁰ and there are no distancing devices; the reader is invited to share his thought processes, while the feelings of other characters are discernible only through Perowne's eyes.

Nonetheless, Perowne's approach to the world is both limited and difficult to access. As a neurosurgeon he sees the world through the lens of his medical knowledge. His mind-style is formed by his work; he tries to understand others—even their emotions—with the help of medical schemata. When confronted with anyone who shows emotional, mental or physical symptoms, Perowne usually reverts to his professional knowledge in order to understand his or her present condition. This holds true even in a situation when he is confronted with three thugs and—rather to his surprise—is about to be beaten up by one of them:

the aftermath of 9/11, Clarissa's by the aftermath of the First World War. The themes of death, "madness" and illness are prominent, with the thug Baxter playing a role similar to that of Septimus Warren Smith. At the end of the day, most of the characters who have been present in the focaliser's mind gather for a party in Perowne's house.

⁹ Henry Perowne is by far the most important focaliser. The reader gets only rare glimpses into the perceptions of other characters, *i.e.*: his son Theo (McEwan 2005: 32), the thug Baxter (98) and Perowne's mother Lilian (161).

¹⁰ His attitudes and his behaviour show that Perowne has the morals of a "traditional" humanist character.

Even as he turns back towards Baxter in surprise, and even as he sees, or senses, what's coming towards him at such speed, there remains in a portion of his thoughts a droning, pedestrian diagnostician who notes poor self-control, emotional lability, explosive temper, suggestive of reduced levels of GABA among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons. There is much in human affairs that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule. (McEwan 2005: 91)

His approach to the world is that of a scientist looking for the biological causes of emotions, characteristics or behaviour, thus implicitly condoning the view that material causes, and not character or free will, are responsible for our feelings and actions. This question of determination vs. free will bears some weight in the novel, since the protagonist and his family are in physical danger twice on that day, and Baxter's violent mood swings (which Perowne puts down to his illness) threaten to lead to the murder or rape of the female family members.¹¹

Especially to readers who are more familiar with fiction than with neurological terminology, the exposure to Perowne's consciousness is a strange experience. His scientific approach to the world and the language he uses make it difficult to understand him; in Levinas' term, the "unknowability of the other" remains. Many reviewers have commented on the unintelligibility of Perowne's prose, comparing it to "Anglo-Latin creole" and stressing that "though we are inside Perowne's brain, it is hard to follow him into anyone else's".¹² In terms of the debate on the "two cultures", we are confronted with "the other" point of view, with an unfamiliar way of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating the world. Although this experience of alterity is heightened by Perowne's flat denial of a number of sentiments which have become truisms in academia, readers are led to appreciate his view of the world, and perhaps even to sympathise with him.

¹¹ Even when faced with Baxter's violence, Perowne does not put down the thug's actions to his character or his inclination—apart from genes, he puts the blame for this reaction on his own bad behaviour towards him: "But for all the reductive arguments, Perowne can't convince himself that molecules and faulty genes alone are terrorising his family and have broken his father-in-law's nose. Perowne himself is also responsible. He humiliated Baxter in the street in front of his sidekicks, and did so when he'd already guessed at his condition. Naturally, Baxter is here to rescue his reputation in front of a witness" (210). Passages like these might be regarded as cases of experimentation through the injection of epistemological data which in turn can be interpreted as a feature of contemporary literature. Unlike previous more conventionally realistic narratives, such doubts about possible causes do not buttress realism, but question it.

¹² Marek Kohn (2005). Kohn even calls the neurological terminology the "book's defining feature"; see also Harrison (2005).

On the surface, the novel seems to condone Perowne's scientific view of the world—and the ethics implied in it. It is difficult, for instance, to tell whether it is still Perowne, who keeps on wondering about Baxter's physical state while he is about to be attacked by him, or whether it is the narrator, who wholly endorses the surgeon's view:

Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter? And who will ever find a morality, an ethics down among the enzymes and amino acids when the general taste is for looking in the other direction? In her second year at Oxford, dazzled by some handsome fool of a teacher, Daisy tried to convince her father that madness was a social construct, a wheeze by means of which the rich—he may have got this wrong—squeezed the poor. Father and daughter engaged in one of their energetic arguments which ended with Henry, in a rhetorical coup, offering her a tour of a closed psychiatric wing. (91-2)

While Perowne seems to have had a field day, proving to Daisy that the “handsome fool of a teacher” was plainly wrong, the reader, who is probably not well versed in the latest knowledge in neuroscience, might think of examples of mental illnesses that are rather caused by the behaviour of others than by deficient “enzymes and amino acids”. Again, it is impossible to decide which view is correct—the question of whether there is a free will that makes us responsible for our actions or whether it is only a question of genes and molecules remains just as open as the ethical framework of the novel remains indeterminate.

Moreover, Perowne is aware of his own limitations and the fact that he does not understand others—not even his family—as well as he would like to. Under the guidance of his daughter Daisy he reads literary works, and he asks himself whether it might be possible to capture an individual's life and consciousness in literature, or in a biography, in a way that remains closed to his scientific approach to the world. His awareness of not having a sufficiently complex and multifaceted grasp on life is heightened by the attitudes of his daughter Daisy, who, like his father-in-law, turns out to be a poet. “Literary people” in general are unfamiliar to Perowne; they hold strange opinions he cannot fathom. When he thinks about the many improvements that marked the last century, for instance, remembering how pollution was reduced, and how “[a]t every level, material, medical, intellectual, sensual, for most people [life] has improved” (77), he cannot grasp, by contrast, why scholars presume that there was no “progress” and even refuse to discuss the question. He went to an “open day” at Daisy's college, trying to understand, but it is literally impossible for him: “The young lecturers there like to dramatise modern life as a sequence of calamities.

It's their style, their way of being clever. It wouldn't be cool or professional to count the eradication of smallpox as part of the modern condition" (77).¹³

Even though he tries to understand his daughter's approach to the world, it remains difficult for him to see what she is gaining by her immersion into literature. Significantly, in the past weeks he has not managed to read either of the two books that she recommended to him on the grounds that they focus on the same topic from different perspectives: he has partly read a biography of Darwin, but did not get round to the novel by Conrad. The presence of Daisy, about whom Perowne often thinks during the day, emphasises the fact that he is wedded to and limited by the scientific approach to life—he cannot master the literary approach as well.

It is thus not difficult to realise that Perowne's approach to the world is rather one-sided. But a literary point of view—embodied by Daisy and his father-in-law—is only hinted at. It remains a haunting presence throughout the book, for Perowne often thinks of his daughter, who will on this day return home after an absence of six months; but since Daisy is not a focaliser, we only get the father's reconstruction of her perspective—and this is quite vague and not reliable. While Perowne literally penetrates skulls in the operating theatre, he is unable to fathom what his family are thinking and feeling. What Daisy's views or a literary perspective on the situation might be, is left to the reader's imagination.¹⁴

The only exception to this is Daisy's and Perowne's controversial discussion of Bush's proposed invasion of Iraq. Again, Daisy stands for a view that is probably convincing for most readers: she says that the invasion will lead to the slaughter of civilians and not to the peace and improvement that it is supposed to bring about. When the book was published in 2005, the results of the war that the two are arguing about were already common knowledge. Since Perowne is—as has become clear with the benefit of hindsight—wrong in many respects, the reader is once again confronted with a view he will probably reject: Daisy's fears have turned out to be justified. There still remains some doubt about her line of argument, however, which is stressed by the fact that she does

¹³ Although he gives many noteworthy instances of progress, Perowne himself indicates that all might not be as well as he claims. He worries about many present-day concerns, beginning with a burning plane that he happens to watch in the morning, which he thinks might be a terrorist weapon, bent on destroying the way of life that he endorses so doggedly.

¹⁴ That Perowne's father-in-law also represents this "literary" point of view may be one of the reasons for the antagonism both men feel for each other. This antagonism, which even borders on hostility, evinces the continuation in the late twentieth century of the divide between science and the humanities, which was expounded by C. P. Snow in *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution* (1962).

not take Saddam Hussein's cruelty seriously enough. Perowne, who cannot make up his mind with regard to the ethical implications of the invasion, is genuinely worried about Saddam Hussein's regime, for he has treated a professor from Iraq, whose exposure to torture has been inscribed into his body, and who has very good reasons for welcoming Bush's decision. An ethical appraisal of the invasion of the Iraq is thus shown to be much more complex than Daisy's rather conventional views allow for.

While Daisy's perspective remains teasingly vague, two incidents in the novel seem to suggest that both the scientific and the literary approach to the world are very valuable and may even prevent violence and bodily harm. At his first encounter with the thug Baxter after the car accident, Perowne manages to escape unscathed because he recognises Baxter's illness and lures him with the prospect of an at least partial cure. After the three gangsters have broken into the flat, threatened to kill his wife Rosalind with a knife that is held to her throat and have made Daisy take off her clothes, the power of literature is asserted by Daisy's recital of Arnold's poem "Dover Beach". This initiates another mood swing in Baxter. Daisy is thus saved by her knowledge of nineteenth-century literature—a knowledge that, as Perowne had remembered earlier, enabled her to describe her feelings extraordinarily well even as a little child.

The novel therefore continually reminds us that Perowne's analytical and scientific approach to ethical issues is one-sided and limited. In order to get a more balanced view, it is necessary to complement the scientific with a literary perspective. This perspective, however, remains absent. It is therefore impossible to arrive at a balanced and adequate understanding of both Perowne's day and the ethical issues involved in his experiences. This in turn results in an indeterminacy that is postmodern rather than modernist. In many modernist works we are faced with the difficulty of weighing, combining, balancing and evaluating different perspectives and values embodied by different characters. Here, however, we are not provided with enough information to evaluate the characters' attitudes, let alone come to a balanced view of the fictional world.¹⁵ This instability is in accord with a non-ontological, non-foundational post-Levinasian ethics in which everything is supposedly ethical because nothing can be decided.

We are thus faced with a double defamiliarisation. Firstly we are exposed to a scientific approach to the world, which provides a radically different perspective on literary topics and ethics. This presentation of the consciousness of "the other" may evoke sympathy or allow us to appreciate "the other"; but the

¹⁵ Tim Adams (2005) recognises the importance of the "debate between rationality and imagination", and he stresses the fact that "it is not clear which side comes out on top". Perowne's lack of "artistic imagination" and his "professional reductionism" are commented upon in many reviews.

insight into Henry's thoughts also highlights the one-sidedness of his perspective. This is emphasised by the vague hints about views held by Daisy and literary scholars, and makes us aware of the limitation of a one-sided scientific or literary approach to the world. Secondly, the familiar narrative means of a heterodiegetic narrator and an internal focaliser are used in an innovative way, resulting in conjecture and indeterminacy. While we are alerted to the fact that the perspective of literary critics or authors is an important addition to Henry's rather one-sided scientific views, the means to reconstruct such a necessary component of an adequate understanding of the fictional world are denied to the reader. We are not even able to gauge the perspective of literary critics or authors on the many topics Perowne thinks about—much less to complement them with the scientific perspective and construct the inclusive, balanced view that is so obviously needed. The novel's framework of values is thus unstable: we know that what is given is only one part of a multifaceted whole, but our efforts to construct this overarching structure are both encouraged and thwarted by the novel.

Through its staging of the difficulties of deciding which approach to the world is adequate, *Saturday* denies that there are any absolute values and reinforces Alain Badiou's view that there is no ethic "in the abstract", but only an "ethics of truths". Because of the strangeness of Perowne's thought processes and the elusiveness of Daisy, the unknowability of the other remains, allowing us to develop a sensibility that appreciates multiplicity and alterity. The experience of alterity is linked to both destabilisation and the evocation of sympathy, therefore inducing us to develop an attitude that is more tentative and open, while at the same time appreciative of the (unknown) other.

Instability, Alterity and Sympathy with Regard to Two Focalisers: Julian Barnes' *Arthur and George*

In Julian Barnes' fictional biography *Arthur and George* (2005), there is a similar interplay between instability with regard to the ethical (and even factual) framework of the story world, and an evocation of an experience of alterity as well as sympathy. In his latest work, Barnes chooses a style of narration that is influenced by the aesthetic tenets of modernism. The acclaimed author of *Flaubert's Parrot*, who in the heyday of postmodernism self-consciously explored the (im)possibility of ever understanding the life of a person by way of historical records, let alone come up with a coherent biography, now presents us with a seemingly unproblematic fictional biography of two historical characters. Their intertwining life stories are told by a covert heterodiegetic narrator who concentrates on the depiction of the consciousness and emotions of the two men.

But although the fragmentation, parody, satire, and historiographic metafictional musings which informed Barnes' earlier novels are absent from his latest work, we should not mistake it for a step back to an unproblematic use of realist conventions.

Given the mode of narration and the adherence to the conventions of fictional biography, there seems to be no doubt as to what happened, or even as to what the historical characters thought or felt during the time span that is described by the heterodiegetic narrator. We are presented with the semblance of a modernist approach to the life of a person which might be compared to May Sinclair's *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922), with its brief relation of significant events during the protagonist's childhood and the selection of scenes that are important for an understanding of the major crises and the (lack of) relationships in the life of the heroine. It is significant, however, that Barnes' novel juxtaposes the lives of two very different protagonists—neatly subdivided for the most part into chapters bearing their respective names. They live in different mental and social worlds, and it is only because of a tragic reversal in George's life that they meet in the end.

In this novel, the manner and order of distributing information are quite important, because the reader is given significant (fictional) facts often belatedly. This forces us to re-adjust constantly what has been read before and to accommodate it to the information given later on. This device is used right from the beginning. At first, Arthur and George are presented as two normal Victorian boys, with Arthur's upbringing being more unconventional than George's. Arthur grows up in an impoverished household, with an imaginative, imposing mother. George is the son of a vicar and imbibes the faith of the Anglican Church. His catechism, routinely tested by his father, also requires faith in his country and giving answers like "England is the beating heart of the Empire, Father" (17). If George is an outsider, it is because of his bad eyesight and his determination to do very well at school.

After twenty pages or so, however, readers have to re-assess what they have learned so far: The impoverished boy, "Irish by ancestry, Scottish by birth, instructed in the faith of Rome by Dutch Jesuits, [called] Arthur became English" (23)—and turned out to be Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous gentleman, sportsman and author of the Sherlock Holmes stories.¹⁶ George, on the contrary, is subjected to racism, which, together with the fact that his surname is Edalji (26), alerts the reader to the fact that although he has imbibed English values and sees himself as an Englishman, George is not regarded as one of them by others. It turns out that the serene Anglican vicar is a Parsee and

¹⁶ In order to make this experience of re-assessment possible, Julian Barnes persuaded his publisher "not to blare Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's name on the dust jacket" (Wigod 2005).

was born in Bombay, where he converted to the Anglican Church. The fact that George has to be re-constructed as the son of an Indian immigrant comes as a shock, since his views and character, with which the reader has intimately become acquainted, are almost stereotypically English: his childhood at the Vicarage, his pragmatism and his emotional reticence, even his thinking, which is inspired by his admiration for the law, suggest that his self-image as an Englishman is not far off the mark. In the field of the ethics of truth, this defamiliarisation is of crucial importance, because it highlights the fact that there is neither closure nor the promise of a stable knowledge which might allow us to judge others and their behaviour.

In the following, Arthur and George are shown to live in different worlds. Arthur becomes more and more prosperous and popular, while George has to fight for his education as a lawyer and is subjected to different kinds of racism. He is exposed, for instance, to harassment by the police, derisive announcements in the newspapers (one even claiming that prostitutes are available at the vicarage) and obscene as well as threatening anonymous letters. Some of these are directed to the police and maintain that George is the head of a gang of people who are mutilating (and killing) local cattle at night. While Arthur goes on from one triumph to the next, George is convicted and sentenced to seven years penal servitude, with the prison authorities making life more difficult for him than the law necessitates.

The two protagonists are similar in one respect, though: since we share both their thoughts and feelings, we see the world through their eyes, and since we see how their characters develop in response to the circumstances, we are invited to feel sympathy for them. It is significant that we come to know them as children, when both are more or less victimised: Arthur lives in an impoverished and unstable household; his deranged father is declared “mad” and removed to a hospital when his mother cannot cope with the situation any more. Later Arthur develops into a kind of champion for justice, trying to do his duty and help others, no matter the cost. George’s unfair treatment, which he suffers without any complaints at all, highlights his vulnerability and his lack of chances to lead the “ordinary” married life that he hopes for. George is shown to be sensitive, modest, earnest and handicapped by his very poor eyesight, and as he grows up in a rather strict, demanding and serious family, the insight into his consciousness may well evoke the reader’s sympathy for the ungainly child, who is unlucky in so many respects. The very Englishness of the family and the high regard in which they hold English and imperial ideals make the racist

harassment at the hands of the villagers and the police, to whom the Edaljis at first turn in order to get protection, seem highly unfair.¹⁷

The representation of the characters' thought processes suggests that there is no doubt concerning the presentation of the fictional facts. The destabilisation of meaning thus does not relate to the heterodiegetic narrator's knowledge of events, or to his authority and ability to present them. We are even led to believe that the fictional events correspond to the historical truth, an overall impression which is confirmed by the "author's note" at the end of the book. This brings the events up to date, and reassures the reader that (with one exception) "*all letters quoted [. . .] are authentic; as are quotations from newspapers, government reports, proceedings in Parliament, and the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*" (360).

Although the fictional facts seem to be unproblematic, the reader is exposed to an experience of alterity. This experience is double-layered: it relates first to the experiences, values and beliefs of the Victorian characters, which are difficult to understand from the point of view of contemporary readers. Secondly, the mode and order of distributing information ensure that events which are introduced in a seemingly unproblematic context appear in a different light with the benefit of hindsight. The fictional facts that the reader becomes familiar with are suddenly made to seem "strange" when some additional piece of information is given, which makes it necessary to come up with a different interpretation of these facts.

The first experience of alterity, which concerns the two protagonists, is highlighted by the mode of narration. Since Arthur and George serve as the main focalisers, we intimately get to know their ways of thinking and feeling. Seeing the world "through the eyes" of George is certainly a strange experience for those readers who have never encountered racism at first hand. While George could quite literally be seen as "the other", who is both handicapped and exposed to unjust and cruel behaviour, Arthur's very popularity and success are highly unusual. The distance between contemporary readers and the famous author is heightened by archaisms which, as one reviewer stressed, "are entirely absent from the original text[s]" by Arthur Conan Doyle and are meant "to create a sense of antiquity where none exists" (Winder 2005). What is more, some of Arthur's attitudes are difficult to stomach from a twenty-first century point of view: his chivalry does not allow him to see women as equals, he

¹⁷ The reader's feeling of sympathy is mentioned in some of the reviews: Natasha Walter (2005) claims that "naturally, we sympathise with George". The immediacy with which we sympathise for George's plight as a child is heightened by the use of the present tense—as opposed to the past tense in the passages dealing with Arthur. Later on, when Arthur experiences an emotional crisis, this initial distribution of the tenses is reversed, and his thoughts and feelings are rendered in the present tense.

remains firmly set against female suffrage, and he would prefer activities like playing golf to be a masculine prerogative. His belief in “spiritism” and the possibility of communicating with the dead, which was held to be superstitious by more enlightened contemporaries, is quite difficult to understand as well.

A different experience of strangeness is evoked in the unexpected turns of the narrative, which make the familiar suddenly appear unfamiliar. The re-interpretation of seemingly straightforward facts is due in two instances to the police inquiry. Even though the reader has learned earlier that at the height of the racist threats the Edaljis began to lock themselves into their bedrooms at night, the behaviour of the Edaljis and their sleeping arrangements seem strange all of a sudden when George has to explain them to the police. That George shares a bedroom with his father, who locks the bedroom door every night, that he cannot leave the room without his father waking up, and that he does not own a razor justifies the police’s suspicion; the reader has to re-view the information again, trying to remember whether there were plausible reasons for such behaviour (104f.).

There are no reasons at all, moreover, for a fact that has not been mentioned so far and that might have driven George to act unlawfully: as the police find out, George needed money quite desperately. This serious, emotionally reticent man, who is only interested in the laws of England and his family, who has no friends and never goes out or has dates with girls, apparently ran into debt and had to ask three different moneylenders for a loan.¹⁸ This fact remains inexplicable, since it suggests a side of George’s character that has not come to light so far. The perfect gentleman Arthur refuses to talk to George about this possible “debt of honour” and brushes these doubts aside. For postmodern readers, however, the situation is more difficult; after all, the incident throws doubt upon the very mode of distributing information. If such a crucial fact, which points to important secrets in George’s life, has not been mentioned before, the character sketch that the novel provides may not only be incomplete, but misleading as well. The indeterminacy surrounding this event is not resolved, but there are no reasons for further doubts concerning George’s character. Since he serves as a focaliser and is firmly convinced of his own innocence, it seems highly unlikely that he has led a “secret life” that might explain his letters to the moneylenders.

Still, the fact that the necessity for those loans cannot be reconciled with what we have been told about George raises the question of the truth of the

¹⁸ In an interview, Julian Barnes said that his own belief in his interpretation of the story was shaken when he looked up George’s letter in Birmingham Central Library, and started thinking that perhaps: “[i]t is more complicated. Maybe something is going on.’ He [George] wasn’t as clean as that, maybe. On the other hand, maybe he was.” (in Hanks 2005).

(fictional) facts. Are we told “the true” story? Are we given the relevant details? What is omitted? Who is George’s unknown “friend”, for whom he did the very untypical thing of lending money he could not pay back and thereby placing his reputation in jeopardy?

These doubts, which contribute to the impression of indeterminacy, are heightened by many implicit references to the power of discourse. The novel contains excerpts from and summaries of many different genres. There are newspaper reports and headlines (mostly concerning the trials), excerpts from (misspelled) anonymous letters and parliamentary debates, bits of Arthur’s autobiography (which give a surprisingly racist account of the Edalji case) and a parliamentary report which is so far off the mark that it is dismissed as a “novella” by Sir Arthur, who asks whether it is “protected by Parliamentary privilege” (308). Moreover, the power of fiction to influence our perceptions and actions is alluded to. George is not the only one who thinks that Arthur’s (partly illegal) attempts to find out who committed the crimes and his willingness to jump to the conclusion that he has identified the culprit are influenced by the methods of Sherlock Holmes.¹⁹

The juxtaposition of genre conventions highlights their focus on different aspects of the fictional facts; the police and the newspapers concentrate on other facets of the characters’ lives than those presented in the novel itself. Since it turns out that the stories are incompatible with each other, the question of truth is foregrounded. This becomes most obvious during the trial, in which there is so much at stake for George. Because of the “adjustments” made by the police, George does not recognise his own story any more, and even the people he met and talked to seem strange: “if his story was subtly changing around him, then so too were some of the characters” (123).²⁰ The embedding of facts in an institutional context lends credibility to the reports by the police witnesses:

It was just a story, George knew, something made up from scraps and coincidences and hypotheses; he knew too that he was innocent; but something about the repetition of the story by an authority in wig and gown made it take on extra plausibility (121).

In contrast to the fabricated tale put forward by the lawyers, the story told by his honest and sincere parents is not convincing at all. His mother seems to be naïvely good hearted, and even the integrity of his father is not discernible any more. George’s solicitor is not surprised at all by the fact that they turned out to be bad witnesses: “the best people are not necessarily the best witnesses.

¹⁹ “It was all, George decided, the fault of Sherlock Holmes. Sir Arthur had been too influenced by his own creation” (305).

²⁰ See also “his story was being taken away from him” (129).

The more scrupulous they are, the more honest, [. . .] the more they can be played with by counsel like Mr Disturnal. [. . .] It's a question of belief. [. . .] From a purely legal point of view, the best witnesses are those whom the jury believes most" (140).

This raises the question, however, of whom the reader is to believe, and it is no coincidence that Julian Barnes considered "Conviction" as a possible title for a book in which the relation between seeing and believing is of crucial importance.²¹ Is the credibility of those who see and interpret the events determined by their character, or is it a matter of discourse, of the ways of distributing information, of techniques of invoking sympathy? Honesty is identified as a hindrance to credibility by the experienced solicitor, and Sir Arthur implicitly negates the notion that the best witnesses are those who notice everything. When George refuses to acknowledge that racist prejudices are at least partly responsible for his sentence and his failure to get the financial restitution that is due to him, Arthur confirms that George "is a first-class witness. It is not his fault if he is unable to see what others can" (217). Arthur, however, was convinced that George is innocent even before he was in full cognisance of the facts, and he is equally convinced of the more than doubtful fact that he has found the true criminal. Even George, who has the most orderly and rational mind imaginable, is willing to wave evidence and due procedures when it comes to believing what Sir Arthur says: "If Sir Arthur said that he knew a thing, then the burden of proof, to George's legal mind, shifted to the other fellow" (335). If evidence and proof are not of primary importance even to a "legal mind", the persuasiveness of witnesses—and focalisers—is determined by other factors, which cannot be weighed according to rational processes. While literature has the power to lend authority to selected characters and to invoke sympathy for "otherness", it can also (persuasively) invite readers to form opinions that have to be revised later on.

The question of what to believe, and the necessity of revis(it)ing former convictions is conspicuously raised again at the very end of the book, when the rational, disbelieving George attends a large séance held in honour of the recently deceased Sir Arthur. While he maintains his sceptical, even derisive attitude throughout most of the performance, a few words of the "medium", Mrs. Roberts, suddenly convince him that his father is trying to contact him. All of the facts she recites fit, and no one but his sister had known that he would attend—so there cannot be any cheating. When he hears that the man in question not only died at the right time and was of the right age, but also spent

²¹ Barnes only rejected "*Conviction*" as a title because it was too close to McEwan's *Atonement*; (cf. Jeffries 2005). In a very perceptive review, Magdalena Ball (2005) draws attention to the importance of seeing, "from the simple impact of optical myopia to the complex impact of metaphorical myopia".

his childhood in India and “was a very spiritual man”, he “feels his flesh begin to prickle [. . .]. No, no, surely not. He feels frozen in his seat; his shoulders lock solid [. . .]. [He] is now utterly terrified” (350). George’s realisation that he has to adjust his attitude to the spiritual world and get rid of deeply held convictions in a few seconds calls forth strong physical reactions. There is another reversal when a man seated a few yards away from him claims to have recognised a relative, which means that George can fall back on old certainties. The intense experience, however, has a more lasting influence and makes him less secure about his convictions than he formerly was: He “is chilled to the bone, sweaty, exhausted, threatened, utterly relieved, and deeply ashamed. And at the same time, part of him is impressed, curious, fearfully wondering. . .” (351).

The book ends with George staring at the platform, on which various “witnesses” in the audience have claimed to see the body of the deceased Sir Arthur:

What does he see?
 What did he see?
 What will he see? (357)

These three questions are the only explicit statements by the heterodiegetic narrator, who remains largely covert during the course of the story, and cast doubt upon everything the reader has read.²² “What does he see?” might simply refer to the by now empty stage; but this is improbable, since he is gazing “out into the air and beyond” (357). The reader is therefore asked what George “sees” in the metaphorical sense, what he knows, feels and believes—which makes us aware of how little we have come to know about George’s preoccupations and feelings. The second question is more important, because it might call into question the previous account of “what the lawyer saw”. If the story as told in the novel is true, the question is meaningless; George saw and thought what we have been told. If the question is relevant, however, it implies that we do not know what he saw and felt, which in turn means that we have not been given the sort of information that enables us to form a correct view and judgement of his case. Time and again, we have been alerted to the power of narrative conventions, to the persuasiveness of narration and authority, and to the need to re-adjust former opinions in the light of new evidence—and this question by the heterodiegetic narrator confirms these implicit doubts about the truth of the story. The last question is strange as well: if it is important what

²² There are some phrases or even adjectives that imply value judgements by the narrator, but these are always embedded in the presentation of the fictional facts or the focaliser’s thoughts or feelings; except in the ending there are no complete sentences that can be identified as statements by the narrator, let alone questions.

George will see in the future, then why does the narrative not continue? Could another, as yet unknown piece of information cast new light on our interpretation of the story and necessitate yet another re-adjustment?

Conclusion

Indeterminacy and instability are therefore very much present in the two novels which have been discussed. Though they do not sport any postmodern devices, they achieve indeterminacy through modernist or post-postmodernist narrative conventions. In Barnes' *Arthur and George*, it is the temporal distribution of information that forces a re-evaluation of what has been read so far and raises the question of whether all the important facts have been told. In *Saturday*, the conspicuous lack of information contributes to produce the same effect, because even leaving aside the fact of the neurosurgeon's rather one-sided approach to the world, there are many hints that we have not been given the information relevant to a balanced view of the fictional facts. Although there is a lack of the kind of explicit indeterminacy that characterises experimental devices such as metafictional comments, this subtle change in the handling of the distribution of fictional facts can be regarded as an instance of a new kind of experiment.

The ethical functions of postmodernist aesthetics are attained by traditional techniques as well. In the two novels by Barnes and McEwan, the experience of alterity is evoked by a creative use of modernist and realist techniques. Both have the additional ethical advantage of evoking sympathy for the characters, which nonetheless resist an unproblematic understanding or appropriation of them. The experience of alterity is produced by several means. First, the protagonists expose contemporary readers to strange thought processes. Perowne's scientific way of thinking is conspicuously odd because of the use of scientific jargon and his tendency to explain life in terms of biology; even literary topics are interpreted and evaluated in an unfamiliar way. Arthur's code of chivalry is by now as unfamiliar as his belief in spiritualism, and George's mind-style is not only peculiar because of his legalistic approach to the world; what happens to him as a victim of racist attacks also evokes the experience of "the other". In addition to that, *Arthur and George* induces alterity on another level, since the fictional facts that are accepted as true at a certain point of the reading process become unfamiliar and have to be re-visited and re-evaluated later on. Since we are repeatedly made aware that our assessment of the supposed facts can be quite beside the point, we are asked to develop a more open-minded and liberal attitude with regard to our judgement of others.

These and similar contemporary novels can thus be read as instances of a new departure in British literature, which might initiate a new phase of

postmodernism—though one has to bear in mind that postmodernist features were never very pronounced in British fiction, anyway. Nonetheless, there seems to be a shift during the 1990s, when even novelists who had resorted to postmodernist conventions in their earlier work began to prefer modernist or even realist devices. This move away from postmodernist techniques does not necessarily imply any antipathy towards experiments, however. Instead, the creative use of modernist and realist narrative conventions can fulfil some of the key functions of postmodernist devices—those of indeterminacy and instability—which are now achieved by means appropriate to an audience who have by now become familiar with postmodernist defamiliarizing conventions. Although the claim that the majority of novels published after the mid-nineties are as subtly experimental as the novels by Barnes and McEwan would be just as presumptuous and short sighted as the thesis that British fiction from the late 1950s onwards is postmodernist fiction, one might still suggest that, during the last decade or so, we can witness a new turn in British literature. There are still plenty of novels which hold on to the dear old realist devices, but with regard to the complex relation between modernism and postmodernism, modernism seems to be more attractive at the turn of the twenty-first century than it was a hundred years ago. Even highly acclaimed new authors like Zadie Smith or Andrea Levy resort to modernist features in their latest novels, while more experimentally minded novelists achieve their effects by using devices that are modernist and realist rather than postmodernist.

It is thus premature to bemoan the wane of postmodernist devices in contemporary British fiction; even though the narrative conventions are different by now, central tenets of postmodernist aesthetics, indeterminacy and the experience of alterity, are just as powerfully evoked by seemingly “traditional” novels as they were by experimental fiction in the heyday of postmodernism. From the point of view of ethics, the new departure may even prove to be more valuable, because it combines the acceptance of alterity with the development of sympathy for “the other”. It thus manages the feat of being compatible with the non-ontological, non-foundational ethics that has been formulated in the wake of Levinas, while at the same time reintroducing the development of sympathy that neo-humanist critics hold so dear.

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