

# Anna Paluchowska-Messing

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## Clockwork Novel: The Mechanics behind Frances Burney's Prose Composition

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*Anna Paluchowska-Messing*

Uniwersytet Jagielloński

## **Clockwork Novel: The Mechanics behind Frances Burney's Prose Composition**

### **Abstract**

The paper explores the didactic potential of the novels by the eighteenth-century English writer Frances Burney. To this end, it takes up the metaphor of a life-like automaton – a symbol of human ingenuity and artistic mastery, and a popular object of entertainment in the eighteenth century – and examines its applicability to describe the act of construing a novelistic text. The analysis yields the conclusion that Burney's experiments with narrative techniques (third-person narration, free indirect discourse, heteroglossia) were employed to ensure the narrator's authority through the strategic withdrawal of the authorial feminine voice, and were also instrumental in achieving a text which would be both aesthetically pleasing and instructive to the readers. Burney's didacticism, moreover, proves to be very modern, that is not prescriptively moralizing, but rather training the readers in the exercise of empathy.

**Key words:** third-person narration, free-indirect discourse, polyphonic novel, heteroglossia, narrative voice, didactic novel, eighteenth-century novel, eighteenth-century women writers

In Frances Burney's first novel, *Evelina*, the main heroine visits the many pleasure grounds and fashionable venues of eighteenth century London. One of such sites celebrating pure consumption is the private museum of the jeweler James Cox. The ornamented mechanical toys described by Evelina seem to correspond to the Museum Catalogue which lists the exhibits of the display in 1773. Among many curious clocks and mechanical fountains, the catalogue records as item twentieth "a gardener boy of molten copper," dressed in a coat "embroidered and ornamented with jewellery," and as item twenty-first "a Vase" which the boy "contains on his head," and out of which "grows a pine-apple copied from nature, whose leaves are finely enameled of beautiful transparent green." Then follows a description of the pineapple itself:

The pineapple is of silver, richly gilt, that bursts open upon playing of the chimes, and discovers a nest of six birds: in the center of the nest is the mother bird, formed of Jeweller's work, whose plumage is set with stones of various colours, which, during the playing of the music, is, by a curious mechanism, animated like life; feeding her several young ones with pearls, and moving from one to the other, holding each pearl in her bill over the bird that is fed [...] and so on successively feeding her young,

from one to another, fluttering her wings at the same time; after which the pineapple closes again of itself. (13)

In Burney's novel, the curious display prompts the company to comment on the value which the spectacle affords to the visitors. While the crude Madame Duval is in rapture ("This is prettier than all the rest! I declare, in all my travels, I never see nothing eleganter" [85]), Evelina seems "to miss something" (85), and Lord Orville positively deplores that "its purport is so frivolous, so very remote from all aim at instruction or utility"; he is grieved that "so much ingenuity should not be better bestowed" (122). What the main characters, the moral compasses of the novel, plainly disapprove of is art which is unashamedly useless.

Interestingly, when Burney was embarking on her literary career such a charge was commonly levelled against novels, especially those "by a lady." All her prose writing shows Burney working under the pressure to produce a text at once artistically rewarding and yet such as could not be accused of finery for its own sake. Finally, in the preface to her last novel, she launches a powerful defense of the genre, and lays down her artistic credo, expostulating that the novel should be perceived as a form of art both aesthetically pleasing and of considerable didactic use.

This paper explores Burney's novels and their prefatory texts for the technicalities of narrative construction which contribute to the genre's change of status – from frivolous entertainment to a powerful didactic tool. Instrumental here are the new techniques of third person narration and free indirect discourse, so successfully implemented by Burney. Further, the structure of the chapters and the deliberate contrasts achieved by the many dialects and idiolects of the characters make up for a truly polyphonic text – in itself a spectacle no less ingenious than the finest of works in Cox's Museum. But Burney's experiments in technique achieved more than mere finery. Not only did they pave the way for the highly palatable moral lessons issued later by the giants of nineteenth-century prose, but also posed questions about the utility of literary reading, to which twenty-first century scientists prepare answers in their laboratories.

### **A book by a lady – a useless pineapple of emerald and gold?**

Burney began her writing career inauspiciously, by burning her whole literary output in a garden bonfire at the age of fifteen. The conflagration was a secret, until the author revealed it to her father (and all her readers) forty-five years later in the preface accompanying her final novel, *The Wanderer*.<sup>1</sup> There she describes her youthful decision as an act of filial obedience to her father's views, which stated that novels could only injure the reputation of a well-bred young woman. And so her "bureau was cleared but [her] head was not," and eventually "Evelina struggled herself into life" (8). When Burney published her debut novel, she did it anonymously, partly in deference to her father's views, and partly for marketing reasons. Novels authored by women had a bad

1 The preface is in the form of a letter dedicated to Frances Burney's father, Dr. Charles Burney.

reputation and were habitually dismissed by critics as “literary weeds, which spring up, plenteously, every month,” or “flimsy series of adventures [...] in the amorous trash of the times” (Campbell 557–58). Strategically therefore it was useful to have her gender obscured, for though novels by women who explicitly styled themselves as teachers were occasionally permitted to hold some value, it was as instruction to young girls only<sup>2</sup>.

Burney, however, throughout her career, aimed to be read by a wider audience, an audience consisting of men and women alike. She aspired to produce a new type of a novel, which would rival the epic poem, the form most highly valued among the eighteenth-century literature connoisseurs. In the preface to *The Wanderer*, she insists that the two genres, if well executed, share many a feature: “the grandeur, yet singleness of plan; the never broken, yet never obvious adherence to its execution; the delineation and support of character; the invention of incident; the contrast of situation; the grace of diction, and the beauty of imagery” (7). In a novel, such an elegant and harmonious composition should moreover represent “a picture of supposed, but natural and probable human existence”, and as such would – crucially – “[give] to juvenile credulity knowledge of the world, without ruin or repentance; and a lesson of experience, without its tears” (7). Burney employs the word “picture” repeatedly to describe her textual productions. In the preface to *Camilla*, her third novel, she also uses the metaphor of painting to best represent the province of the novelist, which is to “fairly, however faintly, delineate” the features of the human heart (7). In short, what Burney proposes to achieve, especially in her later novels, is an aesthetically pleasing landscape of human hearts, ingenuously set in motion to unfold stories and “incidents,” which will produce a morally educational effect on the readers. This description is not too dissimilar to the beautifully intricate mechanisms from Cox’s *Museum*, but with a very important difference – Burney’s novels instead of displaying artistic creativity of no apparent use, would “convey useful precepts” (*The Wanderer* 7).

A woman preaching rules of behaviour was all very well in her proper place, that is as an author of improving conduct literature for girls, but a woman assuming the authority to speak about life in general was a concept hard to swallow. It is perhaps for this reason that the preface to *Evelina* leaves the question of its author’s gender tantalizingly open. On the one hand, it modestly apologizes in a lady-like fashion for the intrusion on the reverent critics’ time and patience by presenting them with “the trifling production of a few idle hours” (4), and talks of the “weak powers” (3) of “the humble Novelist” (7). On the other hand, it boldly asserts that the author is “no hackneyed writer” or “a half-starved garreteer” (5), which is further testified by no less than three quotations from Shakespeare and one from Pope in only ten lines<sup>3</sup>. It appears that the author, despite the professed literary insignificance, is someone to be reckoned with: a person of no mean education. Further in the preface, the “humble

2 Cheryl Nixon’s study of prefaces to mid-century novels by women authors (2002) shows that the books were usually explicitly addressed to female readers, and the very merit of the publications rested on their utility to girls. Nixon explores in detail the rhetoric in the prefaces to Sarah Fielding’s *The Governess* (1749) and Jane Barker’s *A Patchwork Screen for Ladies* (1723).

3 Burney quotes *Macbeth* once, and *The Merchant of Venice* twice, and then Pope’s *Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot*.

Novelist” claims affiliation with writers already established for their remarkable achievement on the literary scene: Rousseau, Johnson, Marivaux, Fielding, Richardson and Smollett. Moreover, the author has the nerve to assure that this new novel, *Evelina*, though indebted to the great predecessors, is not a mere copy, as “[i]n books [...] imitation cannot be shunned too sedulously” (8). This assertive claim to originality is swiftly followed by a disclaimer warding off critical derision: “what I have said in regard to imitation, [should] be understood, as it is meant, in a general sense, and not be imputed to an opinion of my own originality” (9). And thus the preface to *Evelina* might be read as an astonishingly skillful rhetorical balancing act: on the one hand, the author continually asserts, explicitly or implicitly, her status as a writer worth reading, on the other, she modestly negates the assertions she has just made. All this contributes to complete gender evasion – it was impossible for eighteenth-century readers to determine whether *Evelina* was written by a man or woman. In fact, before Burney was revealed as the author of the book, many male writers were speculatively proposed as its authors. Most amusingly, *Evelina*’s publisher, Lowndes, suspected the novel had been written by Horace Walpole “because he too had ‘published a Book in this snug manner,’” while others refused to “believe *Evelina* could be Written by a Young Woman, or, indeed, by any Woman” (Park 140).

It appears that the preface to *Evelina* and the novel itself were deliberately written in a voice which discarded all gender and body-specificity. Importantly, such a voice of unmarked gender could assume authority and a lofty position of a disinterested observer and orchestrator of events in the novel. But in the preface to *Evelina* such a voice could be delivered only because of the writer’s anonymity. Once Burney’s identity as the author was revealed, in her subsequent novels, she needed to find other means to achieve the authority of a disembodied voice. To this end, she began her experiments with other modes of telling a story – those we now recognize as third person narration and free indirect discourse.

### The springs and bolts of the novelistic mechanism

Julie Choi convincingly asserts that third-person narration was a truly original way of telling a story in the second half of the eighteenth-century, when most novels were written in epistolary,<sup>4</sup> memoir or diary form (674). Both Choi and Margaret Anne Doody point to women writers as those most eager to experiment with the technique at the time. In her study on the female predecessors of George Eliot, Doody traces how “women writers [endeavoured] repeatedly, if only in short breaths [...] to unite the strengths of Fielding and Richardson” (282), and finally arrived at a mode of storytelling which was confident, and could “talk about money, work, morality and the workings of society at large” (280) with this mixture of sympathy and irony which we now recognize as a typically novelistic style. These short breaths came from writers such as Sarah Scott, Charlotte Lennox, Charlotte Smith, Frances Sheridan. But while

4 Burney’s debut novel, *Evelina* (1778) is her only epistolary novel.

the nuts and bolts of the narrative mechanism were put in place, Doody insists, they were still “inert, static” (284). To put them in motion, a new technology was needed: free indirect discourse.

What scholars have agreed to call free indirect discourse<sup>5</sup> is a type of narration which though conducted from the third person's perspective, shows not only what the characters do or say, as could be perceived by a by-stander, but – crucially – allows insight into their hearts and minds. Moreover, these hearts and minds are described not as static objects, but moving, changing landscapes, continually responding to their surrounding context, and affecting it in turn. It is experiments with this type of narration, along with the dialogues, that form the main fabric of Burney's novelistic texts. They allow the author to weave a story without marking the weaver, to unfold – as if by an invisible hand – the imaginary minds of others, and provide “lessons of experience without their tears” (*The Wanderer* 7).

When mapping the function of free indirect discourse in Burney's second novel, *Cecilia*, Julie Park notes that:

the technique [...] allows the view of the character from many perspectives at once – the character as she experiences herself and others, the character as others experience her (as evinced through dialogue), and the character as the narrator sees her and sees others experiencing her. Perhaps most remarkable about the technique is the impossibility of distinguishing where one perspective ends and the other begins. (137)

Julie Choi, on the other hand, when looking at the very technical side of free indirect discourse production, remarks that the technique is largely a matter of grammar and punctuation. It requires “the simple excision of the first-person grammatical marker” and the addition of emotionally charged punctuation marks, such as dashes, question marks, and exclamation marks (654). The technique may be simple, but the effects, as Park points out, are remarkable. And most remarkably, the very fluidity of the narratorial position, allows not only to transcribe the workings of one character's heart and mind, but to move freely from one perspective to another. In Park's exposition quoted above, the character who sees and is seen from those manifold positions is the heroine of the novel, Cecilia. She is always at the centre of the narrative, and we get most access only into her mind. In Burney's later novels, the narration gives ready access to many characters' minds – it is not only transparent but also all-pervading. The following extract from *The Wanderer* can serve as an illustrative example of the fact, describing the condescension Mrs Ireton, one of the background characters, practises on the heroine, Ellis, by allowing her onto the premises of the Ireton mansion in London.

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5 The phrase is a translation of Charles Bally's coinage in French: *style indirect libre* (1912). The most influential studies in English followed from Dorrit Cohn (*Transparent Minds* 1978), and Ann Banfield, the title of whose study *Unspeakable Sentences* (1982) is often referred to as best describing the style. Margaret Anne Doody (1980), and Julie Choi (1996) point to Burney as the writer who conducted the most successful experiments with free indirect style of narration towards the end of the eighteenth century. More recently, the question of free indirect discourse was discussed in D. A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2003), Michael McKeon's *The Secret History of Domesticity* (2005), and Blakey Vermeule's *Why Do We Care About Literary Characters?* (2011).

At a large house in Grosvenor Square they stopt [sic!]. Mrs. Ireton turned exultingly to the stranger: but her glance met no gratification. The young woman, instead of admiring the house, and counting the number of steps that led to the vestibule, or of windows that commanded the view of the square, only cast her eyes upwards, as if penetrated with thankfulness that her journey was ended.

Surprised that stupidity should be thus joined with cunning, Mrs. Ireton now intently watched the impression which, when her servants appeared, would be made by their rich liveries.

The stranger, however, without regarding them, followed their mistress into the hall, which that lady was passing through in stately silence, meaning to confound the proud vagrant more completely by dismissing her from the best drawing-room. (47)

The shifting perspectives here do not represent the mind of the heroine, Ellis, who seems oblivious to the internal drama played out by Mrs Ireton's pride, her need to affirm her own status by confounding a hapless stranger, and the sheer meanness of her notions. What the readers can note are the thoughts of Mrs Ireton, intermingled with shots of her and Ellis from the outside. The observation that in Ellis, stupidity is thus surprisingly joined with cunning, is produced, of course, within Mrs. Ireton's mind, but it is transcribed without any punctuation markers suggesting so. This seemingly simple punctuation choice makes for much of the enjoyment of reading (and, presumably, writing) a novel which uses free indirect discourse. The reader may feel they are skillfully decoding all the perspectives during the act of text comprehension. When they discover irony, for instance, as they might in the sentence quoted above, they appropriate it as a result of their personal effort. Thus free indirect discourse activates the reader: irony, though written into the text by the author, is not handed out on a plate, but awaits to be discovered by the act of individual reading. Importantly, the reader's activation enhances the transparency of the novelistic narrative: the reader's increased "ownership" of the text, brings to the forefront the relationship between the reader and the text, leaving the narrator in the shade, invisible.

A similar conclusion could be drawn from Marcie Frank's study (2015), which sees the origins of free indirect discourse as present in Burney's novels in the author's fascination with the theatre and the means of theatrical representations. Frank points particularly to the asides in *Love and Fashion*, Burney's 1799 play,<sup>6</sup> as the key to such a conjecture. The sheer number of them (Frank counted 119) stands for more than double of the highest score of asides in any other play of the period, and, indeed, they seem to perform the same function as the free indirect discourse may in the novel. In other eighteenth-century plays, Frank asserts, asides are used by the characters to speak directly to the audience, creating the illusion that they draw the viewers into their confidence over the other characters' heads. In *Love and Fashion*, the asides appear to be less direct addresses to the viewers, and more spontaneous internal exclamations, whose full meaning seems not to be comprehended by the characters uttering them. This privilege is reserved for the audience. In the tragicomic conversation between

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<sup>6</sup> The play was to be produced in March 1800 by Covent Garden Theatre, but on January 6<sup>th</sup>, Burney's beloved sister, Susanna, died, and it was decided the production should be postponed for the time of mourning. Sadly, the project was abandoned, and the play was never produced.

Lord Exbury and his prodigal son, Mordaunt, for instance, the asides uttered by both characters reveal to the viewer the extent of the misunderstanding between them, which neither is aware of (Frank 622–26).

The spontaneity with which the asides are produced in direct response to the situation on the stage also resembles the function of free indirect discourse, which in the novel gives access to the dynamic process of thoughts flowing in the characters' minds. This could be illustrated with an episode in *Camilla* where one of the many misunderstandings between the heroine and the hero further complicates the plot. As a result of her brother's practical joke, Camilla finds herself stuck in a half-finished summer house of the comical Mr. Dubster, without a ladder or any other means of leaving it safely. When succour finally comes, it is in the persons of two men, who both are Camilla's admirers: the hero, Edgar, and his foil, Major Cerwood. Camilla, who cares not a straw for the Major, but who thinks she had been rejected by Edgar, in a burst of pride, decides to slight him. When both Edgar and the Major stand up the ladder to offer Camilla their hands, "[t]his appeared to Camilla a fortunate moment for making a spirited display of her indifference: she gave her hand to the Major Cerwood" (291), leaving Edgar stupefied still on top of the ladder. The narrative then shifts the perspective from following Camilla's thoughts to the turmoil in Edgar's mind.

Edgar remained behind, almost petrified [...] He then hastily quitted the spot, mounted his horse, and galloped after the carriage; though without any actual design to follow it, or any formed purpose whither to go [...] He hardly breathed the whole way from indignation; yet his wrath was without definition, and nearly beyond comprehensibility even to himself, till suddenly recurring the lovely smile with which Camilla had accepted the assistance of Major Cerwood, he involuntarily clasped his hands and called out: 'O happy Major!' Awakened by his ejaculation to the true state of his feelings, he started as from a sword held at his breast, 'Jealousy!', he cried, 'am I reduced to so humiliating a passion? [...] Yet recollecting the disclaiming speeches he had been compelled to make at Cleves, he thought, if she had heard them, she might be actuated by resentment. Even then, however, her manner of shewing it was alarming, and fraught with mischief [...] He then felt tempted to hint to Mr. Tyrold [...] the expediency of her breaking off this intercourse [with the Major] [...]. But it occurred to him next, it was possible the Major pleased her [...] He felt his face tingle at the thought, though it nearly made his heart cease to beat. [...] To speak to her openly, he thought the surest as well as the fairest way [...] For this purpose, it was necessary to make immediate enquiry into the situation of the Major, and then, if she would hear him, relate to her the result; well assured that to gather the state of her heart upon this subject, by her manner of attending to the least word by which it should be introduced. (291–92)

Having first followed Camilla's reasoning, the narrative then traces in detail Edgar's train of thought from the state of chaos created by a tumult of indistinguishable emotions to his calmer resolution to check the Major's financial standing and communicate it to Camilla – in order to judge her heart from the response. The dynamism of the thought process is further enhanced by Edgar galloping on a horse, at first aimlessly, and then with a pointed purpose.

The narrative records Edgar's thoughts as they flow, without tagging them with any judgement. As a result, at first, the assessment of the situation perceived from



Edgar's perspective may seem reasonable and just; the path of action he lays out for himself may make sense and even promise a speedy resolution to his perplexities. But though the readers are invited to witness the mechanism which prompts the hero's response, and acknowledge its logic, they also cannot but feel a lurking suspicion that all this mechanism and logic are inherently faulty, because they are based on subjective assumptions about other people and the world, which can never yield a full picture of either. When Edgar comes up with the idea of reading Camilla's heart by the response she will give to his information about the Major's fortune, he assumes – he takes it for granted – that he will be able to read her heart. There, of course, he is wrong, as the readers, who, though they may have been too drawn into Edgar's reasoning to notice the flaw in it immediately, will soon find out. That much of human misery results from everyone overestimating their abilities to comprehend others is indisputably the main theme of *Camilla*. Only the readers, by means of Burney's skilful narration, can see the full impact of this all-pervading human fault on the story, and while they retain a lofty distance from the characters, they cannot help sympathizing with them in their struggle under this universal predicament.

Sympathy is the key word here, often used in descriptions of how free indirect discourse works in novels. The other complementing ones would be irony and dynamism. It is the peculiar mixture of sympathy and irony which modulate the distance between the characters and the readers, who, while they follow and understand the characters' sentiments, remain superior to them in the grasp of the whole situation. Sometimes the narrative brings the reader closer to the character (when following Edgar's thoughts, for instance), while at other times the ironic distance between them is much wider (as when witnessing Mrs. Ireton's disdain quoted earlier). The dynamic changes within the characters, which only the readers see, are the main forces pushing the action forward, or – as is often the case in Burney's novels – pushing the action in relentless circles of irresolution. Free indirect discourse enables the narration to remain transparent, firstly in the sense that it screens the author and dispenses with the need of her speaking directly in her own or an assumed narratorial voice, secondly, in the sense that it transparently, that is in an imperceptible manner, guides the reader's response to the character. Though guided, the readers feel they retain the full command of their judgement, because free indirect discourse gives them the illusion that they are not being told the story, but rather they see it unravelling before their eyes of its own accord, rather like a musical toy from Cox's Museum "by a curious mechanism, animated like life" (*Catalogue* 13). With the position of the story teller – the narrator – only faintly marked, the world of Burney's novels seems built of a multitude of stories told by all the characters at the same time, with the progress of the narration allowing the reader to tune to them all in turns.

### Language cogs

This comes very close to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the polyphonic novel, though Bakhtin never uses the term free indirect discourse itself. Instead he looks at the novel as a genre whose peculiar appeal is in the way it plays with many discourses and many

language types (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Poetics*). This distinguishing feature of the novel Bakhtin calls heteroglossia, which stands for "a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships, [...] this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, [...] its dialogization" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 263). The word dialogue is crucial for Bakhtin, as he sees it as the most basic and quite inescapable state of social as well as internal being. The novel intensifies or condenses the all-pervading dialogue in which we all exist into a textual form, and exposes the fact that "our ideological development is just a struggle within us for hegemony among various points of view" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 346). For the readers then, reading a novel may become a way to foster their own development: through experiencing many internally persuasive discourses they enrich their own understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Bakhtin was probably not familiar with Burney, but had he read her texts he would have undoubtedly held them as examples of heteroglossia and polyphony in the novel. *Camilla* especially is organized around the Bakhtinian principles of dialogism at all levels of the novelistic narrative. The central theme of the novel is the perpetually aborted romance between the pair of Edgar and Camilla, and throughout the story, the narrative juxtaposes the perceptions of Camilla and Edgar's quandary by the different characters, thereby showcasing Bakhtin's point of the novel being a vehicle which moves one "theme through different languages and speech types" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 263). That such is the organizing principle of *Camilla* is signaled in the very chapter titles: "Two Ways of looking at the same Thing," or "Two Sides of a Question." Other chapters, though their titles may not lay the mechanics of the novel quite so bare, also work by way of contrasting each other. For instance, Mr Tyrold's very serious sermon-letter imparting his advice to Camilla takes up the whole chapter entitled "A Sermon." This is followed by "A Chat," a sharp change of register, which retells a witty conversation between two local fashion-setters: Mrs Arlbery and Sir Sidley Clarendel. They, too, talk about Camilla and Edgar, but rather than see their attachment as a matter of utmost importance involving questions of female delicacy or reputation, they consider it a light subject fit for jokes.

These shifts of perspective are crucial to the novel's overall orchestral melody, and taking just one of the chapters out for analysis collapses the entire text into meaningless cacophony. Yet, just such was the critical temptation in Burney's lifetime. The sermon-letter of Mr Tyrold was extracted and reprinted by John Gregory in a conduct literature collection *A Father's Legacy to his Daughter* (1809). However, the letter's meaning does not come from the sermon text itself, but is gained mainly through its interaction with the adjacent textual perspectives, which challenge Mr Tyrold's points. While the sermon treats the early days of Camilla's infatuation with seriousness, and, in a solemn tone, encourages her to conquer it, to struggle against herself as she "would struggle against an enemy" (358), Mrs Arlbery, who we encounter in the following chapter, would prefer to brush the matter off as a slight inconvenience: "that common girlish disease, an hopeless passion" (366). Further, while in Mr Tyrold's view there could be no one so worthy of Camilla's attachment as the virtuous Edgar Mandlebert, Mrs Arlbery dismisses him thus:

That Mandlebert, you must know, is my aversion. He has just the air and reputation of faultlessness that gives me the spleen [...]. A man who piques himself upon his perfections, finds no mode so convenient and ready for displaying them, as proving all about him to be constantly wrong [...]. Oh, the charm of dear amusing wrong, over dull commanding right. (367)

Both the sermon-letter and the chat between Mrs Arlbery and Sir Sedley are transmitted without any narratorial intervention, thus giving the characters the full command of their voice. The narrative, as Bakhtin would have it, moves the theme through discourses, shaping and reshaping its meaning. The obviously intentional lack of authorial guidance here means that the readers are invited to judge the matter for themselves. The narrative itself seems to avoid siding with either Mr Tyrold or Mrs Arlbery because its purpose is quite different: to faithfully show the clashing perspectives co-existing in the novel's world. The mechanism unfolding the logic of Mr Tyrold's sermon is intricately connected with the workings of Mrs Arlbery's mind: only together do they form the complete landscape imitating life.

## Conclusions

The complex mechanism of Burney's novels does then have didactic properties, but in a very modern sense of the word. It does not exercise the prescriptive model of education, but seems to endorse the transformative, inspirational power of reading, which is being investigated by cognitive psychologists now, in the twenty-first century. The research of Keith Oatley, for instance, shows that while reading, we not only appreciate or interpret fiction, but create our own unique and inward re-enactment of it. This process activates our brains in the same way as real life situations do – we appear to invest emotions and forge neuronal connections which affect our personality in a lasting way. The effect we would term positive, because these “narrative emotions” tend to broaden our horizons of empathy: by reading about and enacting the minds of others, we seem to gain better understanding of them (Oatley, 2011). This in turn directs our judgement in day-to-day existence, or as Burney would have it: provides a real lesson of life without the real tears.

Indeed, the final moral lesson in all Burney's novels rests on the readers becoming wiser by exercising their empathy, as her novels never conclude with decisive moral judgements.<sup>7</sup> For how could a landscape of interconnected human hearts, constantly revolving, be subsumed with a sentence? Jane Austen openly made fun of such expectations from a novel when she humorously pondered in the closing lines of *Northanger Abbey* whether “the tendency” of the book was to “recommend paternal tyranny or reward filial disobedience” (236). Already in the eighteenth century, it was intuitively

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<sup>7</sup> This grieved Burney's eighteenth-century audience, who wished her books to have happier or more tragic endings. Burney refused all such corrections, and insisted on endings and characters which she considered life-like, that is: even if good they should not be free from flaws (*Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* 144–145).

recognized that the true reformatory strength of the novelistic text lies in successfully drawing the readers into the fictive world, and encouraging them to inhabit it for themselves. Maria Edgeworth thus praised Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791):

I never read any novel that affected me so strongly, or that so completely possessed me with the belief in the real existence of all the people it represents. I never once recollected the author whilst I was reading it [...] I believed all to be real, and was affected as I should be by the real scenes if they had passed before my eyes. (*Simple Story* vii)<sup>8</sup>

From Edgeworth's words one more conclusion becomes apparent, namely that if the novel is to engross the reader completely, the author must disappear from it. This can be best effected, as the eighteenth-century writers discovered, through the mechanisms of narration such as free indirect discourse, which allows the readers themselves to enter the dynamic minds of novelistic characters. Third-person narration, incrusting with the multi-voiced dialogue further enhances the readers' experience of the represented worlds. This whole narrative apparatus is there so that the readers are "affected", and, as a result, learn to become more empathetic. When Evelina, in Burney's debut novel, describes her feelings about the fascinating automata in Cox's Museum, she seems "to miss something" (85). This "something" may have been the power of an artistic object to create "narrative emotions" in its beholder. While the spectacle of the singing birds may have been aesthetically pleasing and may have astonished with its creator's ingenuity, it inevitably failed to affect its audience in a profound way that literature can do. Maria Edgeworth described the phenomenon in 1810, Burney developed it into a defense of the genre in 1814, the scientists of today prove it in their laboratories, and modern writers make it a theme in the novels.

Peter Carey's recent *The Chemistry of Tears* (2012) tells a story of a mourning horologist, Catherine, who, though daily fascinated by clockwork, when faced with the ultimate trial – the death of her lover – is brought back to life not by the early nineteenth-century automaton<sup>9</sup> which her boss delegates her to reconstruct as means of comfort, but by the story of its owner, Henry Brandling, who had the mechanical toy made for his dying son. It is in the deep engagement with this narrative (Catherine insists she needs to keep the manuscript for herself, where "it would be loved and understood" 36) that she finds comfort. The twenty-first century novel seems to take the leaf of the eighteenth-century books, and go further – to reflect on its own potential to affect, reform, reconstruct, even reinvigorate the reader. Frances Burney would have also undoubtedly agreed that the novel serves its purpose of teaching life lessons best when its clockwork mechanism of narrative nuts and bolts is so perfectly assembled that it becomes infused with the chemistry of its readers' narrative emotions.

8 The quotation comes from Maria Edgeworth's letter to Elizabeth Inchbald from 14 January 1810. Pamela Clemit quotes the letter in her Introduction to *A Simple Story* (1996).

9 Interestingly, the mechanical toy which inspired Peter Carey was the Silver Swan built by James Cox and John Joseph Merlin in 1773, to be seen today in the Bowes Museum in Teesdale, England.

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