

## Introductory Comments

NICK WILLIAMS

It's my pleasure to introduce Nick Bujak, who is a post-doctoral fellow in the Expository Writing Program at Johns Hopkins University, having completed a doctorate there in 2014. He has published essays on narrative theory, Jane Austen, and Walter Scott. Colin Jager is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University. In addition to several essays, he's written two books that touch on the topic of secularization in the Romantic period: *The Book of God: Secularization and Design in the Romantic Era*, from 2007, and *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age*, out this year.

I'm going to begin by characterizing Nick's essay, raising a question or two along the way which I think can form a bridge to Colin's. Nick's attention is drawn by a certain kind of narratorial intrusiveness, not the in-your-face, Fieldingesque "Dear Reader" type of address, but rather the more surgical narratorial control of readers' access to information, particularly information about the content of characters' cognition or even direct access to their language, as it is occasionally shielded behind indirect speech. Nick considers the ethical dimension of narrators who shelter or hide characters, raising the intriguing possibility of a character who simply wishes to be left alone, protected from the requirement of active participation in story and its social world. His well-chosen primary example in this regard is that Greta Garbo of the British novel, Austen's Fanny Price, whose reluctance to show up in the story is met by a sympathetic narrator who, at least at the outset of the novel, respects her privacy by means of representational strategies which value blurriness over clarity. Fanny's withdrawing nature, her desire to see the other characters without herself being seen, parallels the odd intentional stance of narrative voice itself, coming as it does (in Blanchot's formulation) from an absolute exteriority, yet turning its attention to the events and people of the story world. Nick calls for a sensitivity to readers' imaginative experience of the variable proximity and distance between themselves and characters, proposing an ethics which registers not only another's right to our regard, but her right to be sheltered from our regard.

My questions about the essay send me back to its first example of the phenomenon it describes, what might be called its minor example: the character of Matilda from Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story*. Because while the account of that novel's last sentences, where the narrator saves Matilda from the necessity of making a choice, is deployed as a sketch of narratorial care that will be filled out with the treatment of Fanny Price, I'm equally intrigued by the differences between the two cases. To mention one: the narrator's care of Matilda (and Miss Milner, for that matter) has a primarily temporal dimension which seems not to play a part in care for Fanny. Matilda is relieved, by the narrator's inconclusive suspension of the narrative, of the burden of the singular future which would result from her choice between narrative possibilities, able to dwell in an eternal present which remains only a fantasy for Miss Milner. For Fanny, on the contrary, what the narrator preserves is privacy, a haven of space rather than of time, like the "little white attic" set aside for her in *Mansfield Park*, but one where even the reader is occasionally denied entry. To put it another way: the narrator's care for Fanny is expressed by letting the reader know that she's having thoughts and experiences (her meeting with William, for example), and uttering sentences, but shutting them away from the reader in a space of representational recalcitrance. In the case of Matilda's suspended choice, the narrator seems to preserve Matilda from having anything so certain as a thought at all, stopping her in the moment before the

narrative would require her to think and decide, like a suspended chord denied its tonic resolution. If the figures of care for Fanny are indirect speech, the blurriness of passive constructions (Fanny and William's "hours of happy mirth [. . .] may be imagined"), the figure of care for Matilda seems to be the incompleteness of the subjunctive ("Whether the heart of Matilda [. . .] could sentence him to misery . . ."). It's no accident that the narrator's rescuing of Matilda from unitary thought comes at the end of Inchbald's novel, since the saving of Matilda from decision is the death of narrative, as she's finally saved even from the future of a further page.

The differences between these two examples lead me to wonder if ethics is the only, or the primary frame within which to understand these special instances of narratorial intrusion. Fanny's right to privacy looks like an ethical issue, but is Matilda's right not to decide, which seems to be a right for her train of thought to stop before it reaches its station, also an ethical matter?

The temporal register I've been trying to bring out in the example from Inchbald's *A Simple Story* suggests a connection to Colin's essay on *Prometheus Unbound*, since the matter of transitional justice crucially concerns the shape of time and human efforts to create new political temporalities. Prometheus's effort to recall his curse in Act I has often been understood as that hero's rejection of both the circular time of endless revenge and Mercury's dispiriting materialist account of an empty eternity "where recorded time, / Even all that we imagine, age on age, / Seems but a point, and the reluctant mind / Flags wearily in its unending flight, / Till it sink, dizzy, blind, lost, shelterless" (417-21), in favor of a time proportioned to human perception. But, as Shelley knew, and as the Furies' nightmare survey of history suggests, a human-created history almost always assumes the tragic shape of Love followed by Ruin, Revolution followed by Restoration. Colin's eliciting of Shelley's ideas about how time might be reordered emphasizes a non-epiphanic and a non-Platonic Shelley, reconciled to the notion that liberatory change can only occur by tinkering with ordinary time. In this spirit, Colin spends little time on the Derridean formulation of the pure futurity of the "to come," the future-beyond-the-future, instead mining the potential of the ordinary "missed opportunity," which might itself have a future. Since this formulation seems key, let me pause to unfold it: in Galperin's terms, the missed opportunity is a possibility "sufficiently passed or irretrievable [as] to have (never) happened," but able still to serve as an index of what was once possible. Colin's innovation on this formula, as I understand it, is to suggest that the missed opportunity is not completely irredeemable and barren of futurity, but recoverable by the action of forgiveness (that suspension of linear determinism) and plural, non-personal Love. To express this in terms of the essay's epigraph from de Certeau—"Is this the outbreak of something new, or the repetition of the past?"—I came to think that the answer was neither, but rather the backward turn in order to found a new basis for the future.