**Chapter 12. Inner Voices: Literary Realism and Psychoanalysis**

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The synergy of Freudian psychoanalytic thinking and modernist experimentation is well-documented (Abel 1989; Ffytche 2010; Spitzer 2014; Stonebridge 1998). So, too, is the relation of the formation of psychology as a discipline to the orientation of certain 19th century literary (poetic and fictional) cultural forms or modes (Block 1982; Faas 1988; Rylance 2000; Tate 2012; Taylor 1997) and to the development of particular novelists (Shuttleworth 1996), one of which, George Eliot, is the focus of this chapter (Davis 2006; Shuttleworth 1984). However, the realist novel and the development of psychoanalysis are usually regarded as two historically distinct and consecutive responses to the loss of religious explanations for mental suffering (Lucáks 1971), rather than intrinsically connected (Matus 2010; Ryan 2012).

I argue that the realist novel and psychoanalytic theory and practice, as propounded by Freud and thence developed by Wilfred Bion in particular, might be regarded as analogous projects, connected particularly via the realist novel’s employment of free indirect discourse. I concentrate on George Eliot for these purposes for three chief reasons: first, as the virtual founder of the literary realist tradition, her use of free indirect discourse is technically virtuoso and thus its relation to psychoanalytic practice is at its most visible; second, the relation of George Eliot’s role as writer to that of healer or therapist has been adumbrated by scholars from a range of disciplines, a distinction which, to my knowledge, is unique among 19th century novelists (Bennett 1990; Rotenberg 1999); third, her fiction offers compelling fictional case demonstrations of Freud’s understanding of melancholia or *depression*.

**Freud’s Melancholia: A Case Study from 19th century Realist Fiction**

Let me try to make good that last claim first of all, by turning to George Eliot’s very first work of fiction, arguably the foundational beginning of literary realism (Noble and Billington 2015, xxvi).

“Janet’s Repentance” (1857) —the final tale in George Eliot’s *Scenes of Clerical Life* (Noble and Billington 2015)—tells the story of Janet Dempster, a desperately unhappy wife, who, long the victim of her brute drunken husband’s violence, and, childless and often alone, has herself been driven to the consolation of drink and is now an alcoholic. The climax of Janet’s story is the moment when she defies her husband, almost daring him to kill her. Instead, in the dead of a bitter winter’s night, Janet is thrust out into the night by him, and forced to take refuge at a neighbor’s, where she awakes the following day:

That moment of intensest depression was come to Janet, when the daylight which showed her the walls, and chairs, and tables, and all the commonplace reality that surrounded her, seemed to lay bare the future too, and bring out into oppressive distinctness all the details of a weary life to be lived from day to day, with no hope to strengthen her against that evil habit, which she loathed in retrospect and yet was powerless to resist. Her husband would never consent to her living away from him: she was become necessary to his tyranny; he would never willingly loosen his grasp on her…She felt too crushed, too faulty, too liable to reproach, to have the courage, even if she had had the wish to put herself openly in the position of a wronged woman seeking redress. She had no strength to sustain her in a course of self-defence and independence: there was a darker shadow over her life than the dread of her husband—it was the shadow of self-despair. (Noble and Billington 2015, 277–278)

Janet has left her husband and marriage only to find that she cannot get out of her own story of internalized punishment and pain. Even now, as day follows night, Janet finds only unending, day on day, repetition of her *weary life—bare, oppressive, hopeless*. In *Mourning and Melancholia,* Freud asserts that melancholia shares the same traits as mourning, namely, “profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, inhibition of all activity.” (Freud 1984, 252) It is that kind of terrible dead stop and yawning blankness which Janet exhibits here. But Janet also offers a case illustration of the one key mental feature which, Freud claimed, distinguished melancholia from mourning: that is, “an extraordinary diminution in self-regard … that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings.” (Freud 1984, 252, 254) So Janet, “loath[ing] in retrospect” a mode of life which she is “powerless to resist” in the “future” (Noble and Billington 2015, 277) blames *herself* for her helplessness: she is “too crushed, too faulty, too liable to reproach” (Noble and Billington 2015, 278):

If one listens patiently to a melancholic’s many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly applicable to the patient himself, but that with significant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love…The woman who loudly pities her husband for being tied to such an incapable wife as herself is really accusing her *husband* of being incapable, in whatever sense she may mean this. (Freud 1984, 257)

“The key to the clinical picture,” Freud concludes, is that “the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object shifted away from it onto the patient’s own ego.” (1984, 257) Where mourning is the reaction to the loss of a loved person, and the work of mourning is achieved when the ego is freed from its attachment to the lost object and can turn to a new one, in melancholia the loss is occasioned by being “slighted, neglected or disappointed” (1984, 260) by the loved one and the attachment is not displaced onto another object, but withdrawn into and identified with the ego. The hostility the ego feels for the loved object by which it has been rejected is turned back upon the ego itself. “The patient represents his ego as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished.” (Freud 1984, 254)

At the risk of over-literalising, and more by way of mutual illumination, let me put Freud’s picture of melancholia, and his terms of understanding, side by side with George Eliot’s depiction (immediately below) of Janet’s situation:

The future took shape after shape of misery before her, always ending in her being dragged back again to her old life of terror, and stupor, and fevered despair. Her husband had so long overshadowed her life that her imagination could not keep hold of a condition in which that great dread was absent; and even his absence—what was it? only a dreary vacant flat, where there was nothing to strive after, nothing to long for. (Noble and Billington 2015, 276)

The shadow of the [lost or rejecting] object fell upon the ego and the latter is henceforth judged as though *it* were an object, the *forsaken* object. Object-loss is transformed into ego loss…Melancholia behaves like an open wound, drawing to itself energies from all directions and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished…In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty: in melancholia it is the ego itself. (Freud 1984, 254; 258; 262 [my emphasis])

Freud’s powerful analytic language of explanation helps us to understand the dynamic by which Janet, even though she has apparently just escaped the wrong story, must be *dragged back again* into it, the only prospect *before her* a continual destructive return of her old life and self. The shadow of her husband *is* the condition of Janet’s mentality here, such that she will turn to drink again all the more certainly now to replace or evade the very absence of the dread which had driven her to drink in the first place. Where Freud’s language explains, George Eliot’s novelistic language operates here not for fictional invention, but to register the inner aftermath which cannot fit into a straightforward narrative of escape or which is imprisoningly and damagingly left behind by it. It gives substance to that terrible vacancy—*nothing*…*nothing*, what Freud calls ego-loss, a self, poor and empty—as Janet, by virtue of suffering from its existential reality, cannot possibly do. It is as if George Eliot’s language is summoned at such moments to give tangible reality and articulate presence to thoughts and feelings which belong to individual humans yet which often cannot be acknowledged or are inexpressible by humans themselves.

This use of literary language thus to express the inexpressible does not merely complement psychoanalysis; rather, it seems to perform, in advance of the *invention* of psychoanalysis, the latter’s very function. The realist novelist, in her role of finding the inner life, is an anticipatory equivalent of the psychanalyst. And free indirect mode, I wish to argue, is the realist novelist’s precision linguistic-analytical tool.

**The Realist Novelist and the Psychoanalytic Task**

To get to the heart of what the realist novelist and the psychoanalyst share as practitioners, as it were, let me use Freud’s own late summary of what he felt his life’s work in psychoanalysis had primarily set out to do. In Freud’s last book, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*—first published in 1940 and arguably the finest exposition of his theory and therapy (2003, xvii)—Freud sought to give, as he put it, “a dogmatic conspectus of psychoanalysis by bringing together all its doctrines in the most concentrated and clear-cut form.” (Freud 2003, 175) Part Two, entitled “The Practical Task”, begins by summarizing the central premise of the psychoanalytic situation. In health, the *Ich* (or *ego*) is charged with simultaneously satisfying the demands of reality, of the *Es* (Id), and of the *Über-ich* (Super-ego), whilst maintaining its organisation and independence. Illness is produced by a weakening of the *Ich* or ego such that it finds it impossible to fulfil these tasks. Freud goes on to describe the psychoanalytical *task* as follows.

The *Ich* is weakened by the internal conflict: we have to come to its aid. It is like being in a civil war that is to be decided by the assistance of an ally from outside. The analyst and the patient’s weakened *Ich* are, basing themselves on the objective external world, supposed to form a team against the enemies, namely the drive-demands of the *Es* and the conscience-demands of the *Über-ich.* We make a deal with each other. The ailing *Ich* promises to be fully honest with us, that is, to put at our disposal all the material that its self-deception offers it; in return, we promise it the utmost discretion, and we put at its service our experience in interpreting the material influenced by the unconscious. Our knowledge is supposed to compensate for its *lack* of knowledge: it is supposed to return to the *Ich* its dominance over the lost zones of the psyche. This deal constitutes the analytical situation. (Freud 2003, 201)

Freud’s description of how the analyst’s possession and use of knowledge compensates for a “*lack*” on the part of the patient, and is deployed by the analyst on the patient’s own behalf, precisely expresses, analogously, the position of the writer in relation to her character in George Eliot’s most famous novel, *Middlemarch*. I use the following example as one of the starkest instances in all 19th century literature of the novelist-narrator *returning* to a character the knowledge which his own *self-deception* (Freud’s term) has evasively dislodged and disowned. As will become clear, this moment also offers a telling illustration of how the realist novel, as a 19th century cultural phenomenon, occupies the boundary between religion and psychanalysis in understanding and alleviating the burdens of the inner life (a concern to which I return later in this chapter).

The passage quoted here concerns Mr Bulstrode, the most formidably controlling personage in the town of Middlemarch. Though he can by no means be described as *depressed*, he arguably displays the novel’s most dis-eased mentality. A powerful banker, his fiercely dogmatic religious devotion and judgemental morality nonetheless mask a criminal past, by which, late in the novel, he finds himself dogged and pursued. In this passage, he finds himself in the position of nursing the sick Raffles (Bulstrode’s former accomplice in his dubious business practices, who is now blackmailing him), with strict instructions from the doctor (Lydgate) as to his treatment. In the dead of night, Bulstrode is keeping watch over his patient.

Whatever prayers he might lift up, whatever statements he might inwardly make of this man’s wretched spiritual condition, and the duty he himself was under to submit to the punishment divinely appointed for him rather than to wish for evil to another—through all this effort to condense words into a solid mental state, there pierced and spread with irresistible vividness the images of the events he desired. And in the train of those images came their apology. He could not but see the death of Raffles, and see in it his own deliverance. What was the removal of this wretched creature? He was impenitent—but were not public criminals impenitent?—yet the law decided on their fate. Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue—if he kept his hands from hastening it—if he scrupulously did what was prescribed. Even here there might be a mistake: human prescriptions were fallible things: Lydgate had said that treatment had hastened death—why not his own method of treatment? But of course intention was everything in the question of right and wrong. (Carroll 1997, 692–693)

What makes temptation so powerful for Bulstrode here is that desire is experienced not as thought, idea or word but as something more primary—as an image or perception: “there pierced and spread with irresistible vividness the *images* of the events he desired”; “he could not but *see* the death of Raffles, and *see* in it his own deliverance.” (Carroll 1997, 693) In this “civil war” (Freud 2003, 201), *Es* has the upper hand. The images of the desired events are irresistible to the point that neither *Ich* nor *Uber-ich* can put up a defense: on the contrary, “In the train of those images came their apology.” (Carroll 1997, 693) The desired end dictates the decision and religious doctrine—the dominant manifestation of *Uber-ich* in Bulstrode—is now put *in the service* of *Es*!: “Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue”; “Even here there might be a mistake: human prescriptions were fallible things.” (Carroll 1997, 693) Yet as soon as that higher authority is thus used to justify Bulstrode’s wrong-doings, and effectively jettisoned as a corrective force, *Uber-ich* comes retributively back in those *yet*, *if*, *but* clauses which ensue: “yet the law decided…”; “if he scrupulously did what was prescribed”; “But of course intention was everything….” (Carroll 1997, 693)

As has been noted frequently, George Eliot’s psychologically probing language and intelligence have their strongest analogy within the novel itself in the doctor Lydgate’s pursuits in biology. Seeking the basis of all anatomical structure—“What was the primitive tissue?” he asks—Lydgate’s aim is

to reveal subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens…to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy and unhappy consciousness. (Carroll 1997, 163)

The invisible lurking place where Bulstrode sees his *deliverance* in Raffles’ death is—in this self-consciously post-religious novel and in this man of professed Christian faith—the equivalent of the moment of the Fall. This is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the instance offers a compressed explanation and an image in miniature of the very inception of psychological realism, the seismic *transition* which converts the grand narrative of temptation and sin into the subterranean story of the individual inner life. Second, it is a clue that the thoughts articulated here, though they originate in Bulstode and are recognisably *his*, could not be fully admitted or expressed by him. “What was the removal of this wretched creature?” (Carroll 1997, 693) is virtually an internalized version of the devil’s own voice. When Bulstrode *sees* the death of Raffles, it is in part because he could not strictly *think* it in such explicit terms, even to himself.[[1]](#endnote-1) Likewise, Bulstrode cannot fully admit into consciousness the second thoughts contained in those *yet*, *if*, *but* clauses and still go on with the course he contemplates. Thoughts banished by Bulstrode are re-captured in George Eliot’s language as she articulates thoughts which originate with Bulstrode, and only with him, but which he himself refuses to own or embody. Thus, the whole paragraph’s minute unfolding of the deep syntax of Bulstrode’s inner life at this critical moment in his history—a kind of mental primary *tissue*—is his inner life as it authentically is and as he cannot experience it.

**Free Indirect Mode: The Novelist’s Precision Linguistic-analytical Tool and the Literary Descendant of Religious Confession**

This is the power of free indirect discourse. The most demonstrable examples in our two quoted passages—“What was the removal of this wretched creature” (in Bulstrode’s sequence) (Carroll 1997, 693) and “even his absence—what was it? only a dreary vacant flat” (in Janet’s) (Noble and Billington 2015, 276) —penetrate and pinpoint the instant of existential and psychic crisis (*sin*, *ego loss*). Linguistically, free indirect discourse is marked by a suppression of the quotation, speech or dialogue which separates actual monologue from the narration, while the preservation of the authorial mode indicates, however unobtrusively, the continued presence of the narrator (Cohn 1978, 112; Pascal 1977, 22; 55). It is where “the thought-thread of the character is most tightly woven into the texture of the third-person narration” (Cohn 1978, 111), such that the two are “merged” (Genette 1983, 174) or undergo “fusing” (Pascal 1977, 22; 55; Lodge 1992, 54–55) to produce “the very special two-in-one effect” that is neither exclusively “dual” or “single.” (Cohn 1978, 112) For this is a mode of narration which exists somewhere between narratorial interpretative comment (which George Eliot is famous for using liberally) and the explicit thoughts and direct speech of a protagonist (the mode of the epistolary novel) in order to “render inner movements, perceptions, reactions at the levels that precede thought and words, before they have found their way to consciousness and articulate utterance.” (Pascal 1977, 59) Free indirect speech is the novel’s great invention and instrument for translating the inner world. Piercing, probing, penetrating the hidden thoroughfares of the psyche, it is to the novel what the microscope was to Lydgate’s biology in the 19th century, and what the analyst is to the patient in the twentieth.

Yet, crucially, “Janet’s Repentance”(Noble and Billington 2015) demonstrates how free indirect discourse is not so much a new invention as a continuation and translation of older expressive practices. This literary mode is closely tied to that specific moment of the novel’s development, says Dorrit Cohn, when third-person fiction entered the domain reserved for first-person epistolary or confessional fiction and began to focus on the mental and emotional life—specifically the inner crisis—of its characters (1978, 113). Twice at moments of deep and dangerous despair, Janet Dempster’s trouble finds expressive relief in the form of confession to the minister, Mr Tryan:

She was unable to utter any words of mere politeness, or even of gratitude; her heart was too full of other words that had welled up the moment she met his pitying glance, and felt her doubts fall away…In this artificial life of ours, it is not often we see a human face with all a heart’s agony in it, uncontrolled by self-consciousness; when we do see it, it startles us as if we had suddenly waked into the real world of which this everyday one is but a puppet-show copy. For some moments Mr. Tryan was too deeply moved to speak. (Noble and Billington 2015, 283–284)

Religious confession, substituting both for lonely silence on the one hand and the *mere politeness* of conversation on the other, is offered in this work as the only available serious language in which Janet can discharge the hidden burden of her hitherto unused *other words*. Yet, as George Eliot’s narrating voice explicitly recognizes at this moment, this deep heart-language, the essential register of reality amid artificiality, is simply notavailable under ordinary life conditions: “In our moments of spiritual need, the man to whom we have no tie but our common nature, seems nearer to us than mother, brother or friend.” (Noble and Billington 2015, 279) Significantly, free indirect discourse occurs in the novel at precisely those crises when Janet’s literal confessor, Tryan, is absent. So when, with Dempster now dead, and while she is still fighting her addiction, Janet inadvertently discovers a decanter of Dempster’s brandy. Desire overwhelms her, and she dashes it to the ground and flees.

Where should she go? In what place would this demon that had re-entered her be scared back again?…The temptation would come again—that rush of desire might master her the next time—she would slip back again into that deep slimy pit from which she had once been rescued, and there might be no deliverance for her more. (Noble and Billington 2015, 318–319)

In this interval between crisis and explicit confession, free indirect discourse—“Where should she go?” “The temptation would come again”—takes the place of the ancient religious practice of confession as an emotionally attuned verbal witness. At once a descendant and a secular, prosaic replacement for religious discourse, free indirect modewas especially equipped to “listen in” to the kind of spiritual crisis which is now called “depression” (Dowrick 2009, 144-7), in anticipation of the secular listener we find in Freud’s analyst.

In *An Outline of Psychoanalysis*, Freud himself acknowledged the similarity of the role of the confessor to that of the analyst. “[In the psychoanalytic situation] we make this deal: total honesty in return for complete discretion. This gives the impression that we were simply aiming to take the place of a secular father confessor.” “But”, Freud goes on to say “there is a great difference”:

[The patient] is not simply to tell us what he intends to say, what he is happy to say, the things that would give him the kind of relief he would get after a confession: he has to tell us everything that his self-observation yields to him; everything that comes into his mind, even if it is unpleasant to him to say it, even if it seems to him to be unimportant or even ridiculous…For we don’t simply want to hear from the patient the things he knows and hides from others: he also has to tell us what he *doesn’t* know. (2003, 202)

Analogously, free indirect discourse tells the experience of a person’s life as he or she never quite lives it (Miller 2003, 60) and offers an analytic interpretation of that experience that is inaccessible to the subject immersed in it. For Janet, at this moment, the only reality is her weakness, the overwhelming sense of all that she cannot be or do. Indeed, from any point of view other than that of the novelist, Janet’s life is more or less a failure. Only the novel, by subvocally capturing the deeper reality of her hidden struggle, with its agonies *and* its brave resistances, can find in Janet’s story a narrative of heroic achievement. This is what the patient seeks from the analyst. Tell me the true story about myself: the one I cannot see and most need to have. As Ricoeur puts it in “Life: A Story in Search of a Narrator” (2012, 197): “the goal and outcome of analytic sessions” is that the person analyzed “presents the psychoanalyst with bits and pieces of lived histories” and “draws from these bits and pieces a narrative that is both more bearable and more intelligible.” The burden of high Victorian realism was always thus analogous to that of psychoanalysis: finding means to release into expression the intimate human matter which is otherwise lost to the subterranean inwardness of a private and more or less neurotic psychology.

Yet neither free indirect discourse, nor the so-called omniscience of author-narrator, are of course truly *there* for Janet herself in any sense. The character does not know of an author; she cannot see or hear her own thoughts as the reader does; she cannot benefit from this understanding, as a patient would benefit from an analyst’s, and as George Eliot surely wishes her character might benefit from her own insight. This is not fictive naivety or simplistic realist convention. It is a belief in what is there even when—especially when—humans cannot realize it as characters in life. This is what Wilfred Bion called the “really real”, and which he designated “0” (Bion 1970, 26) in recognition that no ordinary definition would serve for what exists prior to language and cannot be “contained” by it. Literary realism and psychoanalysis essentially intersect, I wish to argue, in the acceptance that humans do not have access to, and can barely hold, all that they contain. This is not a deficiency, but one of the rules.

**Free Indirect Mode as the Technical Bridge between Novelistic and Psychanalytic Practice, Capturing “0” or the Moment of Reality**

It is an axiom of Bion’s theory thatthe inability “to ‘think’ with one’s thoughts” is a catastrophic “deprivation of truth” where truth is “essential for psychic health.” (1962, 56; 84) “Thoughts” in Bion’s writings, are unmetabolized “beta” elements. “Thoughts” require the capacity to think, “alpha function”, in order to be digested and converted for use as “alpha elements.” (Bion 1967, 117) In the unhealthy psyche, thoughts are evaded, ejected, or stored as inert, undigested facts and symptoms: “Failure to eat, drink or breathe properly has disastrous consequences for life itself. Failure to use the emotional experience produces a comparable disaster in the development of the personality.” (Bion 1962, 42) But Bion also knew that thinking one’s thoughts could be almost impossibly hard to achieve. In the first place, the truththat is the object of our thinking—the really real, “0”—proves intolerably frustrating preciselybecause it cannot be truly known except by experience ordiscovery. The ultimate reality “does not fall in the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally”; it can “become” (its presence can be recognized or felt), but it cannot be “known” except in the moment or happening of experience (Bion 1970, 26). The really real is lived, experienced in absorption, it is not abstractly comprehended. What is more, the thinking tools that are at our disposal—our mental or verbal *containers* for the experience of reality—are liable, in the very effort at containment, to falsify or misrepresent through over-definition or inadequate frameworks:

The words I write are supposed to ‘contain’ a meaning. The verbal expression can be so formalized, so rigid, so filled with already existing ideas that the idea I want to express can have all the life squeezed out of it. (Bion 1967, 141)

In particular, this problem might apply, to therapeutic containers: the term and concept of *depression*, for example, says Christopher Dowrick, is driven by “a set of cultural perceptions in western societies, where our expectation that happiness is the natural way of being leads us to see negative emotional states as intrinsically deviant from normality.” (2009, 101) The diagnosis might be valuable to a suffering person in externally *holding* his or her potentially explosive inner pain. Equally, there is the danger that this automatic language and default attitude blots out the suffering reality that it contains.

“On the other hand,” Bion goes on, “the meaning I want to express may have such force and vitality, relative to the verbal formulation in which I would strive to contain it, that it destroys the verbal container.” (1967, 141; 1970, 107) The problem of finding the right word “is analogous to that of the sculptor finding his form in the block of his material, of the musician finding the formula of musical notation within the sounds he hears, of the man of action finding the actions that represent his thoughts.” (1962, 116) It is hard, struggling work; it is, Bion suggests, one of the most profoundly creative acts of being alive.

Literary realism and psychoanalysis, I have argued, share a commitment to finding and articulating the really real or “0”, containing it, in lieu and on behalf of the suffering human, without thereby merely making it safe or diminishing or distorting it reductively. But 19th century realism does something else besides. For realism holds “0” while apparently remaining bound to the limiting framework of common language and ordinary event. Realism, concluded Henry James in his preface to *The American*, represents “the things we cannot possibly not know, sooner or later, in one way or another…our general sense of the way things happen.” (Gard 1987, 473–475) Yet, realism, I am arguing, achieves a double loyalty: loyal to its subject matter of ostensibly mundane reality (“the way things happen”) but loyal also to the truer reality often distortedly hidden within this one, confined inside people too small and compromised to see it (Billington and Davis, 2011).

My final example from George Eliot’s work is representative. It offers a demonstration of the central problem which, says Bion, psychoanalysis exists to address—the difficulty of adequately thinking one’s own experience from within its struggling midst. Yet it also gives the problem with all the common messiness and complicating determinants, and often surface invisibility and intractability, which it possesses in ordinary reality. I also choose this example—in which Dorothea Brooke, in *Middlemarch*, is on her honeymoon after her dreadfully innocent mistake of marrying the much older cleric scholar, Mr Casaubon—because it is explicitly offered by George Eliot as an example of normal unhappiness, as nothing “very exceptional”, by no means the “illness” which contemporary Western medicine might deem it. “Many souls in their young nudity are left to ‘find their feet’ in such circumstances”, she says. “Some discouragement, some faintness of heart…is not unusual”:

However, Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have used: to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows; for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream. It was too early yet for her fully to recognise or at least admit the change, still more for her to have readjusted that devotedness which was so necessary a part of her mental life that she was almost sure sooner or later to recover it. Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her; but she was now in an interval when the very force of her nature heightened its confusion. (Carroll1997, 192)

In melancholia, as in mourning, says Freud, a loss has occurred, but “loss of a more ideal kind”: “one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what [she] has lost either.” (1984, 253–254) Dorothea cannot identify the cause of her unhappiness in part because that cause is a hidden and continuing process (“secret” as “the motion of a watch-hand”), not the clear thing it might seem to be “now that she was married.” (Carroll 1997, 192) This is not, for Dorothea, an *interval* in which progress is being made from one state to another. The shift from girlish ideal to married reality is happening so far inside the “endless minutiae” of mundane ordinariness, that the very fact of change is not *yet* clear for Dorothea, precisely because it is happening. Dorothea’s crying—“the primary and natural expression of suffering and mental distress” (Darwin 1998, 157–158)—seems deeply primitive here for being a symptom of her radical inarticulacy.

The existence of something incontrovertibly wrong but not identifiably there (“to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a history of the lights and shadows”) is where, says Bion, proto-thoughts begin. These inchoate, half-commenced thoughts originate in the sensation of need, lack or that unnameable crisis when nothing outside clearly signals what it is that is wrong. If there is “no thing”, then “no thing” is “a thought.” (Bion 1962, 35) At such moments as this from *Middlemarch*, literary language shows human thought coming into being. For what is so impressive here is that at no point does George Eliot specifically say what is wrong. Rather, she articulately inhabits the very indefiniteness from which Dorothea suffers, those painfully existent gaps which paradoxically generate thought’s substance. George Eliot’s language, in place of Dorothea’s crying, occupies that barely experienceable *interval* where something is happening, some big thing is originating itself, secretly—before it can emerge in explicit formulation (“It was too early *yet* for her fully to recognise or at least admit the change.”) Like the best ideal analyst, George Eliot takes seriously the human trouble which does not have a ready name or diagnosis and enters the indeterminate areas of individual experience, the inner life which is otherwise without an inner voice to think it. Dorothea, George Eliot tells us, lived on with

no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself…and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. (Carroll 1997, 190)

“The mental act…struggling forth into clearness” demonstrates why we need George Eliot’s language to release the meaning of Dorothea’s predicament. The thought in Dorothea would shape itself as the characteristic melancholic self-denigration we saw in Janet: the “fault” would be “her own spiritual poverty.” (Carroll 1997, 190) George Eliot’s emotionally attuned verbal witness recognizes instead that “the very force of her nature heightened its confusion” (Carroll 1997, 190), that it is the very best of Dorothea that is making her situation worse! Depression, George Eliot’s minutely responsive analysis suggests, might be the very opposite of loss of vital powers, or a deficiency in engaging with experience.

It is the special work of free indirect speech in George Eliot, however, not simply to articulate thoughts her characters need but cannot think for themselves, but to offer thoughts which perhaps no human would dare or could bear to have. It is much later in the novel, following a further cruel rejection from her husband, that Dorothea begins to admit the cause of her unhappiness:

She was in the reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage. Instead of tears there came words: – ‘What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me.’ She began to hear herself, and was checked into stillness. Like one who has lost his way and is weary, she sat and saw as in one glance all the paths of her young hope which she should never find again. And just as clearly in the miserable light she saw her own and her husband’s solitude—how they walked apart so that she was obliged to survey him. If he had drawn her towards him, she would never have surveyed him—never have said, ‘Is he worth living for?’ but would have felt him simply a part of her own life. (Carroll 1997, 463)

Here is the explicit realisation promised by that tiny *yet* in the earlier passage. Yet Dorothea’s own words chasten her into silence not only because they begin to say too much too bitterly and distortingly, but because they summon a partner thought too devastating to be borne. It is one which George Eliot will later articulate on Lydgate’s behalf in relation to his own wife, Rosamond. “In marriage, the certainty, ‘She will never love me much’, is easier to bear than the fear, ‘I shall love her no more’.” (Carroll 1997, 702) The point at which the character cannot bear to *hear herself* is the point that George Eliot has to listen in more closely, to hear *for* Dorothea that terrible question which exists inchoately or resistedly *inside* her— “‘Is he worth living for?’” Where in the previous examples offered, the author and reader might wish that the characters *could* “hear” the thoughts uttered on their behalf, and have access to their own true story, here it almost has to be the writer and not the character in whom intuition crystallizes into new recognition. For how could one ever be one’s own witness to this and simply carry on? How is this deeply inconsolable recognition even possible as a thought, as a *solid* idea, for the person to whom it belongs? It is something barely thinkable except inside the book and an instance of realism’s power to hold thoughts which humans feel it would almost kill them to contain in themselves.

Real thinking, says Bion, “is embryonic even in the adult and has yet to be developed fully by the race.” (1962, 57) Indeed, the discovery of psychoanalysis, Bion claims, is itself a symptom of the fact that thinking and the tasks of self-knowledge have been forced upon a mentality ill-suited and underdeveloped for the purpose:

An apparatus existed and had to undergo, still has to undergo, adaptation to the new tasks involved in meeting the demands of reality by developing a capacity for thought. The apparatus that has to undergo this adaptation is that which dealt originally with sense impressions relating to the alimentary canal. (Bion 1962, 57)

Alpha function, the human capacity to think our thoughts and ensure psychic wellbeing, needs help. It is my contention in this chapter that literary realism both illustrates and helps amend that fundamental human difficulty by employing free indirect mode to think characters’ half-thoughts for them. It is my wider contention that, in so doing, literary realism has a role and power analogous to that of psychoanalysis in amending and aiding human thought function. It offers, that is to say, on behalf of its readers and of the species—on behalf of real people struggling for meaningful story and thought in the ordinary world which is realism’s primary medium—a language for thoughts which humans customarily do not dare, or cannot bear, to think for themselves.

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1. Of Bulstrode’s religious hypocrisy, George Eliot earlier says “This was not what Mr Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him: it was what he said to himself—it was genuinely his mode of explaining events.” (Carroll 1997, 513) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)