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Now It's Personal: D. A. Miller and Too-Close Reading

Frances Ferguson

We all know the experience: we turn on our computers and encounter a suggestive series of questions. Would we like a hotel room in New York on 5 May, a rental car at Newark Liberty Airport on 5 May, a good price on a hot water heater? Search engines are, even as we speak, officiously enlisting more supports for our actions. They don't appear simply as versions of some eager servant—like the Jeeves once revived for an advice-gathering website that has now died the death or changed its name. They know what we like, and they know where we live. All the tracks of what we have seen, of what we have done, constitute our signatures, our profiles. D. H. Lawrence called such collections of preferences and tastes evidence of our “personalities” and contemptuously described the world in which people recognize that they have congruent preferences and tastes as one in which they imagine themselves to be in love—are in love—because they are “thrilled” with one another’s “personalities.”¹

Hailing—I here cite a very few instances out of an infinite number of possibilities—takes place constantly. It can sometimes seem that magazine subscription agencies, political parties, charities, universities, car dealerships, online travel sales, and car rentals call us by name more frequently than do the people we see face to face. Friendly rather than accusatory, helpful rather than testing, the greetings that arrive in mail both slow and

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

1. D. H. Lawrence, “*Lady Chatterley’s Lover*” and “*A Propos of ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover,’*” ed. Michael Squires (Cambridge, 1993), p. 325. See a website like eharmony.com for an example that Lawrence would include in his dictionary of received ideas were he alive.

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etherized may make us notice the culture of universal surveillance that allows an airline or a politician to know more about us than our mothers or our lovers do. What I hope to do in the discussion that follows is not merely to register the ironies of recognition or lament the surveillance of daily life that accompanies even and especially routine communications, communications that present messages from strangers in tones of greatest intimacy. I also want to use this intimacy-through-algorithm to address the problem of literary understanding and how a text or a film that is written or made by some person or persons finds its way to another person or persons, how it greets them and is greeted by them.

The redefinition of art that took place in Immanuel Kant's name made such hailing look harder to explain than it had been. While the production of art had once been seen as largely a matter of following rules and copying successful past achievements, Kant's emphasis on the apprehension rather than the production of beauty meant that artists were in a sense the last to know about the rules they should be following, the keys to the hearts of their audiences. And though Pierre Bourdieu presents himself as a thorough-going anti-Kantian, his entire project and considerable achievement in *Distinction* could be seen as an unfolding of the ways in which Kant's shift from the artistic producer to the artistic consumer called out for a sociology of art. Bourdieu uncovered through sociological means what we might think of—and what he certainly thought of—as the rules of art, in the form of an un-Marxist account of class as the distinctive algorithm for the apprehension of art.² The central feature of this account was largely to shift the apprehension of art—defined broadly as beautiful stuff—from a question of a relationship between the artistic producer and his or her audience to a question of the relationship among audience members. The apprehension of art functioned in his scheme as a signaling device, through which one knew whom one was or ought to be associating with. The thrill of Lawrence's personalities.

Signaling only applies intermittently to forms such as the novel that are susceptible to silent reading. We may not discuss what we're reading with anyone; a novel's appearance on a course syllabus may emit information

2. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), pp. 41–42, 492–94.

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that is more telling about the college or the course instructor than about a particular student. And when we set aside the social diagnostics of novel reading, we are left with a question about why we continue to spend time in the company of imaginary characters and think that they are talking to us. Sometimes we call this hailing by the name of literary identification, as if our seeing ourselves in Emma Woodhouse or Dorothea Brooke or whomever were at issue. Sometimes we even imagine that it's achieved not through characterization but through description so thick as to afford many points of shared contact: "I may not identify with Emma Woodhouse or Dorothea Brooke in most respects, but I too recognize small shops and St. Peter's." Sometimes we think that the hailing is an effect of a certain stability in a genre, our counting on a reliable supply of novels or films or adventure novels or thrillers in a fashion that Franco Moretti has described as an inevitable part of the take-off of the novel in modernity.³

But why doesn't the consciousness of all our differences from one another—which we know how to register in the reactions that frequently attend opinion pieces that accompany the news—block a sense of affinity, and affinity even with characters who seem very unlike us? As Catherine Gallagher has observed in talking about the eighteenth-century novel, accounts that stress identification require some adjustment to explain how it is that characters described as handsome or plain, blonde or brunette or raven-haired, willowy or plump may engage those of us whose traits are on the other end of some imaginary spectrum.⁴ Gallagher's solution to the problem of literary hailing—our recognizing texts and feeling recognized by them—is to stress the ways in which even apparently particular descriptions in novels proceed with a generality or virtual universality to override those particulars. The story of Nobody that she discerns in the novel is not so much that of a person who is unnoticed when notice would be desirable. She is rather a person who is nobody because she could be anybody. She is a person as a concept, not a person as an individual.

Gallagher's treatment of character and characterization, then, has affinities— if a different focus—with the views of Moretti's that I just mentioned and with various accounts of the novel as a genre. Moretti's notion of a supply of novels meeting a demand for another novel enables us to see how far and

3. "As long as only a handful of texts are published each year, that is, the novel is an unreliable commodity; it disappears for long stretches of time, and cannot really command the loyalty of the reading public. . . . With a new text every week, however, the novel becomes that great modern oxymoron of the *regular* novelty" (Franco Moretti, "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History—1," *New Left Review* 24 [Nov.–Dec. 2003]: newleftreview.org/II/24/franco-moretti-graphs-maps-trees-1).

4. See Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670–1820* (Berkeley, 1994), esp. pp. xv–xvii.

how quickly we detach ourselves from reliance on our very particular reactions. It's as if Jean-Jacques Rousseau's account of the inevitability that concepts would precede individual instances were already effortlessly fused with the notion of the willing suspension of disbelief that Samuel Taylor Coleridge attached to poetic pleasure. To adapt Bertrand Russell's useful contrast between description and acquaintance, we choose the next novel off the shelf or in the ether before we are well enough acquainted with it to make what we might call an informed decision (or an aesthetic judgment) about it. The description of it—whether achieved through the self-description of a title or the reports of reviewers—pushes us toward or away from acquaintance with it. Gallagher and Moretti remind us that the bare description “literary character” or the mere announcement that something is a “novel” (or a “detective novel” or whatever) is enough to call us and call for us. Before we've read, we want to read (and read something like *x*); before we've seen, we want to see (and see something like *y*). The bookstore, the library, and the movie theater are architectural tributes (in bricks and mortar or in the ether) to our faith that we'll find and be found by an as-yet unread book and an as-yet unseen film. And the institutions of reviewing—formal and informal—sustain this movement of products of a certain type—novels or films—to readers as individuals. We once trusted—sometimes still trust—reviewers to be the bearers of algorithms without any formulation more explicit than the statement “if you liked *x*, I think you'll like *y*; if you've liked what I liked before, you're probably going to like what I like now.”

Reviewing and literary criticism are institutions designed to gather persons together as audiences and to convert individual instances into multiple examples of family resemblance known as genres. The singular *you* must then feel as if he or she can only legitimately claim to be hailed in the most general fashion: the impersonal, capacious *you* that exercises the personal pronoun as if it were as large and baggy as a concept. And this was nowhere more evident than when I. A. Richards, setting out to put criticism on a solid basis, banished all the things about which readers might have opinions before and after they read a particular text. They were henceforth irrelevant associations because they obtruded the personal in a fashion that would make it hard to arrive at reading for a generality. All the beliefs that readers cared about in the lives they lived when they didn't focus their attention on a novel or a poem particularized them, made them persons who thus disqualified themselves to speak about a literature conceived in universalizing terms.

In sketching out these strongly generalizing tendencies in the criticism of literature, I aim to start measuring how much of a departure I think

D. A. Miller's critical practice represents. Miller uses a silhouette—himself in profile—in the place of an author's photo for *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style*. The clever gesture might seem perhaps to conjure antiquarian revivalism of the kind that gives us societies that reenact Regency balls or restage Civil War battles. It might recall lineups of children's silhouettes that decorate the walls of suburban homes. But here it usefully pricks our sense of its appropriateness to Jane Austen and presages Miller's interest in Alfred Hitchcock's deployment of his own silhouette and his cameo appearances—the “you, here?” that Austen and Hitchcock produce in their audience and that Miller both explicates and instantiates. The silhouette is D. A. Miller as he might have appeared had his profile been taken in Regency England or had he been Hitchcock. But it is not D. A. Miller fronting us (as if to look in the eye of his reader) but D. A. Miller's profile putting himself in a position of recognizability without any gesture of reciprocity—D. A. Miller as someone who may be known by his past behavior in having written *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* and someone whose image seems to have installed itself in the documentary record more firmly than a standard author's photograph. It chimes with and underscores the importance of his occasional recourse to the first person, his own version of the Hitchcockian cameo appearance, and his own meditations on the relationships between a closely observed author and the closely observing reader—or between a closely observing reader and that reader as a person with a life that goes largely unmentioned in the novels and the films at hand.

I'll have more to say later about the importance of the profile and the cameo in Miller's work and their significance for the reading practice that he has in recent years called close reading in its minoritized state and “too-close reading.”⁵ But for now let me simply observe what his glancing appearances are not. They do not surreally blend the artifactual and the actual, as if to suggest that Miller has now been transported into the fictions that he considers. Nor do they sympathize with the “objective way of criticism” that the New Critics practiced when they insisted that a poem, when complete, goes about the world untethered and in supreme indifference to its maker.⁶ Miller's critic never entirely leaves the pages in which he has spoken about his texts, nor do his Austen and his Hitchcock leave the worlds they have constructed. Rather they persist through versions of what Miller captures in his treatment of free indirect style, a mode that recruits

5. See Miller's discussion in the chapter entitled “Broken Art” in *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton, N.J., 2003), pp. 57–92, esp. pp. 57–60; hereafter abbreviated JA.

6. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The Intentional Fallacy,” *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), p. 18.

us as readers to an intimacy both pleasurable and unseemly with the characters we read about but also think of ourselves as knowing.

Free indirect style—that mode in which a narrator seems to be able to represent the thoughts and sensations of a character without benefit of the character’s overt speech—has become a staple of literary analysis in recent years.⁷ Critics have been interested in how it enables a narrator to practice what Miller calls close writing in relation to a character, to seem to be completing a character’s sentences for her or him and to hear the irruption of another voice even in what seems to be the mouth of one character (in a fashion that the Miller of “too-close Reading” might call “lover-like” as he’s talking about Brandon and Philip’s preparations for their party in Hitchcock’s *Rope*).⁸ One suspects that it is free indirect style that prompts Martha Nussbaum to suggest that literature provides something like moral exercise in enabling us to understand other people’s understanding.⁹ But it’s not clear that such intimacy with characters is always appealing. Reviewers of biographies frequently object to biographers’ use of free indirect style and wish to excise statements like “the night before the election, Jack Kennedy was troubled, thinking that”¹⁰ The objection is, of course, to biographers who conjure up an image of the consciousness of historical figures to provide more insight into their subjects’ views than they can actually have. And Candace Vogler offers another line of argument for the reviewers’ complaints. She suggests that the literature that makes our closeness to the consciousness of other people seem possible and desirable offers a bad account of human interaction. It encourages us to think of an extreme intrusiveness as if it were a desirable model against which our actual acquaintance with persons in the world is made to look inadequate. It allows us to be such effective spies on many literary characters that we can imagine that we know them as we could not know persons in ordinary life and then perhaps encourages us to imagine that we do know or ought

7. Some of the key discussions appear in Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (London, 1982); Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J., 1984); Käte Hamburger, *The Logic of Literature*, trans. Marilyn J. Rose (Bloomington, Ind., 1993); and Monika Fludernik, *The Fictions of Language and the Languages of Fiction* (London, 1993). Banfield’s book is currently out of print, but a substantial selection is available in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, 2000), pp. 515–36.

8. Miller, “Hitchcock’s Understyle: A Too-Close View of *Rope*,” *Representations*, no. 121 (Winter 2013): 1.

9. See Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston, 1995), and Candace Vogler, “The Moral of the Story,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Autumn 2007): 5–35.

10. I introduce this hypothetical example just to enter into the record the complaints that many reviewers register about the prominence of free indirect style in biography—much to the dismay of historians who confine themselves to the documentary record.

to know other people just that thoroughly.¹¹ (The Jane Austen of *Northanger Abbey* who speaks of England as “a nation of voluntary spies” and the Ian McEwan who uses her words as an epigraph to *Atonement* would be particularly interested in her view.) Free indirect style enables us to do what we might think of as overknowing characters. While it might be a staple of the realist novel, it suggests a yawning gulf between the realist novel and supposedly nonfictional genres, on the one hand, and actuality, on the other.

Although Bernard Cerquiglini has suggested that we have overestimated the tightness of the link between modernity and free indirect style,¹² we don't need here to debate various claims about its historical emergence but can merely focus on its importance to Miller. It is perhaps the most signal symptom of the novel's existence as the genre of no genre, the genre that refuses to lay out in advance the rules of the game by which it will play. (There are other symptoms, which I'll get to later. But in some sense they all plausibly follow from free indirect style in ways that I'll try to lay out.) Free indirect style has thus seemed particularly important in modernity as a marker of the difference between an older regime of oratory and a newer world of writing. Classical oratory and literature in the mode of Pierre Corneille, Jacques Rancière observes, drew their importance and authority from the fact that their language always proceeded from the mouths of authorized actors to the ears of authorized actors. To speak was, Rancière says, to act.¹³ Speakers spoke in their own persons, even if and when they imagined their auditors' thoughts. And they said only what they could say to someone's face. (In this they differed from the silent conversationalists in Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* who aggressively—if never *viva voce*—translate another character's words: “which meant.”) Writers of the classical and oratorical age always signed their words in the simple act of speaking them and writing them. However much those words might have had a Derridean notion of writing contained within them—and hence the thought that words deliver themselves in an irregular fashion—oratory continually required the presence of the speaker. It required him to sign with his own voice.

11. See Vogler, “The Moral of the Story.”

12. See Bernard Cerquiglini, “Le Style indirect libre et la modernité,” *Langages* 19, no. 73 (1984): 7–16. Cerquiglini strongly challenges the claims of some commentators—from Bally to Banfield—for the association of free indirect style with literary modernity. I am grateful to my colleague Haun Saussy for having directed me to Cerquiglini's article. Roy Pascal provides one of the clearest accounts of the relationship between classical *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* in *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-Century European Novel* (Manchester, 1977), pp. 8–9.

13. See Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech*, trans. James Swenson (New York, 2011), pp. 49–50.

The writerly novel—the novel that a reader assembles in the course of reading (“ourselves writing,” as Roland Barthes puts it)—may seem a particularly apt way of characterizing French prose of the *nouvelle vague*.¹⁴ But it had already quietly made its appearance in novels that employ free indirect style; it is a reader’s recognition that a new person has entered the space of the novel and has done so almost silently, in a verbal version of peripheral vision. Free indirect style is, then, an analogue to the profile or silhouette, so that recognition takes place as if with familiarity (“That’s the kind of thing Emma would say”) and in the absence of the character’s actually saying it as loudly as one of Rancière’s orators would have.

Free indirect style is distinctively important in the novel precisely because of the irregularity and unpredictability of its occurrence. As Moretti has recently pointed out, Adolf Tobler identified it *avant la lettre*, in 1887, as “a peculiar mix of indirect and direct discourse.”¹⁵ Like the tales that Vladimir Propp documented, it developed a history before it was associated with any particular author and circulated so widely that it never was stamped with the name of a progenitor. By the time that Charles Bally christened it in 1912, it had been circulating without benefit of particular authorial sponsorship—that is, with benefit of multiple sponsorship—for a considerable period of time. Free indirect style is the commonest of common novelistic literary property. It is not impersonal merely out of a surfeit of personality—the narrator’s and the character’s. Although Austen and Flaubert are among the legion of writers whose writing offers abundant examples, it seems impersonal because it seems always to be returned to language itself. A particular stanza form might put us on the alert for a recurrent rhyme or a regular grouping of lines, but free indirect style doesn’t appear at constant intervals, so that our recognizing it can seem like an act of familiarity: “I know what Emma thinks when she is herself thinking—and not having her thoughts described by her narrator.”¹⁶

Miller observes that others have had so much to say about free indirect style in Austen that he doesn’t need to dilate on the subject (see *JA*, p. 61). But his abbreviated discussion delivers a surprise—one in which free indirect style ceases to be free indirect style when Austen repeats exactly the same words before our very eyes. Miller distinguishes between “Emma

14. Roland Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay*, trans. Richard Miller (New York, 1974), p. 5.

15. Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (New York, 2013), p. 94. See also Pascal, *The Dual Voice*, p. 8.

16. Cerquiglioni disputes Banfield’s presentation of free indirect style in purely grammatical terms partially because he thinks that it leaves out of account subtler but substantive instances and thus does not capture the importance of the difference between “Henry looked” and “Henry saw”; see Cerquiglioni, “Le Style indirect libre et la modernité.”

could not forgive her” and “Emma could not forgive her,” the one within free indirect style to register Emma’s annoyance with Jane Fairfax’s entirely proper and entirely unconfiding response to Emma’s question about Frank Churchill, the other the words of the narrator settled on the other side of a chapter break (quoted in *JA*, p. 63). Miller can thus describe Austen’s use of what he calls close writing and a less close writing—narration. From a novel that deploys free indirect style very considerably, Miller singles out the bare repetition as a case for demonstrating the conspicuous distribution of proximity. Austen is closer to Emma, and we are closer to Emma, before the chapter break than after it: “During the chapter break, what had been the indirect and impersonal *performance* of Emma’s consciousness had become the mere matter-of-fact *notation* of that thought” (*JA*, p. 64).

Furthermore, Miller identifies how close Austen brings us to Emma through free indirect style—how much closer to Emma than to other characters, a point he underscores by observing how many opportunities Austen grants the very name: “even before it christened Miss Woodhouse, it had already enjoyed the privilege of being the name Austen most frequently chose for her heroines” (*JA*, p. 60). “‘What two letters of the alphabet are there, that express perfection?’ Mr. Weston propounds. ‘M. and A.—Em—ma.—Do you understand?’” (quoted in *JA*, p. 61). Finally, Miller rounds off a catalog far too extensive for me to quote here by observing that “the name already broaches the open secret of an impossible identification between the No One who is narrating and the most fully characterized Person in all Austen” (*JA*, p. 61). He makes it possible for us to see how far Austen’s deployment of free indirect style and naming opportunities make us Emma loyalists and helps to explain why people have always chafed at Harry Levin’s and Wayne Booth’s criticism of Emma’s quixotism.¹⁷ We know Elton to be a presumptuous fool when he thinks himself an appropriate suitor to Emma, and we know Miss Bates as a vacant proser. And all of this is true even as we remain unshaken in our confidence of Emma’s cleverness and Elton’s and Miss Bates’s limitations, all true even while Emma’s startled reaction to Elton’s professions of love make it clear that she had never suspected Elton’s interest in her while that supposedly slow-witted Miss Bates had thought it obvious.¹⁸ Our closeness to Emma enables us to rest in a certain inattentive cleverness out of loyalty to her.

17. See Harry Levin, “The Example of Cervantes,” *Contexts of Criticism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 79–96, and Wayne Booth, “Control of Distance in Jane Austen’s *Emma*,” *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, 1983), chap. 9, pp. 242–66.

18. See William H. Galperin, *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia, 2003), pp. 185–96.

When Rancière describes style as the ruin of the genre system that matched high, middle, and low subjects with their appropriate forms, his chief concern is with the way in which high and low subjects are pitched into the mix together.¹⁹ Literature thus provides a redistribution of the sensible in creating new lines of equivalences: garlic and rubies and mud might appear in the same poem, and the conjunction of high and low life is sutured by nothing other than style. Miller, in discussing Austen, offers a sharply different account of style. For him style involves the nonidentity of persons and of characters with themselves—that No One who is Austen’s narrator and that gradually realized Person who is character or any of us as personalities. The Jane Austen who is accomplished narrator, the Jane Austen who is stylish by virtue of her ability to seize a world from which she is personally excluded by her permanently single state. The Emma who happily commands her little universe, the Emma who is miserably aware of how far her words have been from what they should have been. The D. A. Miller who identifies with the pleasures and imperatives of Austen’s style, the D. A. Miller who dreads making a mistake in writing. As “Emma could not forgive her” turns into “Emma could not forgive her,” we realize that we are no longer in a world of examples that can be explained in purely grammatical terms. Position—on one side or the other of the chapter break—has become tone; the words have been transmuted by their faithful echo and its way of showing up the differences between a statement and its reiteration.

Style for Miller consists of a “deliberately embraced project” (*JA*, p. 17). The narration of Absolute Style forestalls the demands of Personhood, the achievement of socially recognizable and rewardable standing on the part of a character, which amounts, in the end, to the “universal law of conjugality” (*JA*, p. 34). “As a theme, or represented practice, in Austen’s work, style is typically obedient to this dialectic of its eventual dispensability” (*JA*, p. 53). Not equivalences then, narration and character, but two distinct ways of inhabiting the same circumstances—and a proleptic mourning for the consciousness that will inevitably be sacrificed, its protest already marked by and for that “eventual dispensability.”

Jane Austen the Stylotheite and Jane Austen the Person who delivers the goods of Personhood to even so stylish a character as Emma are, to underscore the point, neither equivalent nor always in alliance. Miller sometimes describes them as being in dialectical relationship with one another, and he continually sees himself licensed in his critical practice by the state of close division. In close writing like Austen’s, “narration comes as near to a char-

19. See Rancière, *Mute Speech*, pp. 127–29.

acter's psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it, and the character does as much of the work of narration as she may without acquiring its authority" (*JA*, p. 59), but narration shows "persistence in detachment from character, no matter how intimate the one becomes with the other" (*JA*, p. 59). "The close writing that is free indirect style is also given over to broaching an impossible identification. In the paradoxical form of an impersonal intimacy, it grants us at one and the same time the experience of a character's life as she herself lives it, and an experience of the same inner life as she never could" (*JA*, p. 60).

Miller knows, as we all do, that Emma is a particular favorite of her author's, that she only minimally distinguishes her own consciousness from that of Emma's. But Austen's intense deployment of free indirect style in *Emma* brings us to a question about close reading. Miller has already described his version of close reading as "close reading in its humbled, futile 'minoritized' state" (*JA*, p. 58), so we are poised to measure the distance between his practice and that of the New Criticism and its assiduous attention to the text. For Miller's close reading is an analogue to the close writing of free indirect style. It harbors two competing impulses. It involves the "ambition to master a text, to write *over* its language and refashion it to the cut of my argument"; and, on the other hand, it contains "my longing to write *in* this language, to identify and combine with it" (*JA*, p. 58). And it's the recognition of these conflicting aims that particularly distinguishes Miller's project from that of earlier versions of close reading.

The distance between Miller's too-close reading and New Critical practice is easiest to measure if we take one clear New Critical example. Think, for instance, of Cleanth Brooks's accounts of the place of speakers and poets, of the language of poetry as the language of paradox. New Critical doctrine, as we all know, sharply distinguished between speakers and poets, and enjoined readers to make claims only about what the *speaker* had to say. That untidy personage on whom biographies were written was unwelcome. The poet was, implicitly, always in exactly the same relation to the speaker that the rest of us were. By attending closely, we could pick up the idiolect of the speaker, which was, after all, really what the poet did: he or she merely quoted the idiolect of a speaker who happened to have addressed him or her first. And if New Critical close reading was democratizing in knocking an author off his or her authoritative stance, it was entirely the reverse of minoritizing. All its claims couched themselves in universal terms. The New Criticism assumed that we could all reach a good deal of agreement about what a text meant. We might not know what the author had meant, but we could justify our readings by calling on other people to sign off on them. Thus, Brooks could describe paraphrase as a

heresy not because he was himself refraining from paraphrase but rather because paraphrase might make it all too easy for signs of disagreement to show themselves.

Brooks's analogue to Miller's desire to write *in* the language of the text is an injunction against paraphrase that concludes in direct quotation and a manifesto for direct quotation. Of the seventeenth-century *carpe diem* poem "Corinna's Going A-Maying," Brooks says, "the poem communicates so much and communicates it so richly and with such delicate qualifications that the thing communicated is mauled and distorted if we attempt to convey it by any vehicle less subtle than that of the poem itself." In what he apologetically calls "this graceless bit of tautology: the poem says what the poem says," Brooks comes as close to Miller's desire to talk, write, and think in the language of an Austen as he ever will. Yet having insisted that "it is highly important that we know what we are doing [with paraphrase] and that we see plainly that the paraphrase is not the real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem," Brooks largely abandons the desire merely to quote.²⁰

By the time he's finished talking about "Corinna's Going A-Maying," he may have avoided "maul[ing] and distort[ing]" the poem, but he has not eschewed translation or statements of meaning. Indeed, he has a great deal to say about the meaning of the poem, beginning with his observation that Corinna is not so much being invited into the beauties of May as reproached for being late in celebrating them.²¹ W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley insisted that one demands of a poem what one demands of "a pudding or a machine . . . that it work,"²² but the New Criticism in practice required that it continually deny that working, that a poem always be seen to return itself to its pure form as the intact and quotable but not paraphrasable text. Indeed the impulse to make criticism seem as if it were always reverting to the mere rehearsal of the exact words of the text was so strong as to have minimized the place of editorial projects that would have complicated that process of quotation.²³ In saying that it cared neither about where a poem came from (an author's intention) nor about the subjective responses of its readers (a reader's affect), the New Criticism might expatiate on the words of a text, but it always ultimately produced

20. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York, 1975), pp. 72–73, 74, 197.

21. See *ibid.*, pp. 69–70.

22. Wimsatt, Jr. and Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," p. 4.

23. Jerome McGann has pointed to the tensions between textual studies and practical criticism at various points, but perhaps nowhere so succinctly as in *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 67–132, esp. p. 114.

accounts of what the text meant and/or retreated into a Harriet Smith-like admiration of what the poem says. The New Critic worked to achieve a rewarding and rewarded Personhood in delivering a nuance or an insight, but the poem was always ultimately described in terms of the meaning that could be generalized and then redelivered to style as the New Critics conceived it—an Attic attitude that works (Wimsatt and Beardsley): “the poem says what it says” (Brooks).

Miller doesn’t engage in polemics against either the New Criticism or Theory with a capital *T*. He doesn’t so much mount an argument against either as characterize them—the New Critical close reading that discerned a previously unobserved nuance and put the elbow patches on the compleat professor (see *JA*, p. 57); the Theoretical reading that, in the mode of geometry, heads efficiently if long-windedly toward its destination. But Miller’s practice clearly establishes his differences from both modes. We might sum up those differences by noticing the extent to which he carries Rancière’s project of style—the abolition of boundaries between high and low subjects—farther than Rancière does. For Miller, that is, tracking the fortunes of Style involves observing how far authors, characters, and readers are all engaged in an ongoing negotiation of the distribution of Style and Personhood.

Although Miller recognizes the New Critical preference for well-wrought urns, he’s not interested in exposing its preconceptions to invalidate them but in pointing to something that Flaubert reported: “Prose is never finished.”²⁴ Flaubert, saint and martyr of prose, continually pitying himself for having written three pages and canceled four in a day’s work, dramatizes all the difficulties attendant on finding *le mot juste*. In the process of composition itself, as well as in the unfolding of the novelistic action, timing counts for a great deal. The words, the pages that seemed to have so much pace yesterday now seem stiff, wooden. And part of the problem is that authors and readers alike treat poems differently from the way they treat prose. Verse forms and rhyme schemes contribute to the sense that poetry has succeeded in being written. But even in the absence of particular stanza patterns and rhyme schemes, readers continually perform a version of the New Critical preservation of the poem-as-given. Poetry holds its position on the page. Prose, on the other hand, seems always to be imagining alternatives to itself. One of the reasons why William Wordsworth’s criticism of Thomas Gray’s “Sonnet on the Death of

24. “Ah! quels découragements quelquefois, quel rocher de Sisyphe à rouler que le style, et la prose surtout! *Ça n’est jamais fini*” (Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau, 6 vols. [Paris, 1973–2007], 2:447).

Mr. Richard West” made a radical statement in insisting that poetry should be as well written as prose when prose is well written is that he set himself up as a rewrite man to Gray’s poem; let’s just, he said, eliminate the inversions and²⁵ In talking like that of poetry, he treated it as prose had come to be treated earlier—from the time of Hugh Blair’s lectures on written composition. It was the mode that insisted on its own obsolescence—its need to be continually rewritten. In the grip of that unelaborated insight, Blair held up Addison’s “Pleasures of the Imagination” papers from the *Spectator* as models and then extensively demonstrated how they might be reworked and reworded.²⁶

Rather than being credited with resisting the paraphrase that has just described it, as poetry is in the New Critical mode, the prose of the novel is continually accepting revisions. When Flaubert, as I mentioned earlier, had his characters recast one another’s words and translate them with a “which meant,” he put his characters in the position of amending the words before our eyes. And Miller allows us to see how Austen makes the susceptibility of prose to revision a regular plot element; while, as Banfield says, new elements can be tipped into written prose, the plot of *Emma* regularly strands our heroine in the world of statements that can never fully be taken back.²⁷ The novel, that is, incorporates changes invisibly, as if to conceal that they had ever been needed. And it marks the characters’ inability to do the equivalent: it continually makes incidents out of things that people would never have said to the people they said them to if they had known whom they were talking to. In that mode it holds out its own infinite revisability as a wonderfully appealing option. That is to say, prose develops its own version of free indirect style off the backs of characters who are enmired in the present tense of speech, where mistakes and mistakenness abound. For every fact of the fiction that Banfield identified and that Miller described in showing how “Emma could not forgive her” settled into narratorial omniscience, prose—qua prose—continually exerts a counterfactual force. This is not so much the counterfactuality of imagining that things might have been different, that events in some world had been different from the way they were. It is rather the counterfactuality of imagining that one might have said something other than what one said in the irretrievable past of conversation. In the tough world of prose that is always looking less to understand than to rewrite another’s words, a figure

25. See William Wordsworth, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1974), 1:132–35.

26. See Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres in the University of Edinburgh*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1783), 2:58–137.

27. See Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*, in *Theory of the Novel*, p. 529.

like George Knightley might even begin to look less like a disciplinarian than like a solicitous editor, warning Emma off the jokes she uttered at Jane Fairfax's expense, via the game of alphabets, to Frank Churchill, the person in the world least likely to take them up in the spirit in which they were made.

Although Austen gives Harriet Smith the alibi of falling for Knightley because of his kindness to her, Harriet was always right to have loved Knightley for another reason: they were always of the same party. The appreciative and the constructive critic, respectively, they wanted Emma to be the perfection that Harriet thought she already was and that Knightley thought she very well could be. And that perfection involved the stylish imagination that Emma could not just play matchmaker but that she could, with only minimal scripting, create a work of art working with actors who didn't know that they were on stage and thus imagined themselves moving under their own direction. The quixotism that an earlier generation of critics condemned was not really quixotism but, as Miller suggests, a commitment to style, to imagining that the untrained and uninitiated actors around her could be made to live a life of style.

Miller is entirely right to describe *Emma* as melancholic in the subduing of its imagination of a "double perfection, the perfection of Style matched to that of Person" (*JA*, p. 92), and he is right as well to see Hitchcock as the appropriate successor to Austen in the serial unfolding of his aesthetic commitments. For Austen and Hitchcock, justly famous alike for Absolute Style and total control, are stages of what Miller helps us to see as part of the same progress. William Prichard was not, Miller thinks, merely mistaken—indeed, not mistaken at all—in describing the opening sentence of *Pride and Prejudice* as the "first sentence of Jane Austen" (*JA*, p. 40). For that sentence—"it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife"—insistently sets up the possibility of being taken up in two very different fashions.²⁸ It first performs a turn that establishes a classic line of distinction between drama and epic, on the one hand, and the novel, on the other. It announces that it does not deal in traditional plots. But the supposedly undetermined plot is quietly staking its claims. Young men may think they're being put on notice, may recognize what seems like a sociological generalization of a Malthusian kind, may even be put on guard by it. But while they may think of themselves as armed with social knowledge and acting under their own power, the novelist—and, indeed, other characters—are developing a place and a plan for them.

28. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Pat Rogers (Cambridge, 2006), p. 3.

In the marriage plot, the forcible recruitment of characters is, of course, a matter of social constraint, an expression of the “law of universal conjugality” (*JA*, p. 34). But a wonderful essay of Thomas De Quincey’s, the third of a series titled “Postscript” (1854) and intended as a development of “On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts,”²⁹ helps us to fill in a link between two different kinds of insistently inevitable arcs: Austen’s marriage plots and Hitchcock’s murder plots. De Quincey solicits our admiration for various elements of two different murders—the one of four members of the Marr household (the shopkeeper Marr, his young wife, their baby, and a young apprentice), the other of three members of the Williamson household. De Quincey’s exposition turns us aside from sympathy with the people that crime dramas have taught us to call the victims and asks us to consider the greatness of conception of the murderer. Said murderer—Williams—may have marked himself out as an aesthete in the most glaringly obvious of ways. Though a sailor, his wardrobe features unsailor-like finery, particularly a brown surtout “lined with silk of the finest quality” and new (and thus noisy) shoes (“P,” 20:70). But De Quincey, in logically tracing out all the plans that Williams must have developed, all the movements he must have made, essentially describes the murderer as an artist because he appropriates people’s actions and directs them to ends entirely different from those that their agents intend. He puts Marr in the position of turning and bending—to get out a pair of unbleached cotton socks for the sale he thinks he’s about to make—and thus of offering himself as a perfect target for the heavy ship’s carpenter’s mallet that Williams plans to deploy.

De Quincey’s interest in the murderer makes him privy to Williams’s feelings in a virtually novelistic fashion. “Murderer is almost joyous” (“P,” 20:62), De Quincey says of Williams’s pleasure in finding a “covey of golden coins” (“P,” 20:62). But De Quincey’s closeness to Williams is never more interesting than when he recognizes in Williams the power to revise his victims’ movements. “Fastidiously finical in his exactions—a sort of martinet of scenical grouping and draping of the circumstances in his murders” (“P,” 20: 64), Williams does not merely oblige himself to rework the actions he has already imagined his victims will take and to convert obvious paths of escape into royal roads to death. He knows his victims as they don’t know him, and he knows himself as a perfectionist. He adapts their every move as if he were producing the next frame in an animated

29. Thomas De Quincey, “Postscript [to ‘On Murder, Considered as One of the Fine Arts’],” *The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. Frederick Burwick et al., 20 vols. (London, 2000–3), 20:36–74; hereafter abbreviated “P.” Miller does not, so far as I know, write about this text, but its movements would make it an excellent candidate for his attention.

cartoon or a character's next thought after a narrator's pronouncement. The apparently motiveless crime—and the crime that looks as though it must have been personal because it so far exceeded any sense of practicality—is a “murder of pure voluptuousness, entirely disinterested” (“P,” 20: 65). It is the equivalent of the irruption of free indirect style in the actions being recounted rather than in the words spoken. And the doubled actions don't resolve themselves into the simple irony of two characters' acting at cross purposes with one another (as in O. Henry's “The Gift of the Magi,” in which each member of a couple sacrifices an object—her hair, his pocket watch—in order to buy an accessory for the object he or she doesn't know to have been sacrificed. The decorative combs for her hair and the gold chain for his watch become emblems of how bad timing can cause intentions to misfire). Rather, shadowing the actions of many characters with the murderer's repurposing of them sets up a conflict within the narrative itself or, rather, starts creating an outside from within the narrative.

The real interest of Williams's fashion sense and his practice of a kind of murder that approaches painting or interior decoration is not his interest in aesthetic satisfaction. For De Quincey already glimpses a point that Miller makes: that appreciation for the perfect murder must always be lacking where the imperfections that allow it to be discovered go unobserved. Reading back from Miller's account of Hitchcock's films, we can see the extent to which style needs to be framed by the blunders of even the most stylish, that its very perceptibility relies on the imperfections that create a Person to engage in narrative hand-to-hand combat with Absolute Style. Miller's wonderful discussion of the awkwardnesses of Austen's incomplete *Sanditon*, in which the beautifully organized—and, as he says, “overorganized” (*JA*, p. 84)—prose succumbs to “the livelier quicksand of language” (*JA*, p. 92), shows it not merely as a descent but as a descent that reveals what style has been.

The imperfection of Austen's *Sanditon* prose reminds us of how the pleasures of Austen's novels extend to both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. But Miller's discussion of Austen's novels also suggests just how important the novel form is in seeing the possibility of style everywhere (not just in the mouths of orators like Cicero) and seeing its fragility constantly at threat from the very language it works with and works. The difficulty for Miller's novelists is that they can't just bid farewell to their words in the way that Wimsatt and Beardsley thought poets might. The corpus of their words builds up a kind of dossier labeled with their names or their profiles.

In a reading of Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train*, Miller observes Hitchcock's cameo appearances, his hoisting himself onto stairs of the train that

Guy Haines is just leaving, his moving in the crowd on the platform.³⁰ But Miller moves past the game of cameo sightings that Hitchcock audiences have come to participate in with as much pleasure as they might take in successfully completed crossword puzzles. After tracking Hitchcock's appearances from the easiest to the rather more difficult (the ones that require knowing "to look for him"),³¹ Miller collects a small library. Judging books by their covers, he identifies (and then purchases his own copies of) *Alfred Hitchcock's Fireside Book of Suspense* and *Suspense Stories Selected by Alfred Hitchcock*, books that have conveniently made up part of the scenic furniture of the film.

The covers allow Hitchcock to make even more cameo appearances (if you know "to look for him") as the film photographs the immobile photographic image. Yet the multiplication of his image does not exactly—or not merely—suggest that Hitchcock lurks everywhere. Rather, it intimates that the covers contain Hitchcock without any longer requiring his actual person. The collections are collections of stories that he did not write but might almost have written, given how well they speak his language. In featuring Hitchcock's appearance in the still of an author's photograph, the photos of these books shift the weight of the cameo: "He is not," Miller writes, "the person we imagined, or, rather, that person is not the author we overlooked" ("HPP," p. 113). And the movement of the concrete image—from the person in the flesh to the person on film—sets up a movement by and of style that seems like an epitome of what too-close reading gets at. For Miller traces the way in which the cameo within Hitchcock's film, in sliding into the cameo of Hitchcock's sponsorship of other people's Hitchcock-like stories, leads to the discovery that Guy crosses paths with Hitchcock as the two of them and Bruno seem to be heading to and from Miller's Music Store (where Miriam works) and that the cast album of *Carousel* in Miller's window links the music store "to the film's own merry-go-round" ("HHP," p. 123). Miller—D. A., this is—reports having "felt almost personally hailed" by the name that he and the music store share and by the store's link "to [his] old passion for Broadway musicals" ("HHP," p. 123).

What I am arguing is that D. A. Miller's project of too-close reading involves deleting that "almost" and insisting on the importance of the ways in which a reader or a viewer is "personally hailed," hailed by elements of a description that could not have been put there with the aim of being

30. See Miller, "Hitchcock's Hidden Pictures," *Critical Inquiry* 37 (Autumn 2010): 106–29; hereafter abbreviated "HHP."

31. To explain why he set off in search of yet another Hitchcock cameo, Miller quotes a passage from Bill Krohn, *Hitchcock at Work* (London, 2000), pp. 123–24.

meaningful to him because the novel or the film had no prior knowledge that he would exist. To dismiss the chiming of the critic Miller's name with the name of the owner of the music store, to draw the line against connecting Bruno's shoving Marian to the sound of "I didn't need a shove, I just fell in love with your pretty baby face" (quoted in "HHP," p. 123) with Miller's "old passion for Broadway musicals" is to treat those connections as irrelevant details and to insist that criticism be practiced in the mode of the universalizable meanings that can be fully explained to persons in general.

Too-close reading sees in criticism, in novels, in films the ways in which they were already speaking Miller's language, were already predicting a history of the future, and of not just any future but of *his*. By contrast with Harold Bloom who imagined that writers and critics struggle to evade the influences that have been progenitive for them, Miller is repeatedly surprised and pleased to find himself in company. Preparing for a trip to Japan, he memorizes a Spartacus map of the Shinjuku Ni-chome district of Tokyo and only later realizes, while rereading Barthes's *Empire of Signs* just before his departure, that it is precisely this neighborhood that had appeared in Barthes's illustration of the "impromptu drawings by means of which the inhabitants of Tokyo give directions to strangers."³² Miller's gloss: "*Siete voi qui?* I could have said with all the astonished rage of Dante Alighieri when he found his mentor Bruno in that West Village bar."³³ Too-close reading reads so closely that it finally sees that the novels, the films, the criticism are completing its sentences, his sentences. Too-close reading, far from erasing or abstracting from personhood to arrive at a version of a text that we can all identify with, has Miller's name on it (as it might have ours if we can manage it).

One of Kant's key observations in the *Critique of Judgment* was that aesthetic experience is not general but particular. It insists upon an acquaintance with this painting, that flower rather than with the thought of paintings or flowers. Miller's close and too-close reading equally—and even more intensely—make a claim on behalf of the reader's experience. His readers are not readers in general any more than they identify with the generalized No Ones that Gallagher describes.³⁴ The reader's specific identity may shift in the way that deictics do (with *this*, *that*, *here*, *now* referring particularly through all their variations), but it is always attaching to a

32. See Miller, *Bringing out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley, 1992), p. 5.

33. *Ibid.*

34. Garrett Stewart has also observed the difference between Miller's account of Austen's "No One" and Gallagher's "Nobody"; see Garrett Stewart, *Novel Violence: A Narratology of Victorian Fiction* (Chicago, 2009), p. 252 n. 16.

proper name. Moreover, it starts seeing a style, a name, an attachment even in the moments in which the author, the director seems to have migrated into the furniture or failed of perfection to such an extent as to be unrecognizable to less committed admirers. Miller's reader takes the point of Hitchcock's calling him by name and appealing to his love of Broadway musicals and realizes that the imperfections (of Austen's prose, of various items on the set in *Rope*) are there so that he can recognize them when others wouldn't—when they are not themselves. Miller's account of reading is not a matter of specialized knowledge and the claim that one might make on its behalf, and it's certainly not a call for a particular curriculum and canon. (Think of how unfair it would be to set a passage from *Sanditon*—rather than one from *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma*—as the sole example by which to identify Jane Austen on a general exam.) Instead, Miller provides an unsentimental rendering of the ways in which books and music and films are sometime spoken of as friends. The friend doesn't merely recognize a friend at his or her most characteristic. The friend finishes a friend's sentences when he or she trails off. This is the literary solution to the philosophical problem of the continuity of the individual over time: a reader, a writerly friend sustains the identity of the writer, the filmmaker in the process of being him- or herself “personally hailed.” Miller documents encounters with texts and films and other critics (Barthes) that capture the salience and irreducibility of friendship as Michel de Montaigne described it: “because it was he, because it was I.”³⁵ The acts of critical explanation that other criticism would offer—“But don't you see. . . ?”—are gestures that he sets aside.³⁶ He sees the melancholy that shadows Emma Woodhouse's success in terms of the world of public approbation that she has learned to want, and he sees the dissatisfactions with the world of meaning that literary critics keep registering without being able to resist it. He knows that one's readerly loves, one's friendships are not susceptible to justification. They are merely and, supremely, personal.

35. “If you press me to tell why I loved him, I feel that this cannot be expressed, except by answering: Because it was he, because it was I” (Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald M. Frame [Stanford, Calif., 1958], p. 139).

36. Fredric Jameson's *The Antinomies of Realism* (London, 2013) includes an account of the tension between affect and what he terms “the named emotions,” with the naming of the emotions functioning in relation to a relative publicness or privacy of both literary presentations and critical accounts of them. See especially Jameson's second and third chapters, “The Twin Sources of Realism: Affect, or, the Body's Present” and “Zola, or the Codification of Affect,” pp. 27–77.