

## POINT OF VIEW IN WHITE NARCISSUS

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**P**hilip Child claims that in Raymond Knister's *White Narcissus* "the narrative is in the third person, but it is told through Richard's consciousness even though the story is more Ada's than his."<sup>1</sup> If the story were told this way, the novel would be less disconcerting to read. In fact, Knister has little control over point of view, as Child's later comment, "In the case of Richard and Ada . . . the core of their characters is blurred by the fog of their wavering moods. . ." (p. 12), tacitly acknowledges.

A casual reader looking into the book might concur with Child's first assertion. In the opening paragraphs Knister lets us into Richard's consciousness: "He found incredibly foreign the road down which he swung . . . He felt lost . . . It was an immediate relief. . . . Milne was inclined to wonder . . ." (p. 19). But any closer reading soon shows the randomness of point of view. Take the statement that "a boy of eleven with yellow hair on a thin neck rushed around the corner of the house . . ." (p. 22). Richard could apprehend the boy's appearance, but since he does not know the boy, how does he apprehend at first glance his precise age? Or take the following passage:

A man was tiny enough in the midst of great cities, he remembered strangely, but here it was possible to wonder how many more of these roads there were stretching away into the evening, endlessly, bearing each its strung-out farms, its weight of enigmatic human and animal circumstance.

He seemed suddenly to have walked a great distance. A burden of his own past seemed to have descended upon him. How beautiful all this had been, and as the years of his boyhood slipped past without more than a dream of wider freedom, how dreary! (p. 23)

Here we begin listening to Richard's voice; but by the time we reach the new paragraph, the voice talking subtly changes to that of the narrator, telling us that the years of Richard's "boyhood slipped past without more than a dream . . ." The shift in voice becomes more pronounced later on. Mrs. Hymerson, for instance, on meeting Richard starts to inquire about his family: "'How's —,'" she begins, but then, the narrator says, she "seemed to recall that he lived apart from relatives" and asks instead, "'How's everything in the city?'" (pp. 25-26). This puts us close to her consciousness, but we get closer still in the following: "'Quite a character' Mrs. Hymerson smiled, as though she knew and wished to take the flavour from what her husband was about to

<sup>1</sup>"Introduction," *White Narcissus*, New Canadian Library (1929; rpt. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962), p. 10. All further references to the novel are to this edition.

express" (p. 27). Similarly, we share her husband's consciousness when the narrator tells us that Mr. Hymerson "was not unaware of Richard Milne's reception" of his words (p. 27).

In the novel Knister gives us only one scene from a clearly focussed point of view, when Richard from his upper bedroom window witnesses Mr. Hymerson and his son Arvin trying to fit teeth into a hayrake. He sees them down below him in the yard, hears their voices, notes their expressions, and gestures "as though he were watching a play" (p. 43). Knister reports to us solely through Richard's consciousness of the scene; we in turn see the three of them as though we were watching a play in which all three play their parts. In such a narrative schema the reader takes the narrator on trust, confident that the perspective from which he apprehends the unfolding drama is reliable, regardless of the credibility of the drama itself. But in *White Narcissus* as a whole such reliability falters. The voice shifts disconcertingly around; and the resulting uncertain relationship between reader and character is irritating, raising the question, why isn't the author consistent in his use of point of view? A consistent use of shifting perspective, dramatic or aesthetic in function, may add greatly to interest and suspense, but in *White Narcissus* the shifts occur randomly, without narrative function.

This unstructured, haphazard occurrence shows plainly in the way Knister designates his characters. He terms the protagonist variously "Richard Milne," "he," "Milne," (p. 25); "Richard" (p. 30); "the younger man" (pp. 28-29); "the young man" (p. 50); even "the man" (p. 33) — just as he designates both Bill Burnstile (p. 22) and Mr. Hymerson (p. 49). Such ambiguous distancing between reader and character jolts even more when two voices sound in one sentence, in which we hear first the distancing designation — "The young man did not reply to this" — and next listen to his consciousness — "reflecting almost with dismay that he had forgotten . . ." (p. 29). A similar jolt in perspective occurs in a paragraph in which the designation "the man" introduces what is practically a stream-of-consciousness passage:

Once more the man was overcome by a sense of strangeness. He had been in his office that morning, had walked and taxied in the streets of the city and left it at noon, riding through unforgettable miles of railway yards and factories and grimy suburbs. And already he could make himself believe in the existence of such things only with an effort. For all the years in which he had struggled for success there, it seemed that the only real and personal part of his life had been lived here, surrounded by trees, fields, river, which claimed him as though he had never left them.

(p. 32)

The reverse, from near to distant perspective, occurs in a chapter in which Ada is designated as "Ada" and "she" (p. 40) but ends up being termed "the tall woman" (p. 46). The confusion of perspective increases in a passage such as the following:

Their mother was a red-headed, blue-eyed Scotch woman of rapid tongue and a mind of her own, which she exercised but little except when her inclinations were crossed. Bill Burnstile had run across her in the West, and, since she seemed a capable sort of woman for a housekeeper, and a good sport, he had married her. He had liked her smartness, but now she appeared to have become somewhat lackadaisical in her attitude toward life. She paid perfunctory attention to her children, and, beyond a casual word now and then to the effect that they were not to "bother Mr. Milne," she betrayed little interest in preventing them from conducting themselves as they pleased.

This easy-going character showed itself in her housework as well, and if she had been inclined toward rationalization, she might have held that it manifested part of her equipment for self-preservation. For if she had tried alone to take care of the house and every need of her family, she would have been run to death. (p. 97)

Here we find three points of view. First, we apprehend Mrs. Burnstile through the narrator's eyes: "red-headed, blue-eyed . . ."; next from Bill's point of view: "she seemed," "he had liked," "now she appeared"; next we see her from Richard's point of view; and finally again from the narrator's.

But to return to Child's contention that the narrative "is told through Richard's consciousness" (p. 10). We listen in on Richard's thoughts on a good many subjects: Ada and love, his work, and literary creation (pp. 73-81); the problems her parents pose vis-à-vis his love for Ada (pp. 98-101); the parallel of sin and guilt in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (p. 108); his mode of writing (p. 110); Ada as a woman (p. 111); even a long didactic interpolation about farming, cast in the form of Richard's thoughts on the topic (p. 52). But this viewpoint fails to keep its focus. In his first encounter with Ada's mother, for instance, Richard's address to her is put in the context of the reader having access to the consciousness of both: ". . . he struck, with a directness which surprised them both" (p. 68), and "She paused, as though surprised at this revelation coming uncalled from her lips" (p. 69).

It is in passages on Richard and Ada that point of view shifts most disconcertingly. When Richard meets Ada we are privileged to share his most inner consciousness: "His mind refused to hope, to consider implications, overpowering, impossible, and rapt"; but we do not have access to hers — we know her inner being only through his:

He saw the real image of her as she sat alone, while seasons passed. How else should she sit, though her reason for being in that house always had been to keep from loneliness the father and mother whose estrangement had been one of the legends of his childhood? In itself that was enough to make for loneliness, and he marvelled at her endurance, her poised good sense. With the coming of womanhood, should she not feel free? But she could not believe in freedom. (p. 35)

Thereafter, however, the voice shifts. The narrator lets us share her thoughts as well as his: "He made no answer, since they both knew that it was not

necessary to mention why he had returned this time" (p. 36); and when the narrator tells us that "she had answered so swiftly . . . that he felt he had probed her most secret dread" — that she might come to hate her estranged parents (p. 38) — we are to accept that we know that he knows what no one has yet told any one in the novel. When Richard meets Ada for the second time, the narrator says:

She had kept inviolate for a few far-parted days of the year this desire to commune with nature, and had avoided the chafing with which day-by-day intercourse would have blunted her love. And this to her was everything, everything tangible of beauty beyond the poignant and trivial dullness of her days. After all, she scarcely had realized, save as a rumour, that there was another world beyond these fields. Had she not known the world of poetry, ideas, she perhaps would not have been conscious of loving them, nor ever have known the fear of love, that fear that she could grow to hate them, though her bitterness would be the mere working of monotony. Then she would wish that, like the clod-like people about her, she had never learned to love them. (pp. 59-60)

In tone and in expressions such as "like the clod-like people about her" we are privileged to enter Ada's mind. Why now and not at other times?

Knister lets us become aware of Ada's possible love for Richard through the supposition on Richard's part that "she must have learned in his absence to admit to herself whether or not she loved him . . . he felt that she did love him" (p. 43), and this functions narratively to raise the question and leave its answer suspended dramatically in the reader's mind; but then the narrator tells us that "music . . . was the impelling passion of her life . . ." and lets us into her reminiscences:

But even in those days the girl had begun to attempt compositions of her own. She began to be haunted by the strange tantalizings which are known to the genius of expression. She would be in despair or dullness. Or a muted ecstasy came over her, in which, so high was her vision of the beauty she wanted to embody, she did not dare attempt composition. Everything was hard for her. It was unbearable to remain silent, chilling the music from her heart with duties of the household day; and unbearable to yearn for composition, filled with ineffable impulses which she knew from old would not flower into the singing perfection of art.  
(p. 62)

This inner view makes the following outer view in which Richard questions her motives and personality, ostensibly to himself but in effect for the reader, seem merely contrivance. Similarly, when the narrator says that Richard's feelings about staying in the area after Ada's first repulse "probably arose from his sense of some appearance of the ridiculousness in his obstinacy . . ." and then adds, "in truth he was more or less dazed. . . . He had a sense of fatality . . ." (p. 95), one wonders, since it makes no narrative difference, why the narrator cannot make up his mind which viewpoint he wants to use and

stick to it. When Richard and Ada finally get together, the narrator comments: "There was a smile on her face he could not see" (p. 121); that is, we now have a scene in which we see the action solely through the narrator's eyes, as Richard had once seen Hymerson and Arvin in the farmyard below him; but this dramatic objectivity blurs out immediately following:

Richard Milne was silent again as she had been, withdrawn, his arms as it were galvanized, staring vindictively into the opposite darkening bank of the river. The consciousness of his complete abstraction reached them both at the same instant and he kissed her once more, automatically, and looked away, his mind engaged intensely in a struggle for relevance. She looked at him and a realization crept over her. At last, drawing an immense breath, he spoke, and his words were alien though not unfamiliar.

"Perhaps you think me harsh. You know then better than I. I have never had any doubt that they are, or were, or should have been fine people. You don't object to my being open? Separately, that is." His voice revealed no humorous intention.

"Why should I object to anything you may say," she murmured with a sort of contrition, almost equivalent to repeating her declaration, as though, now, she were determined somehow to accept his love and his convictions coupled with her devotion to her parents, however troubling these commingled elements (in the calm lake of her being). (pp. 121-122)

In these passages we share the thoughts of both, so that the novel draws to a close with almost a fusion of their consciousnesses, not as a necessary result of preliminary preparation, but fortuitously and without accumulative aesthetic impact.

*White Narcissus* deserves to be admired as a fine novel of mood and poetic description and as a turning point in the course of the Canadian novel from external to internal viewpoint; but it does leave the reader with a sense of dissatisfaction when he has finished it, and one of the main reasons for this is the lack of adequate control of point of view.

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