The Text that Self-Destructs: Narrative Complexity in William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune*

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Preamble

Something happened to William Trevor's novelistic fiction between 1976 and 1980. Rather like Richard Rogers's and Renzo Piano's revolutionary *Centre Pompidou* in Paris (inaugurated in 1977), the plumbing and wiring of previously internal functions were for the first time exhibited on the outside of the structure. In *The Children of Dynmouth* (1976), like all his previous novels, Trevor used straightforward sequencing of (always numbered) episodes to organise and relay his narration to the reader. In *Other People's Worlds* (1980) a formal inventory of en-titled sections is introduced in a table of contents. This overall architecture is imposed externally to reflect the attempted structural and thematic unity of authorial design internally.

The presence or absence of a table of contents in a work of fiction may not in itself elicit much interest or enquiry from a modern reader. In the case of William Trevor, however, there are at least two areas where an investigation into the relationship between a novel and its constituent parts as shown in a table of contents may prove fruitful: (1) along the boundary between his short stories and his novels in general, and (2), in particular, in the specific instance of *Fools of Fortune* (1983), where a structural fault-line produces the kind of text that I shall call 'self-destructive prose'.

Like the total novel itself, a table of contents assumes an author addressing a reader. It signals and advertises a particular structural relationship between the internal story or stories told in the novel and the way this is telegraphed to the reader via the chapter headings. It builds, in a very basic and simple way, a structural context for the text. The specific narrative function of the address may, of course, vary from case to case. In *Other People's Worlds,* for instance, the table of contents reflects the perspective or point of view of the main characters, sometimes correlated to the relative degree of their involvement in 'other people's worlds': "Julia," "Julia in Francis's" and "Doris in Julia's" are three of the chapter headings in this novel. In narratological terms, however, since the story in this novel is told in a basically univocal way in the third person, they offer little complexity or sophistication. In *The Silence in the Garden* (1988) the chapter headings ("Sarah Arrives," "Villana's Wedding," "Carriglas in Autumn," for instance) play a more straightforward, traditional, summarising, and narratively descriptive role. What you see is what you get. In these two novels there is a stable and transparent relationship between the story and the table of contents. But, as Gérard Genette has pointed out, the relationship between these 'paratexts' (in this instance, the chapter headings and the table of contents) and the literary text or even between the 'paratexts' themselves is not always limpid or explicit. Genette believes that "[l]e meilleur intertitre, le meillleur titre en général, est peut-être celui qui sait aussi se faire oublier" (Genette 1987:291). In *Fools of Fortune* there is more in the table of contents than meets the eye. Here the chapter headings are more difficult to forget. They draw attention to themselves, and seem instead to deliberately hide a more complex narratological structure behind the simple sequence of main characters ("Willie," "Marianne," "Imelda"), neatly reprised in the same order to make up six separate parts. The relationship between the table of contents and the narrative and its narrators is much more complex and fluid. A close examination of this relationship may help us discover some fundamental features of Trevor's narrative

technique and move us towards an understanding of 'self-destructive prose' in *Fools of Fortune*.[1]

Trevor as storyteller

Critical interest in Trevor's work has always been based largely on thematic exploration and on traditional considerations of plot, character and setting, on, in short, Trevor's reputation as a popular storyteller. As late as 1996, Michael W. Thomas had reason to complain that "despite his extensive career, Trevor has yet to attract substantial critical attention" (25). Only very rarely has more serious interest been shown in Trevor's narrative strategies and a more meticulous critical approach applied, and, in broad terms, Thomas's statement still holds true today. In the most recent major contribution to Trevor studies, Dolores MacKenna's detailed and exhaustive *William Trevor: The Writer and His Work* (1999), the author has many perceptive things to say about Trevor's narrative, but the study is still dominated by a biographical-thematic approach.

The general critical consensus on Trevor's career as a writer is that it is in the medium of the short story that he has been most successful. Seamus Deane, writing in the mid-eighties, suggested that it is "as a short-story writer that he is most distinguished" (Deane 226). The same view has been expressed many times: "This Irish storyteller and ex-sculptor of nearly 17 years considers his short stories his most important art, and most critics see the short story form as best suited to Trevor's genius" (Morrow Paulson xi). Christina Hunt Mahony places the novels and stories side by side and comes out in favour of the latter: "Trevor's novels have attracted notice throughout the Anglophone world, and have been translated

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[1] It is intriguing to discover that Trevor's novelistic tables of contents appear only in these three novels in the 1980's. None of his subsequent novels (*Felicia's Journey*, 1994, *Death in Summer*, 1998, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, 2002) have a table of contents. It may be tempting, therefore, to attach special importance to this decade as a period in which Trevor somehow, to use a vague literary critical term, 'experimented' with the structure of his novels. This idea, however, does not form part of the purpose of this paper.

broadly. It is the short story, however, that may be his true metier" (Hunt Mahony 202).

Reviewers and critics have often emphasised the traditional characteristics of the short story in praising Trevor's work, its reticence and understatement, its ambiguous implication, its low-key but rich suggestiveness. The short story is an ideal vehicle for "the artist of the glimpse" (Shakespeare 201), who projects a deliberately small-scale, muted and unhurried image in time and space rather than the more extensive and flexible canvas of the novel. There are some basic generic differences in narrative strategy between the short story and the novel and these must always inform any comparison between the two. Only in terms of a purely thematic investigation can the short stories and the novels of one and the same writer be usefully studied together. In the case of Trevor, there are some very intriguing relations between the work of the short story writer and the novelist and in order to understand the differences between them we need to examine the way the meaning of a text is determined by its communicative functions

As we have already seen, Trevor himself has clearly indicated that his personal affinity lies with the short story rather than with the novel. "I certainly feel more at home myself with the short story. I think my stories are better than my novels" (Ardagh 242). Complaints have sometimes been made against his novels. It has been suggested that Trevor is "a poet of brief fictions," that his novels are "overpopulated" and that characterisation in the novels is less surefooted than in the short stories (qtd in Morrow Paulson xix-xx). Another complaint, more pertinent to an investigation into features of narrative technique, is that the novels have tended to be "essentially episodic" in construction (MacKenna 1990: 112). In *Fools of Fortune* the long sequence describing Willie's experiences at boarding-school may at best be seen to have only a very precarious relevance for the overall theme or plot. Gregory Schirmer suggests that this section of the novel is "slightly self-indulgent" (Schirmer 154), and Christopher Driver points out that "perhaps these episodes [he also includes the part about Marianne at the finishing school in Switzerland], short or long, would fit another book as

easily as this one" (Driver 22). As if to illustrate the opposite perspective and to remind us that there are genuine and pressing reasons for looking into the space between Trevor's novels and short fictions, the novelist John Fowles intimated in a review that the title story of the collection *The News from Ireland and Other Stories* should have been written as a novel instead (Fowles 90).

These observations may to some extent be a reflection of a structural dilemma facing Trevor the novelist, and they may, in particular, mirror the rather complex genesis of *Fools of Fortune* as a novel. According to Trevor himself "it started as a short story, then he wrote vast amounts that he later cut" (Hebert 10). The original short story was published in 1981 in the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Saints." It has never been reprinted in any of Trevor's collections of stories. One reason might be that it is not a particularly good example of Trevor's art. The story is rather top-heavy with red herrings and loose ends, and he is, here and there, guilty of some embarrassing overwriting. The reason for the main character's exile is a mystery with which the narrator unnecessarily teases the reader. The first-person narrative soon reveals a self-indulgent and perversely obsessive narrator, who is far removed from the character of Willie Quinton in the finished novel. Today the story is in fact best treated as a work-in-progress for the novel. Once incorporated into *Fools of Fortune,* "Saints" as fictional material became redundant and lost its intrinsic relevance. It was rigorously and expertly pruned by Trevor before it was slotted into place in *Fools of Fortune.*[2]

But "Saints" may still serve the useful purpose of illustrating how 'short' stories help Trevor grow the narrative structure of his novels. It happens as a logical consequence of Trevor's natural inclination as a writer and storyteller. His novels are, he has suggested, "groups of short stories worked together" (Hebert 10). MacKenna argues that this is Trevor's preferred technique:

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[2] "Saints" contains very approximately 7,500 words, whereas the corresponding section in the novel (Willie's second monologue) is a mere 2,000 words long. (Some small fragments of "Saints" are also worked into Willie's long first monologue.)

"Whether the finished product is a story, a drama or a novel, it is first written as a short story" (MacKenna 1990: 111). She describes *Other People's Worlds,* the novel that immediately preceded *Fools of Fortune,* as "a novel which encompasses a series of short stories" (112). Inevitably, this method of work may create the "episodic" effect referred to above. It must be seen as a potentially serious structural problem in all Trevor's novels. Reviewing *Fools of Fortune* in 1984, Michael Gorra found that the novel "reads as if it were a summation, almost a codification, of the themes, characters, and situations with which [Trevor] has worked in his short fiction over the last twenty years" (Gorra 158). Fourteen years later, John Updike felt it necessary to introduce a negative note relevant to our discussion in his review of *Death in Summer.* After generously praising the short stories, Updike pinpoints a similar structural dilemma: "At novel length, however, his gifts of concision and implication produce a certain feeling of disjointedness and overload" (Updike 4).

It is obvious that as a practitioner of both genres Trevor has always been acutely aware of the differences between them. "Novels tell all," he has said, "[s]hort stories tell as little as they dare" (qtd in Stinson 24). When 'working his short stories together' into the novel that became *Fools of Fortune,* Trevor was faced with the problem of finding the right balance between these two extremes. The solution he came up with produced a mixed and very varied approach to narrative structure. *Fools of Fortune* is, MacKenna has suggested, "technically Trevor's most ambitious work" (1990: 112). At times, short story fashion, it leaves minute hints for the reader to assemble, and at other times, like a novel, it tells (more or less) all.

The historical overviews

Fools of Fortune contains two narrative units that are in a very obvious way divorced (in a narratological sense) from the rest of the novel and at the same time thematically married to it. These are the parts that hold the balance of narrative power in a novel made up of different short stories. The first part is a page and a half long and

comes at the very beginning of the novel, the second less than half a page (one paragraph consisting of thirteen lines) approximately half way through it. These 'historical overviews' (as I shall call them) are placed at the very beginning of each of the two long parts that dominate the novel, entitled "Willie" and "Marianne," respectively, and although their separate existence and specific properties may be deliberately hidden by their formal absence from the table of contents, the presence of these peculiarly distinctive units is clearly noticeable in the narrative structure of the novel. Indeed they are so obvious that it seems that some commentators have failed to take account of them. Many critics have tended not to deal with them at all, whereas some refer to these passages as if they were an integral part of the two sections that they introduce. These two narrative units are, as I have suggested above, part of the *thematic* configuration of the novel, but, from a *narrative-structural* perspective, it is their separateness and uniqueness that strike us most forcibly. Nothing even remotely like them exists anywhere else in Trevor's novels.

Many commentators show their confusion about the problematic nature and function of these overviews in the narrative structure of the novel by their incomplete, imprecise and even incorrect references to them. One critic states that "[t]he book is divided into separate sections attributed to Willie, Marianne, and Imelda, and with the exception of Imelda's brief narrative, they are written in the first person . . ." (Schirmer 153). He also refers to "the tranquillity of the opening pages of the novel, describing Willie's memories of Kilneagh" (Schirmer 151), whereas, as I have indicated above, the first page and a half actually contain the first historical overview. Another critic believes that "[t]he first two sections of *Fools of Fortune,* [are] told or written by Willie and Marianne" and that the first overview gives Willie's point of view: "Willie sees Woodcombe and Kilneagh as places full of 'the sense of the past'." The same critic goes on to say that, "ironically, considering the story which is to follow, [Willie] sees in Woodcombe something of an ideal" (Hildebidle 121), a rather confusing reading based on the

mistaken assumption that it is Willie's voice that we are hearing in the first historical overview. Yet another critic is more generally uncertain about the question of narrative point of view in the novel and believes that Imelda is "one of the crucial stream-of--consciousness narrators" (Cahalan 1988: 279), repeating this view in another source, where Imelda is grouped with Willie and Marianne in a trio "whose narratives dominate the novel" (Cahalan 1999: 164). A fourth critic suggests that "Trevor's narrative in *Fools of Fortune* is not chronological, and the narrative perspective is shared by *several* [my emphasis] of the characters in turn" (Hunt Mahony 208). A fifth correctly identifies the first overview, referring to it as a "prologue" but seems to ignore the second. In 'bracketing' together two widely different narrative units he further illustrates the tricky task of relating the narrative function of these different parts to the thematics of the total novel: "Bracketed by segments in authorial voice, the main body of the text presents the reporting voices of the three principals in a reprise pattern that is well-suited to the elegiac tenor of the theme and diction" (Deen Larsen 259). A sixth, finally, counts "three narrators who view the same events from different angles. One of the characters acts as a chorus figure and through a letter or journal he or she provides a commentary on other characters and events. Sometimes these comments record the views of the author who otherwise maintains a detached stance" (MacKenna 1990: 112-113). In general, these critics fail to take just account of the very special function held by these overviews in the narrative structure of the total novel. The probable reason for the confusion surrounding these overviews is that most commentators, in dealing with Trevor the storyteller, are primarily concerned with *thematic* rather than with *narrative* function. In the first instance, the overviews are included in the meaning-making function of the text, whereas in the second they are excluded from the main narrative of that particular part ("Willie" or "Marianne") by the functional separateness of the narrator. The overviews may not be clearly signalled in the table of contents, but the typography of the text sets them apart from

the main narrative, and, as the reader gets deeper into the narrative of the novel, the unmistakable qualities of the particular voice responsible for the narration in the overviews begin to stand out as distinctively different. For the purposes of my argument it is essential first to establish clearly the different narrative functions of the various parts (named after the main characters of the novel and given in the table of contents), sections (numbered 1,2 etc within each part) and segments (unnumbered but separated by asterisks within each section) of *Fools of Fortune*.[3]

There are, in fact, *four* distinct narrators in the novel and to display clearly the variation between different narrative units they are indicated A1 - D2 in the left column in the table below. The letter refers to a particular narrative voice and the digit after the letter refers to the first or second occurrence of this narrative voice. I have used the term 'epistolary monologue' in the table (B1 and C1) to refer to the two long monologues (by Willie and Marianne, respectively) that dominate the novel. They are not written as letters proper, but some critics (MacKenna 1990: 112-113 and Cahalan 1999: 158) have described them as letters, and the term will serve to remind us of their predominant mode of narrative expression.[4] In these parts the two central characters (Willie and Marianne) intermittently address each other directly in dialogic fashion and so create the impression of a private and intimate conversation or exchange of letters. At other times, this sense of a private dialogue between them is lost in the forward story-telling thrust of the episodes that these narrative units recount, and some parts (most obviously the two referred to by Schirmer and Driver above) are less private and personal, and the narrators seem to be addressing the reader rather than each other. It is doubtful, for instance, whether Willie's story about the aggrieved boarding school teacher urinating on a sleeping ex-colleague would have been intended for Marianne's

[3] All references to the novel are to the first edition, William Trevor, *Fools of Fortune.* London: The Bodley Head, 1983.

[4] They are not, of course, to be seen as resembling the kind of traditional epistolary novel that is sometimes described by the German term "Briefwechselroman". See, for instance, Romberg 46-48.

ears. That episode seems to belong firmly in the male-dominated world of the public school. It represents a break of narrative style and reminds us of the fact that the relationship between the narrators and the reader in *Fools of Fortune* is a fluctuating and complicated one.

In the table below a conventional distinction is made between a first-person personal narrator using the pronoun 'I') and a third-person authorial narrator (using the pronouns 'he', 'she', 'they'). I also make a distinction between an "embodied" and a "disembodied" narrator, which, by and large, follows Jacob Lothe's use of Todorov and Stanzel in his treatment of Conrad concerning "the ontological status of the narrator" (Lothe 11). The former narrator is, of course, also a character in the narrative and has a physical voice that speaks to us from within the story, whereas the latter lacks such a voice and stands and speaks from outside the story.

The crucial difference between Willie and Marianne as narrators, on the one hand, and Imelda, on the other, is that Willie and Marianne are both embodied with a voice speaking their own stories, whereas Imelda, by and large, is disembodied and has to rely on a third-person narrator to tell her story. The difficulty with Imelda's parts, however, arises where this simple distinction is disturbed by Trevor's subtle manipulation of voice and where we occasionally get the impression that we may sporadically be hearing Imelda's physical voice directly as an embodied narrator. It is, very likely, these shifting perspectives that have caused some confusion among commentators.

The focus of this paper, however, is on the distinguishing characteristics and narrative function of sections A1 and A2. These are the sections that dominate the overall thematic configuration of meaning in the novel and that, because of their rather unique structural role, end up self-destructing. It is the *difference* between A as a narrator, on the one hand, and B, C and D, on the other, which yields this effect. The relationship between A and the reader is fundamentally different from that between the other narrators and the reader.

Table of narrative voices and their function in the novel

NARRATIVE UNITS	PAGES	TITLE OF THIS PART IN TABLE OF CONTENTS	NUMBERED SECTIONS	NUMBER OF SMALLER SEGMENTS WITHIN EACH SECTION	NARRATIVE VOICE	NARRATIVE FUNCTION AND PERSPECTIVE
Al	9-10	WILLIE	1	1	FRAME NARRATOR, IMPERSONAL, OMNISCIENT, DISEMBODIED	*FIRST HISTORICAL OVER VIEW*
BI	11-128	" - "	2-6	1,6,5,4,5	FIRST PERSON, PERSONAL, EMBODIED	EPISTOLARY MONOLOGUE: WILLIE ("I") ADDRESSING MARIANNE ('you")
A2	131	MARIANNE	1	1	FRAME NARRATOR, AUTHORIAL, IMPERSONAL, OMNISCIENT, DISEMBODIED	*SECOND HISTORICAL OVERVIEW*
C1	132-185	" - "	2-6	2,8,3,4,1	FIRST PERSON, PERSONAL, EMBODIED	EPISTOLARY MONOLOGUE: MARIANNE ("I") ADDRESSING WILLIE ("you")
D1	189-219	IMELDA	1-4	4,4,3,2	THIRD PERSON, AUTHORIAL, DISEMBODIED, OCCASIONALLY EMBODIED	ABOUT IMELDA ('she') AND OCCASIONALLY IMELDA'S POINT OF VIEW
B2	223-229	WILLIE	1 (UN-NUMBERED)	3	FIRST PERSON, PERSONAL, EMBODIED	MONOLOGUE, NOT EPISTOLARY, A SHORTER VERSION OF TREVOR'S STORY SAINTS"
C2	233-234	MARIANNE	FOUR ENTRIES IN DIARY	--	FIRST PERSON PERSONAL, EMBODIED	MARIANNE'S PRIVATE DIARY
D2	237-239	IMELDA	1 (UN-NUMBERED)	3	THIRD PERSON, AUTHORIAL, DISEMBODIED, OCCASIONALLY EMBODIED	ABOUT IMELDA ("she") OCCASIONALLY SHIFTING, UNCERTAIN POINT OF VIEW

The seeming symmetry of the table of contents is found to be, on closer examination, only the façade of a much more complex, varied and fluctuating structure. *Fools of Fortune* is a complex construction which derives its peculiar strengths and weaknesses from this very lack of formal structural congruity. The novel defeats its own inner absence of narrative structure by a very strong sense of thematic unity at the centre of its literary meaning. Perhaps sensing that the fragmentary genesis of the novel might threaten thematic unity, and knowing that "Saints" was only one of the stories that would be 'worked together' in this novel, the author decided to counteract its potential disjointedness by providing conduits of thematic focus displayed on the outside of the central story. This is precisely the function performed by the two historical overviews (A1 and A2) in *Fools of Fortune.* Their positioning in the total novel (at the very beginning of each of the long monologues by the two central characters Willie and Marianne) is intended to assist the reader in building a context around the text and to drain the edifice of potential narrative confusion. From the very beginning of the novel they introduce the theme of overall historical continuity and add a formal national, international and cultural superstructure to the private and familial stories of the main characters. That is the thematic function of the overviews in the novel.

It soon becomes obvious, however, that, in terms of their narrative function, these sections are not narrated by either of the main characters in spite of the fact that they appear at the start of Willie's and Marianne's first monologues, respectively; it is equally clear that they are not narrated by the same narrator responsible for the third-person narrative of Imelda's parts. The latter (D) is a largely conventional third-person authorial narrator. Very occasionally, however, both in D1 and D2, the voice of this narrator seems almost to come from inside the story and the distance between narrator and reader is drastically reduced. The pace of the narrative slows down, third-person personal pronouns are in temporary abeyance, and the narrator withdraws and allows the consciousness of the character to express itself more directly. In D1, for instance, the point of view is, shifted from a third-person "she"

(=Imelda) to ask direct questions or express ideas that may be seen to be in Imelda's own voice:

> In the mulberry orchard the midges began to bite. Fallen apples from the single apple tree lay among the long grass, green cooking apples, too bitter to eat. Was it Jerusalem Sister Mulcahy had said the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell had gone to? Was it Cuchullainn who had sent the headless bodies galloping to his enemy's camp in chariots? She'd become curious about her father because everyone made such a fuss, Sister Rowan saying Our Lady would intercede and Teresa Shea being jealous. (198)

It is this kind of shifting perspective, at times without the overt mediation of a narrator, that has made some critics treat Imelda's parts as personal (rather than authorial) narrative or examples of the 'stream of consciousness' technique. In D2 the narrative focus is further dissolved and at times loses is firm point of pronominal reference. Occasionally, the narrator in D2 is on close personal terms with the characters and expresses this lack of formality in the way in which, suddenly, he is actually - in spite of the third-person narrative - physically present in the church at the end of the novel: " 'O Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant,' intones the voice on Sundays and it is pleasant then in the musty church, no matter what the season" (238). It is impossible to attribute definitely and securely this emotion ("it is pleasant") to one of the characters. At times, in D1, we again seem to hear Imelda's voice in the third-person narrative: "Funny the way her mother said it so often: one day he will, they only had to wait. Funny the way she wrote things down in an old jotter so's you could hardly read it" (217). The second sentence, through the loss of the specific reference in "her mother" and the introduction of the spoken form "so's" potentially allows Imelda's voice within direct earshot of the reader. In D2, the identity of the narrator is, now and again, more indeterminate: "They say the mulberries should soon be picked, a bumper crop this year. Odd that the summer's drought should have urged the fruit on so" (237). (Who is finding it "odd"?) The itinerant perspective in

Imelda's parts makes it impossible to describe this narrator as 'omniscient' in the table above, a term often used fairly indiscriminately about most third-person narrators. At the same time, the fact remains that it is this third-person authorial voice that clearly dominates Imelda's two parts. This is why MacKenna can state so confidently that "the narrative is carried by the two principal protagonists [Willie and Marianne], who address each other directly in letter or diary form, while the thoughts of the other main character [Imelda] are revealed by an omniscient narrator" (MacKenna, 1990: 113). It is this con-fusion of voices that modulates the narrative complexity of *Fools of Fortune.*

Shifting perspectives, or what Genette has called "changements de focalisation," are not just "un parti narratif parfaitement défendable" (Genette 1972:211). In fact, they also tend to enrich narrative complexity and increase the reader's engagement with the text. They are often seen as a typical feature of Trevor's narrative art and may well merit the praise that Schirmer (among others) gives to the novel's "combination of multiple perspectives and first-person narration" (Schirmer 154). Referring to *Felicia's Journey,* a novel published eleven years after *Fools of Fortune,* Mary Fitzgerald-Hoyt commends the author's "brilliant manipulation of point of view" and "his profound understanding of conflicting perspectives" (Fitzgerald-Hoyt 411). The complexity of Trevor's narrative method varies from novel to novel and also sometimes within each novel. *Fools of Fortune,* however, is unusual in that this variation operates mostly in a structure supported by the formal division into different narrative units, each with its own narrator. It is only Imelda's parts that sometimes sporadically heighten the level of narrative complexity by allowing elaborate and sophisticated shifts to take place.

The overviews and narrative complexity

The two overviews (units Al and A2 in the table above), on the other hand, have a very simple, formal, reliable and omniscient narrator and reveal no genuine complexity or finesse in their narrative function. There is no intimacy with the characters or with the

setting, and Christian names are shunned: "a Quinton cousin" or "the third English girl" is used rather than Marianne (10). The focus of the narrative is on the generic rather than the specific case. These parts are narrated by a narrator who removes himself telescopically from the immediate context of the story itself in order to survey the historical framework of Anglo-Irish affairs in general and the family relationships (the Woodcombes and the Quintons) in the novel in particular. He inserts himself between the personal and familial story as told in Willie's, Marianne's and Imelda's parts and the reader. His role in the total novel illustrates the distinction that the Russian formalists emphasised between the *fabula (*or story), which refers to the chronological order of the text's events, and s*juzet* (or plot) the way these events are organised and manipulated by the author. This narrator looks at the story from the outside and has decided to interfere with it (obviously with the author's approval) in a presumably objective effort to repair what he considers to be a weak and insecure structure. Here Trevor is a fabulist who worries about an insufficiency of *sjuzet* and feels it necessary artificially to strengthen the *fabula* by the insertion of two historical scholia. In the first overview (before Willie's first monologue), which serves as an exposition or prologue to the whole novel, he prepares the reader for one of its most important themes by pointing out and stressing a pattern in Anglo-Irish affairs not immediately or directly obvious in the two long personal monologues themselves. In the second, he feels it necessary to remind the reader of the importance of this overall thematic context before entering the private, personal world of Marianne. By introducing this simple frame narrator Trevor fundamentally alters the relation between reader and text.

The central meaning of the text is hidden behind layers of different narrative voices:

[Frame narrator] [Imelda] [Marianne] [Willie] [MEANING] [Willie] [Marianne] [Imelda] [Frame narrator]

The presence of the frame narrator in the two overviews counteracts narrative complexity. Lothe has discussed Conrad's narrative technique in a way which is eminently relevant to Trevor and *Fools*

of Fortune: "There is a general danger attached to the narrative technique of interposing a 'simpler' narrator between the reader and the text's major (and more authoritative) one: the views of the frame narrator may reduce or destroy the complexity of the narrative he presents" (Lothe 24). In the two overviews the frame narrator contextualises, generalises and simplifies the story and gives the reader thematic directions to follow. They reduce the reader's private engagement with the meaning-making processes involved in reading the total novel.

In some respects, the role of Trevor's frame narrator can be compared to the fictional use of an 'editor' in the early history of the novel. In *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels* and in the early epistolary novels, the author invents an external voice that becomes responsible for arranging and coordinating the narrative voices inside the story itself. This voice is sometimes seen as "the character in the novel who can continually and at any given moment take a panoramic view over the whole course of fictitious events" (Romberg 76). In these early novels, however, one of the most important functions of the 'editor' was to vouch for the existence and authenticity of the character and the materiel (the letters, for instance), a role that is not generally required in modern fiction. Romberg argues that "[t]he editor must be considered as a part of the fiction" (76). Although it was part of the conventions of the early novel, today the whole apparatus whereby, for instance, Swift introduces Captain Gulliver, the letter to Cousin Sympson and the latter's letter to the reader tends instead to emphasise that it is extraneous to the central story itself. In *Fools of Fortune* the separateness of the frame narrator similarly removes him from the fiction. He does share an important function with the 'editor': "By the mechanics of editorship the editor – technically speaking – is enabled to let his voice be heard among, and sometimes above, the characters in the novel" (Romberg 76). But instead of clearly advertising and/or authenticating the identity of his frame narrator, Trevor hides him among the fictional characters in the novel in a kind of role reversal of the traditional 'editor.'

The rather em-phatic nature of the statement that the frame narrator adds to the novel can also be seen to have an educational or didactic purpose. He 'intervenes' in the story ('histoire' in Genette's terminology) in order to provide the plot ('récit) with an overall thematic context for the benefit of the reader.

> Mais les interventions, directes ou indirectes, du narrateur à l'égard de l'histoire peuvent aussi prendre la forme plus didactique d'un commentaire autorisé de l'action: ici s'affirme ce qu'on pourrait appeler la *fonction idéologique* du narrateur (Genette 1972: 262-263)

The primary purpose of the commentary that Trevor provides in the overviews is to be functional and explanatory. These parts are much less literary than the rest of the novel; they are direct, matter-of-fact and impersonally neutral. They even use cliché to establish and illustrate the overall thematic context of the rest of the novel. There are several explanatory and rather obvious references of this kind: "This couple's only child was brought up in Woodcombe Rectory and later caused history again to repeat itself, as in Anglo-Irish relationships it has a way of doing" (10). The description of an Irish village with "its concrete convent dominating the single street, with agricultural machinery displayed next door to it" (10) is heavily reductive (Ireland equals religion and agriculture), conventional and cliché-ridden - a sort of thematic telegraphese. There is not much narrative complexity on show here.

The narrative structure of *Fools of Fortune* and the idea of narrative success in its correspondence with the reader hinges on balancing the simple, straightforward, largely factual and objective overviews against the more subjective, complex and elaborate meanings found in the other parts. The gaps that the monologues of the main characters and the third-person narrative in Imelda's parts leave open in the thematic structure of the novel are closed by the author/narrator by the insertion of the two historical overviews. Wolfgang Iser's well-known theories about the collaboration between text and reader and his insistence on the role of the reader in actualising the meaning of the text may help us understand how

these overviews function. More specifically, Iser's theory identifies a number of 'Leerstellen', literally 'empty places,' but in English usually translated as 'blanks' or 'gaps', in the text (Iser 182). These blanks perform an important function in the configuration of the meaning of a text and form part of a larger 'structure of indeterminacy.' A blank generates interaction between text and reader and initiates a process of 'ideation.' A reader is invited to make meaning by filling in these blanks in the text. Very generally, in narratological terms, we would expect the author of a traditional novel to attempt to fill these narrative gaps as the story unfolds, whereas a modern novelist like the Joyce of *Ulysses* or *Finnegans Wake,* on the other hand, would emphasise the gaps and relish their indeterminacy. In a modernist text, there is no intrinsic obligation to close these gaps at any time, certainly not at the end of the work. A detective story, on the other hand, would attempt to reduce any indeterminacy to a minimum and close down the reader's process of ideation at the end of the story.

The Italian novelist Mario Biondi, in a review of *Fools of Fortune,* highlights the process of interplay between hints or "minute revelations," on the one hand, and, on the other, the historical background. Together, they gradually and successively construct the meaning of the text for the reader.

> La vicenda, in superficie una semplice tragedia a sfondo storico e tinte cruente, è invece raccontata con grandissima finezza e sapienza letteraria procedendo per piccolissime agnizioni successive, espresse in maniera sommessa, che dapprima rischiano di sfuggire al lettore e poi lo prendono per mano e lo trascinano inesorabilmente verso un finale di una delicatezza al limite della consolazione. (Biondi internet review)
>
> (A literal translation: 'The story, on the surface a simple tragedy against an historical background and bloody colours, is, however, told with great finesse and literary skill, and proceeds by successive minute

> revelations expressed in an unobtrusive manner, which at first run the risk of escaping the reader and then take him by the hand and drag him inexorably towards a finale with a tenderness that borders on consolation.')

What is special and unusual about *Fools of Fortune* is that the process of filling in the blanks is to such a large extent separated from the blanks themselves and placed in the two overviews, where the overall thematic fabric of the novel (Biondi's "historical background") is elucidated and bolstered. It is this that has caused some critical confusion about their role and authority in the novel. Since the functional meaning of the overviews is independent of the rest of the novel's narrative structure by being separately superimposed from the outside onto its thematic structure, we can actually see the overviews themselves disappear as the blanks are filled in. They self-destruct when the task that was assigned to them has been fulfilled. This is why so many critics either do not actively notice the narrative separateness of the overviews and why there is confusion as to whose voice they transmit. Their strategic function is to provide the reader with a single, secure and consistent perspective and to make blanks that may have appeared in the other parts of the novel disappear. They may supply a panoramic framework of meaning for the rest of the novel, but, like the 'editor' of classical novels, they soon run the risk of becoming redundant.

The overviews: theory and practice

Trevor's view of his novelistic fiction guarantees that he will always consider the needs of the readers of his novels: "At the end of a short story the reader's mind should be able to take the story on in his mind, but at the end of a novel he is entitled to expect a rounding-off" ("Contemporary Writers Series"). In *Fools of Fortune* the reader is provided with a thematic "rounding-off" in the form of two separate historical overviews. Here we are again reminded of the potential structural risks involved in Trevor's alternating between

long and short fictions. The spaces between them expand and contract in a way that the author does not always seem able to control. John Mellors manages to exemplify the damaging consequences of this genre vacillation on all of Trevor's fictions (short stories, novellas, and novels) in one short article on his work. He first castigates "Trevor's fussiness in trying to tie up loose ends," and then goes on to suggest that a short story he is discussing ("Lovers of their Time") "would have been far better left without the attachment of a novel's denouement" (Mellors 94). In his novella *Nights at the Alexandra,* Mellors argues, "Trevor has marred a short fiction by tacking on what reads like the resumé of the full length novel he might have written" (94). Finally, on the subject of *Fools of Fortune,* Mellors complains of a "Darby and Joan end to the book, and one feels that this excellent novel is yet another story which might have been even more telling without its last few pages" (95). Trevor's perceived need to supply the reader with a totalising context potentially undermines his gift for understatement and subtlety.

The question of literary complexity is very much also a question of narrative distance. Schirmer identifies and discusses what he terms "panoramic perspectives" in Trevor's fiction (10, 14, 23, 25), a technique which involves an often sudden narrative withdrawal to "a remote bird's-eye position" (Schirmer 23). Varying telescopic uses of distancing effects frequently appear in Trevor's early fiction. In *The Old Boys* the geographical context is Britain: "The rain spread from the west. It fell in Somerset in late afternoon; it caught the evening crowds unprepared in London. A woman, glad to see it, walked through it in a summer dress. A man in Putney, airing his dog, lost his dog on the common and died in October of a cold that had become pneumonia" (184). In *Mrs Eckdorf in O'Neill's Hotel* the reader is constantly moved around Dublin. "Far away from Thaddeus Street, in the suburb of Terenure, Mrs Sinnott's daughter, who fifty-one years ago had been christened Enid Mary and was now Mrs Gregan, listened to her husband's voice talking about tomatoes" (23-24). This technique, Schirmer suggests, is used by Trevor to introduce "ironic qualifications" by juxtaposing a specific character or event with a larger "deflating context of indifference"

(23). It is also an example of Trevor's tendency towards universal irony, which tries to make God himself the supreme ironist and human life devoid of plan or plot. It is universal, both in respect of time and place. The same inclination is noticed by Morrison (she calls it a "cosmological perspective"), and the concept of "significant simultaneity" is seen by her as dominating Trevor's work: "past and present are, actually, the same moment" (Morrison 5). This type of narrative adjustment can easily be used to relate 'now' to 'then' and to remind the reader of the significant and ever-present force of history in the seeming insignificance of a tiny detail. In one novel the separateness of a single paragraph performs the function of lifting the reader out of the triviality of a painful tooth extraction in a previous paragraph into a "nobler, more historical view of Dublin" (Mortimer 80):

> In Dublin the rain fell heavily that morning. Turf in public parks became soft underfoot and the unpainted wood of hoardings changed colour and soon could absorb no more. . . . Rain ran on Robert Emmet and Henry Grattan, on Thomas Davis, on O'Connell with his guardian angels, and gentle Father Mathew, apostle of temperance. . . . It damped the heads of Mangan and Tom Kettle and the Countess Markievicz, it polished to a shine the copper-green planes of a tribute to Yeats, Moore and Burke, Wolfe Tone and Charles Stewart Parnell, Goldsmith and ghostly Provost Salmon: dead men of Ireland were that morning invigorated. (*Mrs Eckdorf* 185-186)

This paragraph reminds us of Trevor's fondness for a totalising sense of an overall historical context. What, again, makes *Fools of Fortune* different from the other novels is that here the overviews, rather than being incorporated in the text of the main story and narrated by the main narrator, are given their own extended and narratologically separate voice and space.

On the level of functional narrative the nearest analogy to Schirmer's "panoramic" and Morrison's "cosmological" perspectives is the cinematic technique of the long shot (the opposite of a

close-up), which adds commentary on a central, specific issue by allowing the greater and wider context of a particular episode to be seen more or less simultaneously. In most of his fiction Trevor uses this technique to some advantage. In the three related short stories that make up "Matilda's England," for instance, a sequence which has thematic affinities with *Fools of Fortune,* he manages to contain the wider thematic context of Irish and English history within the character of Matilda herself. At other times he is less successful: John Stinson complains that "[i]n 'Beyond the Pale', for example, Trevor finds that implication is not enough, and he resorts at the end to some stiltedly direct commentary" (25). Stinson is disappointed for the same reason that we may be disappointed with the overviews in *Fools of Fortune.* The cinematic and panoramic nature of these overall perspectives deprives the reader of the pleasure of reading because they remove a large part of the imaginative input required to create meaning. They may go too far in drawing together the different strands of the thematic structure of the novel as these are 'blanked in' in the novel itself. They provide the reader with ready, one-dimensional solutions rather than allowing him to get on with the work himself. Trevor has often spoken of the need to "give readers their own imaginative terrain," but in the way the historical overviews are 'worked together' into *Fools of Fortune* he seems to have forgotten this (Adair 4).

Iser illustrates this cinematic effect in his discussion about the phenomenology of reading. The difference between a literary character as realised in a film (the actor that we can see) and the image of the same character generated by the literary text is that "the film is optical and presents a given object, whereas the imagination remains unfettered. Objects, unlike imaginings, are highly determinate, and it is this determinacy [as opposed to the indeterminacy of the literary text] which makes us feel disappointed" (Iser 138). In the two historical overviews Trevor excludes us as readers from the meaning-making process of the total novel. As a consequence, these sections function only to artificially accelerate the process of thematic configuration in the overall text. Since this action is accomplished by a process diametrically opposed to the

normal creative tendencies of a modern literary text - we are actually told in the overviews how to read the rest of the novel - these actions fill in the empty spaces that the text leaves open and thereby reduce the investigative, urgent and meaning-making pleasure of the reader.

In an interview that coincided with the publication of *Fools of Fortune* Trevor indirectly gave some further hints about his narrative technique: " I love cutting things, it's the short story writer in me, and I love taking chances with readers" (Hebert 10). This simple description illustrates the way an aesthetic strategy is realised in the fictional technique of reticence and understatement so typical of Trevor's prose style. Inevitably, filling in the gaps that Trevor left in the novel may take more than one reading. It is in the context of reading and re-reading that we can discern a further pattern in Trevor's narrative technique. If most readers involve themselves with the literary text just once this will inevitably have both commercial as well as literary-narrative implications. The average reader may read only once, whereas literary criticism, on the other hand, has been called "the art of rereading" (Johnson 3). Roland Barthes has insisted on this practice as an important aspect of literary study. He has shown that essential characteristics of the process of re-reading are in fundamental opposition to the idea of the book as commercial object, as a popular novel and a good read. This object has to be consumed at first reading without too much resistance, for another book to be written, published and sold. Reading and re-reading *Fools of Fortune* it becomes clear that the communicative function of the overviews is to give the general reader of the novel what Trevor the short story writer may have cut; they fill in the gaps between the stories ("Saints" and others) that were 'worked together' in the novel. The novelist could not afford to leave empty the blanks that had formed between these separate stories and in the main story itself. The two historical overviews now perform that function for the reader *in his first reading* in order to enable to novel to be consumed. They clearly and manifestly help the reader affix (cement and make permanent) a single meaning to the total story. In so doing, they reverse the process whereby, in Barthes's view, a text can escape being consumed and become instead a free and "plural text"

through a re-reading that "draws the text out of its internal chronology ('this happens *before* or *after* that') and recaptures mythic time (without *before* or *after*)" (Barthes 16). The overviews in *Fools of Fortune* establish the internal chronology and counteract mythic time.

The difference between the overviews and the rest of the novel can also be illustrated with reference to the critical distinction established by Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader* between 'closed' and 'open' texts. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* defines these terms in a way that shows their relevance to Trevor's text: "An 'open' text . . . requires the reader's active and attentive collaboration in the creation of meaning; whereas a 'closed' text . . . more or less determines or predetermines a reader's response" (Cuddon 771). Once the central meaning of the text has been established, a re-reading of the novel will reveal the superfluity of the overviews. They begin to idle and become thematically redundant. They now fail to impact on the total meaning of the text because that meaning is already present. The function they were given relates only to the first reading of the text. On re-reading the novel, the main part of *Fools of Fortune*, by virtue of their "successive minute revelations expressed in an unobtrusive manner" (Biondi above), continue to demand the reader's active and attentive collaboration in the creation of meaning. The two historical overviews, on the other hand, idle, stall and self-destruct.

Concluding remarks

As a result, *Fools of Fortune* is, paradoxically, both a narratologically complex and, at the same time, a straightforward novel. For the main part, Trevor weaves an intricate, meandering pattern of different narrative voices that recount haunting stories of personal drama and tragic suffering which cannot fail to engage and move the reader. Here he uses many of the free and flexible techniques available to the modern writer. In the narratologically separate historical overviews, the contrasting voice of the omniscient frame narrator adds a panoramic perspective in order to provide the reader with a thematic superstructure. This is a different Trevor, who, in a more traditional

storytelling mode, reverts to a pre-modern pattern of narrative and authorial control.

Certain aspects of the overviews themselves and their function in the novel seem to form part of an elusive and tantalizing set of structuring oppositions. The overviews can be posited both as highly visible and as almost invisible, and they are, at the same time, the pipes outside the structure and the narrative subtlety that some critics have failed to notice. In the way they control and guide the reader's thematic exploration they are dominant and overpowering, and at the same time they are redundant in that they do not give the reader any important information not already available, explicitly or implicitly, elsewhere in the novel. In several ways they seem to dominate the view, and recede from view, along an oscillating curve in rather subtle and inscrutable ways as and when they are required to provide a resource of contextual meaning for the reader.

The contradictoriness of the novel's structure may also be a reflection of the novel's thematic concerns. If Trevor is trying to find a perspective from which to view Anglo-Irish history 'objectively', the narrative structure becomes part of his analysis of the ways in which history itself is imagined in an Anglo-Irish context. The voice that fills in the blanks and that offers a stable and authoritative historical overview is also subject to the kinds of narrative and 'subjective' uncertainty and confusion that dominate the other parts. The historical overviews can, to some extent, be seen as rather cumbersome appurtenances that testify to Trevor's need for his novels to be (perhaps excessively) summed up and buttoned down. At the same time, however, they resonate with the more unstable and subjective structures that they compete with in the novel and so contribute to the overall analysis of voice and perspective, narratologically and thematically. The success and popularity of *Fools of Fortune* is to a large extent due to this separation of narrative powers. On the one hand, the reader relies on the overviews for overall contextual meaning, and, on the other, he is free to ignore and forget them once they have performed their appointed role in the novel.

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