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BREACH OF CONTRACT: PRAGMATIC VARIATIONS ON A THEME IN RICHARD FORD'S SHORT STORY "PRIVACY"

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Résumé : Tout en ayant recours à divers outils pragmatiques, l'article emprunte principalement à la théorie de William Labov sur les six étapes de tout récit oral afin d'analyser les ressorts trompeurs de la narration dans « Privacy » de Richard Ford. Cette courte nouvelle à la narration homodiégétique permet, par sa longueur et son mode narratif, d'évidents prolongements avec un récit oral. L'article scrute la façon dont le texte fait mine de suivre à la lettre la structure classique d'un récit pour mieux la subvertir, le texte jouant ainsi dans sa forme, et plus particulièrement au niveau de la relation narrateur/narrataire, son motif thématique principal qui est celui du leurre et de la tromperie. Au-delà, il démontre que le jeu avec le narrataire et la violation des règles de communication masquent, paradoxalement, une tentative plus radicalement solipsiste d'auto-aveuglement de la part du narrateur.

Mots-clés: Pragmatique, Stylistique, Analyse du Discours, Relation narrateur / narrataire, William Labov, Richard Ford, *A Multitude of Sins*

Laws, rules, contract clauses sometimes seem to exist the better to be circumvented, flouted, or downright violated. Richard Ford's collection of short stories in which "Privacy" appears is entitled *A Multitude of Sins*: the book obviously promises to explore man's endless transgressions of divine law, and the decalogue – God's commandments to his people as part of his Covenant – proves an undeniable filigree to the collection. However, reminding us that authors often revel in breaking the implicit contract that binds them to

their readers, the title proves deceitful. Most of the stories repeatedly return to the transgression of one specific commandment, the seventh – “Thou shalt not commit adultery” – and therefore deal with one sin from a multitude of perspectives.

“Privacy”, the opening story, explores the moment of temptation as opposed to the sinful act itself: the homodiegetic narrator relates a period in his marital life when he fell to watching a naked woman in an apartment opposite his, feeling secretly aroused by the illicitness of the situation. What the short story stages is a voyeuristic impulse, and as such it might seem more closely related to the tenth commandment (“Thou shalt not covet your neighbor's house; thou shalt not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's”), all the more so as the basic setting – a man watching his female neighbour – adds to the potential link. But in the general context of the collection and in accordance with its position at the threshold of the book, “Privacy” strikes one, first and foremost, as an inchoate version of the later stories: the main character – the narrated-I – remains on the brink of adultery.

The narrating-I, however, goes further: resorting to systematic narrative deception, he turns into a full-fledged figure of transgression, and his deviant relation with his narratee proves central to the story. Because pragmatics focuses on “the relation between language and its users (speakers and hearers), or more specifically [on] the contextual conditions governing the speaker's choice of an utterance, and the hearer's interpretation of it” (Leech and Short, 254), and can offer “a natural continuity between ‘rhetoric’ in its ordinary language sense, and as applied to literature” (*Ibid.*), it provides an efficient point of entry into Ford's text. Besides using theories of presupposition and Paul Grice's principle of cooperation, this article will draw primarily on William Labov's famous socio-linguistic approach to oral narratives, in an attempt at close stylistic scrutiny of Ford's short story with a view to interpretation. Indeed, scrutinizing the way the narrator of “Privacy” both strictly abides by and systematically violates the six stages of story-telling as defined by Labov in his seminal 1972 essay “The Transformation of Experience in Narrative Syntax” will enable us to show how the diegetic theme of interpersonal deceit finds a prolongation in the narrator-narratee relationship and affects the very form of the short story. More than this, we will contend that this reading of the text is but a first stage, and that the narrator's flouting of communicative rules eventually masks a more radical attempt at self-deception. Paradoxically, stylistics envisaged as discourse analysis will thus prove here an efficient key to try and crack open the essentially solipsistic narrative code of the short story.

In the footsteps of William Labov

William Labov's name is first and foremost associated with his work on oral narratives made by ordinary people, work whose influence has extended beyond the field of sociolinguistics and of which Michael Toolan gives an extensive account in his 2001 book *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction*. In "The transformation of experience in narrative syntax", Labov synthesizes his findings upon analyzing oral tales told by black people in Harlem, and develops his hypothesis – already defended in a previous piece of work co-written with Joshua Waletzky five years earlier ("Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience") – that a recurrent pattern underlies oral narratives of personal experience. Casting aside surface differences in the pursuit of a deeper and invariant common structure, Labov posits that "a fully-formed oral narrative", and therefore a pragmatically successful narrative, follows six stages which he theorizes as follows:

1. *Abstract*: What, in a nutshell, is this story about?
 2. *Orientation*: Who, when, where?
 3. *Complicating action*: What happened and then what happened?
 4. *Evaluation*: So what? How or why is this interesting?
 5. *Result or resolution*: What finally happened?
 6. *Coda*: That's it, I've finished and am 'bridging' back to our present situation.
- (Toolan 2001, 148)

As Toolan reminds us (2001, 167), "The extent to which the Labovian six-part formalist analysis of the oral narrative of personal experience applies or is relevant to literary narratives has [...] become a matter of some contention", and he adds: "narratologists have differed over the usefulness to narrative poetics of the Labovian approach." (2001, 169) However, Labov's terminology has been adopted by literary criticism, and there is no denying that a number of similarities exist between oral tales and literary discourse, in particular when the literary text under scrutiny is a short story. Because "Privacy" is what we might call a short short story (five pages), not unlike the standard span of an oral narrative, and because it is told by a first-person narrator retrospectively relating a personal experience, the possible continuity between Labov's analyses and a narratological approach to Ford's piece of literary fiction seems hardly debatable.

And indeed, "Privacy" offers a case-in-point illustration of the invariable six-part structure posited by Labov. In the wake of a fairly transparent **abstract**, the title which indeed points to the central theme of the story in its multiple dimensions (one's right to privacy, marital intimacy, and even the more remote dimension of secrecy), the narrator opens his narrative with an informational introduction:

This was at a time when my marriage was still happy.

We were living in a large city in the northeast. It was winter. February. The coldest month. I was, of course still trying to write, and my wife was working as a translator for a small publishing company that specialized in Czech scientific papers. We had been married for ten years and were still enjoying that strange, exhilarating illusion that we had survived the worst of life's hardships.

The apartment we rented was in the old factory section on the south end of the city [...]. [...] A famous avant-garde theatre director had lived in the room before and put on his jagged, nihilistic plays there [...].

Each night when my wife came back from her work, we would go out into the cold, shining streets and find a restaurant to have our meal in. Later we would stop for an hour in a bar and have coffee or a brandy, and talk intensely about the translations my wife was working on, though never (blessedly) about the work I was by then already failing at. (3-4)

Far from opting for an *in medias res* beginning, an exceptional form turned norm in contemporary fiction, the narrator here chooses to provide his reader with step-by-step background **orientation**, and adopts all the basic markers of expository discourse: besides the use of existential structures, the opening lines are made up of what Labov and Waletzky, in their 1967 paper, term “free clauses”: unlike “narrative clauses”, which report an ordered sequence of events and are therefore fixed, “free clauses” – which inform of the context of the events – are freely shiftable (Toolan 2001, 145-149), something that the paratactic mode of the story's second paragraph seems to invite us to do. Aspectual modulations, a common feature of free clauses according to Labov and Waletzky, are another characteristic of this opening, both through the logical presence of the perfective aspect (analeptic information proving necessary) and the use of progressive forms. The fourth paragraph adds another staple of orientation: as the sentences turn more narrative, listing a succession of actions, habitual modality surfaces (recurrence of “would”), confirming the expository perspective adopted by the narrator. To quote from another source, Helmut Bonheim's *The Narrative Modes: Techniques of the Short Story* (107) – a book whose developments regularly intersect with Labov's approach –, “Privacy” perfectly illustrates that “[t]he kinds of report that tend to be expository – the anterior view, the habitual action and the panoramic scene – are birds of a feather which have a tendency to flock together.”

Singulative discourse abruptly – but expectedly – returns at the moment of the **complicating action**: “It was on such a cold night that [...] I saw [...] a woman slowly undressing.” (4) **Evaluation**, the most diffuse of Labov's stages since it consists in all the means used to underline the significance of the story and can therefore be located anywhere in it or spread out through it, is easily locatable in “Privacy”. It makes up a self-contained paragraph just after the complicating action:

I don't know all that I thought. Undoubtedly I was aroused. Undoubtedly I was thrilled by the secrecy of watching out of the dark. Undoubtedly I loved the very illicitness of it, of my wife sleeping nearby and knowing nothing of what I was doing. It is also possible I even liked the cold as it surrounded me, as complete as the night itself, may even have felt that the sight of the woman—whom I took to be young and lacking caution or discretion—held me somehow, insulated me and made the world stop and be perfectly expressible as two poles connected by my line of vision. I am sure now that all of this had to do with my impending failures. (5)

As is classically the case, evaluation contributes to the creation of suspense insofar as it delays the unfolding of the action. However, the thread of the plot is soon picked up and eventually, after a series of developments, comes the **resolution**: passing her one day on the street, the narrator discovers that the woman he had for seven nights observed, and desired, is an old Chinese woman, perhaps seventy years old or more. The short story then closes with a sentence which has many of the attributes of a **coda**: "And I walked on then, feeling oddly but in no way surprisingly betrayed, simply passed on down the street toward my room and my own doors, my life entering, as it was at that moment, its first, long cycle of necessity." (7) Even though it does not contain the usual shift in deixis which explicitly bridges back to the narrator's current situation at the moment of the telling, the final words do orient the temporal perspective forward and indirectly comprise the narrator's present. The tonality of general life assessment is redolent of fictional endings, and the sense of closure has been immediately conveyed through the opening conjunction "And". Indeed, although a linguistic deviation as such, the final sentence with *and* has become a classical feature of narratives, both oral and written: Helmut Bonheim (152) reminds us that "in Labov and Waletzky's transcriptions of oral narratives, twelve out of fourteen include as one of the final sentences a beginning with *and*", and he goes on to conclude: "In other words, the *and*-sentence is part and parcel of a set of conventions used in story closings."

Of course, one cannot but think here of the traditional "And they lived happily ever after" of fairy tales, a point which deserves further comment in the case of "Privacy". Such a formal echo had already been anticipated in the opening sentence of the short story ("This was at a time when my marriage was still happy"), an intertextually-marked formula. And on the diegetic plane, the long final paragraph brings another obvious allusion to this genre: the protagonist's walk in the city (in sharp contrast with the action in previous pages which takes place entirely within the apartment), his having to face adverse weather conditions, his confrontation with the woman and his eventual return – a changed man – to the apartment, call to mind the motif of the initiatory journey. It is therefore logical that the story should be such a tightly-structured narrative, in keeping with the ritualistic pattern of fairy tales.

Red-herrings

In “Privacy” however, in a clear reversal of the genre, the Princess turns into a toad and an initially happy protagonist inexorably heads to his marital ruin. As is so often the case in postmodern literature, intertextual allusions or formal borrowings are in the service of displacement and deconstruction, although not to the point of parody in Ford’s story. And it is therefore time at this point to retrace our steps, and to unstitch our neat Labovian threads; indeed, the tight structural pattern that the story offers to the reader is systematically undermined in the very movement of its being set. As pointed out at the very beginning, rules seem to call for their violation, and the pragmatic commandments governing linguistic communication (the six principles of Labov, the four maxims of Grice...) are regularly contested by speakers in everyday life and by fictional narrators in literary texts, the deviant forms in their turn often becoming the norm (*in medias res* openings or open endings for instance). However, there definitely is more to it in “Privacy”, as the blurring of narrative progression is methodical and concerns all six stages. The meticulous sapping of the successive foundation points becomes an integral part of the text, and is therefore bound to carry part of its meaning. Analytical description coming before interpretation, let us review how each specific stage in the narrator’s story-telling gives way to a contradictory logic to that underlined so far.

A more exact title for the short story would probably have been “Breach of Privacy”; yet, the choice of the single term as such does not strike one as being inadequate since it simply seems meant to leave more interpretative space to the reader. It is in fact a remark, made in passing in the third paragraph, which really alerts the reader to the deceitful nature of this choice:

Our bed—my wife’s and mine—was in one dark corner where we’d arranged some of the tall, black-canvas scenery drops for our privacy. Though, of course, there was no one for us to need privacy from. (3)

Respect for or breach of privacy is not even a matter for debate as it is the concept itself which is made to sound radically unsuitable and is casually done away with, this being achieved, in a further paradox, by putting the word into relief through the principle of end-focus. As for the concessional final sentence, it too relies on deviation as one senses that the lack of need for privacy is not linked to the absence of people liable to break it, but to non-existent marital intimacy, as suggested by the narrator’s strange need for reformulation: “Our bed—my wife’s and mine—[...]”.

This brings us back to the very beginning. “This was at a time when my marriage was still happy”: the narrator’s attentiveness seemingly goes as far as supplying us with a proleptic synthesis of the fairly long passage that functions

as orientation. However, well before the disturbing allusion to the marital bed, as soon as line 2 in fact, the reader understands that the incipit, isolated by paragraphing, is indeed disconnected from what follows (see the extended quotation of the opening passage in the first part above). The halting rhythm of line 2 which contradicts the fluidity of the punctuation-free opening sentence, the negative symbolism of winter, negative lexical presupposition in "I was, of course, still trying to write" which suggests not only failure but durable failure, and the final words of the paragraph which pull the analeptic fragment in a somewhat opposite direction from that initiated in the incipit ("still happy" suggests that happiness has been enjoyed for some time whereas we learn that the couple are recovering from hardships)... : everything indeed runs counter to the narrator's initial statement. Finally another, more subtle detail contributes to the undermining process: what is the need of such an expositional passage if most of the facts carefully expounded are supposedly obvious: "of course" is repeated twice (paragraphs 2 and 3) and taken up in the even more striking – because obviously reflexive about the narrator's linguistic activity – expression "needless to say" at the beginning of paragraph 5: "Our wish, needless to say, was to stay out of the apartment as long as we could." (4)

Paragraph 6, too, relies on narrative perversion with its false start, or fake instantiation of a complicating action: "And so it happened that ...", which actually introduces more iterative and expositional narration: "And so it happenend that on many nights that winter, in the cold, large, nearly empty room, I would be awake [...]. And often I would walk the floor from window to window [...]" (4). At this stage, the story gives the impression of heading nowhere, indeed matching the sterile back-and-forth movement of the protagonist. The true complicating action, however, comes in the next paragraph:

It was on such a cold night that—through the windows at the back of the flat, windows giving first onto an alley below, then farther across a space where a wire factory had been demolished, providing a view of buildings on the street parallel to ours—I saw, inside a long, yellow-lit apartment, the figure of a woman slowly undressing, from all appearances oblivious to the world outside the window glass. (4)

Not only does the complicating action, which is meant to move the plot forward, prove physically static in the diegesis (it is an act of perception), it is textually so also, as the narration of the turning point is interrupted twice: first frozen as it were by a long parenthetical passage – parenthetical both in terms of punctuation (dashes) and syntax with the embedding of prepositional phrases and non-finite clauses – and then delayed by the postponing of the object of the finite verb ("I saw, inside [...], the figure of a woman undressing.") The analeptic fragment within the parentheses and its repeated use of a non-finite ing-form blur the status of the paragraph, otherwise made of a central "narrative clause" characterized by a simple past tense (Toolan 2001, 148). The

precision in the next paragraph “Because of the distance, I could not see her well or at all clearly”, which calls into question the very complicating action itself, thus simply brings to symbolic completion the careful linguistic process of deconstruction.

As mentioned before, the unfolding of the plot is soon delayed by an entire paragraph devoted to evaluation (paragraph 10 page 5, quoted in full in part one). Assessing in a seemingly classic way his personal involvement in the story, the narrator once again produces self-deconstructive discourse as those lines, supposed to sustain the tellability and the significance of the story, become the locus of uncertainty and suspect interpretation. The anaphoric emphasis on the adverb “undoubtedly” ultimately leading to the use of the stronger marker of certitude “I am sure” cannot suffice to offset the initial “I don’t know” and the regressive movement on the epistemic scale which lies at the core of the paragraph: “Undoubtedly [...] It is also possible [...] I may even have felt [...]”. Furthermore, the improbable reading of the diegetic situation by the narrator: “the sight of the woman [...] held me somehow, insulated me and made the world stop and be perfectly expressible as two poles connected by my line of vision” (with the awkwardness of the wording “it made the world [...] be” which contradicts the claim to flawless expression “perfectly expressible”) and the vague and allusive nature of the concluding line (“I am sure now that all of this had to do with my impending failures”) run counter to the very purpose of evaluation, i.e. one of clarification.

“Narrative-paragraph-initial sentences are a signal of narrativity”, Michael Toolan reminds us in his more recent book *Narrative Progression in the Short Story: A corpus stylistic approach* (2009, 126). Yet the next paragraph aporetically opens as follows: “Nothing more happened” (5), and the negation of all further development is symmetrically echoed at the far end of the paragraph: “It was all arousal and secrecy and illicitness and really nothing else.” (6) However, the crucial twist in the plot is yet to come, namely the protagonist’s decision to leave his flat one day (giving rise to a long passage characterized by a multitude of verbs of movement that also set the story into *narrative* motion) and his passing the woman at close quarters on the street, which soon leads to what, in terms of sheer plotting, appears as minimal resolution: the discovery of the woman’s old age and ethnicity (and therefore, we infer from the narrator’s point of view, her profound alienness). Then surprisingly, and *in extremis* as it were, the narrative suggests the possibility of a criminal turn to the plot, a belated complicating action which is immediately dropped:

I might suddenly have felt the urge to harm her, and easily could’ve. But of course that was not my thought. She turned back to the door and seemed to hurry the key into the lock. (7)

So by the time they reach the coda, the seasoned reader probably expects nothing but fake closure, which they are indeed given (see the full quotation in part one above). The symbolic shutting of a door, a staple of closed endings according to Bonheim (119, 139), is here displaced onto the secondary character, while it is movement which is foregrounded as regards the hero, the non-finite -ing form "my life entering" seemingly condemning him to endless wandering, indeed an aporetic form of imprisonment and therefore of closure. Lasting imbalance is created through the presence of contradictory elements: "as it was at that moment" jars with "its first, long cycle of necessity" and "oddly" contradicts not only "but in no way surprisingly" but also the adverb "simply". Nothing is indeed simple as the story closes, and the expression "its first, long cycle of necessity", not unduly complex as such, is anything but clear and remains partially irrecoverable for the reader.

The path of interpretation

Bonheim (157) contends:

To grasp the ending of a story as totally open, the reader would have to see it as a blind alley or an excrescence, a useless extension outside the narrative economy; in other words, artistically inferior. No writer will want to write such an ending, at least, not deliberately [...].

[... The] critic who claims to have found a genuinely open ending is in effect confessing his inability to interpret it. [...].

We are ready to confess here our inability to interpret Ford's open ending with certainty, yet we are certain that it is indeed the fruit of a deliberate strategy on the author's part, in keeping with the type of narrative discourse he has his first-person narrator develop, and that it thus makes up an integral part of the meaning of the story. And though no self-enclosed signification is waiting there in a text for the critic merely to crack open, stylistic scrutiny can help us on the asymptotic quest for meaning and interpretation: one personal – subjective and incomplete – response borne out by linguistic facts.

The above analyses have left undiscussed many aspects of the text; yet, to quote Geoffrey Leech (297): "This unavoidable selection is also part of what makes stylistics an interpretative enterprise rather than a mechanistic or purely descriptive approach." Our analyses orient interpretation in three directions. First, the obvious discrepancy between the surface structure of the narrative, offered as bait to the reader, and the more complex reality of the text is but a device of indirect characterization, bringing textual confirmation of the protagonist's deceitful nature. Under cover of attentive guidance, which entails his being scrupulously respectful of Grice's maxims of manner and quantity notably, the narrator actually cheats on us while perhaps trying to lull our

critical faculties to sleep. The second and reverse – yet concurrent – interpretation is that such emphasis on textual deceit mimes for us the deception *undergone* by the narrator: the text flags a warning about the danger of deceptive appearances, those of which the narrator is also a victim: the woman is not the attractive young female, offered to his captive gaze, that he took her to be, just as the text, with all its red-herrings, is not the neat and smooth construct offered to our passive consumption that it may seem on a first reading.

However, the “ideal” reader is very unlikely to fall prey to the text’s deceitfulness as the signs of duplicity abound and sometimes seem excessive. And therefore, isn’t the only individual unable to see *through* the text the narrator himself, blinded as he is by the proximity of his own painful experience? This sends us on a third interpretative track, that of self-deception which, after all, prolongs what the story suggests on a diegetic plane: the protagonist may well have wilfully blinded himself to the reality of the scene under his eyes at the time of the story, as a casual passing remark alerts us: “the woman—whom I took to be young” (5). During the voyeuristic episode, none of the terms used to depict the woman indicates her age; her described thinness and fragility (“a petite woman in every sense”) might be those of someone in old age, and there are numerous markers of hedging epistemic modality in the passages where she is described. When looked at carefully, the main description which is given of her at the bottom of page 5 could apply to the body of an old woman¹. This forces us back to our first two interpretations: the text’s formal deceitfulness perhaps indeed functions as bait, but not only to betray the narrator’s deceitful nature; it could well be meant to act as a decoy with a view to manipulating the reader’s perspective: while dissociating themselves from the clearly fake appearances of the text, the reader is probably more likely to adopt the narrator’s faulty – yet all the time ambiguous – point of view of the woman, and thus to experience surprise at the end, their faculties having been mobilized in a different direction. This in turn means that the reader’s potential pride at not letting themselves be deceived by false appearances (those of narrative structure) in the end suffers a rebuff.

However, we have not exhausted the question of the protagonist’s self-deception and its relationship to the form of the text. Delusion is not only that of the narrated-I, a character in the story, about a woman turned pure fantasy, but first and foremost perhaps that of the narrating-I. It remains to be seen how his story, and more specifically the very narrative act that produces it, also proves but solipsistic instrument of self-delusion. The self-deceptive narrative process functions on three levels, and pragmatics will again be our point of entry into the text.

¹ This argument is notably developed by Florian Treguer (2008, 211-212).

First the incipit, with its two-fold play on presupposition, seems to betray the narrator's inability to face the failure of his marriage. Indeed the indirect reference, via presupposition, to the subsequent failure of the marriage ("This was at a time when my marriage was still happy" presupposes that the marriage ceased to be happy) not only allows for a more dramatic opening that engages the reader's participation; it also permits the narrator to avoid pronouncing more painful words, and therefore to avoid reality, an idea which the second effect of presupposition, anchored in the cleft structure, confirms. Indeed, "This was at a time when" presupposes the truth of the clausal complement "my marriage was happy"; however, as has already been shown, this view is immediately contradicted by the next lines that give a bleak picture of the couple. The narrator thus foregrounds, but for his own sake it seems, a blatant falsehood that shields him from personal suffering, the unsettling truth however surfacing in the Freudian slip "my marriage" (where "our marriage" would have seemed more logical).

The second object of self-delusion is the narrator's own true self. Building up a story around his voyeuristic impulse gradually appears as a possible way for the narrator to deny a more disturbing fact: that of his potentially violent nature. Because they violate Grice's maxim of quantity, the narrator's repeated negations ("Nothing more happened" – p.5, "There was nothing else" – p.6, "For no particular reason" – p.6) grow suspect, and when one more denial arises at the very end: "I might have felt the urge to harm her, and easily could've. But of course that was not in my thought" (p.7), the possibility dismissed instead looms large in the reader's mind despite the contracted form "could've", a typographical attempt to minimize the risk. One knows the force of what Gerald Prince calls the "disnarrated", i.e. "terms, phrases and passages that consider what did not or does not take place" (Toolan 2009, 148); as underlined by many critics, "the negatives in fact create what they negate"². The last but one sentence, in its weird wording, could not be more telling: "I didn't want her to think my mind contained what it did and also what it did not" (7). The carefully-suppressed truth of the character lies hidden in the text, behind the words or between the lines, waiting to spring to the reader's attention, the reader to whom it falls to release the unsaid of the text³.

² The quotation is from Nina Nørgaard (Toolan 2009, 148), but one also thinks of cognitive linguist George Lakoff's famous 2004 study *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*.

³ The reader probably infers that some part of the narrator did feel an urge to harm or crush this ageing, sexually undesirable woman, who has humiliatingly aroused his ludicrous desires. They also come to understand that he probably sees himself, or his semblable, his secret sharer, in the old Chinese woman, who seems as cold, solitary and uncommunicative as himself, an interpretation borne out by the multiplication of contracted forms at the end – "must've been" or "could've" – which might betray the

Last, and perhaps most central of all, it can be argued that the narrator probably writes up this carefully-built story to keep at bay an inexorable sense of emptiness and, beyond, of overwhelming meaninglessness. The discrepancy between the wilful transparency of form and the ultimate opacity of the story (Gay, 211-214) is indeed arresting. It is our final contention that the justification for this strange story is in its very forced form, which draws attention to the act of telling itself and the need to create something – be it a fake construct – in order to fill an insufferable void⁴. Abiding by the six stages of narrative progression gives the narrator a deluding sense of going somewhere, a fantasy that the story endlessly contradicts⁵; at the same time, underlining the contours of story-telling aims at entertaining the fantasy of diegetic substance, where in fact, as suggested by the text, there is nothing but a sense of void. In the final analysis, “Privacy” is perhaps an unconscious, and desperate, solipsistic act of self-sustenance in the face of nothingness. Of course, the reader too, in the process, is given a hint of the latter, and indirectly forced to confront it. The final story of *A Multitude of Sins* is entitled “Abyss”, and it has the Grand Canyon, a gigantic hole, as its central symbol. From the very outset of the collection, however, the reader has been led, through textual manipulation, to approach the edge of an abyssal hole while being seemingly advancing along a safe narrative path.

Conclusion

In the conclusion to their book *The Language and Literature Reader*, Ronald Carter and Peter Stockwell write (297): “[...] the mark of a good stylistician is someone who selects a particular analytical tool best suited to the passage in hand.” Without pretending to come up to their definition, we contend at least that Labov’s theory is a very helpful apparatus for analysing Richard Ford’s short story “Privacy” as it enables us to lay bare its deceitful narrative mechanism, a structural element that fully participates in the thematic understanding of the text. Furthermore, in the context of this collection of essays which celebrates Geoffrey Leech and Michael Short’s landmark *Style in Fiction* (1981), this contribution’s resort to close stylistic scrutiny of Ford’s short text, pays homage to these linguists whose analyses of literary extracts in

narrator’s ultimate, and desperate, attempt to establish contact with an addressee that these oral forms render more tangible.

⁴ The fact that the apartment’s previous occupant was, as we learn in the opening lines of orientation, a “famous avant-garde theater director” who “put on his jagged, nihilistic plays there” (3) is one decisive element that contributes to the overwhelming sense of void and meaninglessness that pervades the story.

⁵ Not only does the protagonist remain static and his only outing short-lived, the multiplication of repetitive linguistic patterns breeds an impression of motionlessness and sterility.

Style in Fiction showed what powerful interpretations can be derived from the application of linguistic tools to literature. Albeit to the detriment of the academically-expected final stage of a rigorous coda-like conclusion, we simply wish here to thank them for the luminous example they have set, and still do to this day, for critics who choose the path of stylistics into literary texts.

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