Writing Aslant: Putting Chisel to Paper—William Trevor’s *A Bit on the Side*

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“I don’t write about art to explain it but to explore what has happened between me and the image, both emotionally and intellectually”

Siri Hustvedt (282)1

1 It is now well-known that before being a full time writer, William Trevor used to be a sculptor, a carver of wood. In “Mentors” he gives a humorous account of his beginnings, carving an eagle in low relief at St Columba’s School under Oisin Kelly’s supervision:

Anyone could, Kelly impatiently insisted.
He was wrong. If the chisel wasn’t sharp enough, it tore at the wood, leaving it shredded and hairy. Sharpening the chisel was a knack and carving with it was a knack. The more you hacked, the less the carefully pencilled outline resembled a proud bird of prey. Perspective disappeared [...] if you dealt with the chisel too powerful a blow with the trickily rounded mallet the eagle’s claws weren’t there anymore. If you didn’t look after your fingers they wouldn’t be there either. Most of the time there was blood all over the place.

But there was something about the arduous, unsatisfactory activity that was appealing. When a delicate little gauge was as sharp as a razor, it slipped pleasurably through the grain of the wood [...]. The grain was a pattern to make use of, a means of suggesting concavity or depth, an emphasis when you wanted it to be. In time—five or six weeks—I finished the eagle, and Kelly advised me simply to polish it with beeswax, but I chose, instead, to plaster on raw linseed oil, which had the effect of bringing out all the flaws. Kelly said I ruined it.

2 The precision of gestures, the alliance of mind and matter and the independence of spirit are here strongly emphasized. Trevor pursued carving until he was in his late thirties, going back to writing because, as he explained to John Tusa, his sculptures had become too abstract and “[he] missed the people [he] had once carved as it were, and [he] just
stopped.” In the *Irish Arts Review*, Homan Potterton presents rare pictures of William Trevor’s works and sums up his career in a way which is not without evoking the sculptor of “Sacred Statues,” the seventh story of *A Bit on the Side* (128-153).2 “An elderly woman” gives Trevor a set of chisels; an elderly Mrs. Falloway tries to help Corry, persuading bishops to buy his sacred statues to put in their churches, arguing “how refreshing it would be […] to see the art of the great High Crosses of Ireland brought into the modern Church” (140). Like Corry, Trevor used to carve Saints, as Potterton recalls, “doing a number of sculptures for churches at Ashbrittle and Greenham near Wellington—a Saint John the Baptist in painted wood, a reredos with the Last Supper,” and like him, he is unable to pursue: “When the clergyman who commissioned these, the Rev. Ralph Bowman, left the parish, he was succeeded by an Evangelical who did not believe in decorated churches, and the sculptures disappeared.” Like Corry, he had been thinking about “becoming a professional letter-cutter.” Unlike Corry though, who has to turn to road works and rather ironically finds himself “re-surfacing […] the quarry boreen” (150), Trevor went back to writing, putting chisel to paper.

3 Autobiographical echoing obviously has its limits; yet, it is an invitation to take a closer look at William Trevor’s sculptures. Potterton draws attention to the way “Trevor achieves his effect […] by the subtle gradation of different planes progressing deeper and deeper to what ultimately amounts to a bevelled recess,” which can be seen on some of the pictures that illustrate the article. *Witches* (1951) and *Christ Carrying the Cross* (1954) are both structured around the oblique lines of the abstracted triangular figures of respectively three witches and Christ bearing his Cross, standing out against a flat, carved-in stylised background. Georgian Houses form the backdrop of *Witches*, whereas the backdrop behind the foregrounded carved out first plane of *Christ Carrying the Cross* consists of a second plane with the two vertical crosses of the robbers and a third plane with the oval faces of the crowd, controlled by the three standing figures of the centurions. The network of oblique lines in that last sculpture is particularly puzzling, offering the eye of the beholder different directions to explore simultaneously. The figure of Christ draws an oblique line oriented towards the left, the arms of the Cross running parallel to it while the longer part of the Cross leads in the opposite direction. Obliquity stands as a challenge to verticality.

4 When asked by interviewer John Tusa why he had turned to sculpture, Trevor explains: “the last school I was at was a very good one but there was a sort of clique of writers there, would-be writers, and I didn’t seem to want to belong to that. So I was attracted by sculpture for that rather silly reason and I gave up writing in much the same way as I later gave up sculpture.” The desire for difference, the reluctance of belonging seems an early motivation in Trevor’s choices; he then pursues his deciphering: “if you think of what sculptors do, […] you carve away a huge amount of material […] throwing away is to me the vital part, and the most exciting part of writing is what you decide should not be there.” His preference for implying rather than asserting, his reticence, his predilection for obliquity in writing are clearly stated here.

5 Tristram Shandy, a specialist in lines, claimed the meandering line as his favourite, wandering into digressions and seemingly useless details as a way to conduct narrative, leading the reader into a baroque profusion of directions. Trevor’s line of beauty seems to stand as an exact opposite to Sterne’s; the oblique line of the chisel. The aim of this paper is to try and peep into the secret workshop of this sculptor of words to try and unravel
some of the strategies used to initiate us to the perception of a third dimension in writing and reading.

“A bit on the side”

Although a prolific writer, William Trevor is a silent writer. Apart from a volume of autobiographical sketches, *Excursions in the Real World*, which includes two articles previously published in *The New Yorker*, the very moving “Field of Battle” about his parents, and the already mentioned “Mentors” about his teachers, and a few interviews, discretion about personal matters is a main characteristic. He left Ireland when he was in his late twenties, sharing in that respect the move of numerous Irish writers, past and present, for whom exile, whether self-imposed or not, turned out to be essential to creation. “Most writers benefit from exile,” he tells Miriam Stout in *The Paris Review* interview in 1989, before describing his position as “writing through the other end of the telescope,” thereby foregrounding indirect, displaced perspective as inescapable and vital. He further connects it to his status of being a “not well-off Irish protestant”:

> It began the process of being an outsider—which I think all writers have to be—[…]
> Displaced persons in a way—which is really similar to what a writer should be, whether he likes it or not […] personally I like not being noticed. I like to hang about the shadows of the world both as a writer and as a person; I dislike limelight and the centre of things is a place to watch rather than become involved in. I dwell upon it rather than in it.

The idea is constantly reiterated; a few years later in the *New Yorker*: “I think writers and any artists belong outside, on the edge, looking in” (qtd. in Schiff 162-163).

Trevor’s characters are most of the time marginal, on the fringe of society. Often lonely, if not altogether deviant, they are essentially different, unfamiliar. As deictic centres in the different narrative worlds and frequent anchors of internal focalisation, they bring the readers to share their de-centred positions, thereby constructing complex oblique vantage points on their situations and relationships.

Readers therefore find themselves “a bit on the side” too, guided into oblique perspectives that demand interpretation, while at the same time repeatedly deferring it, imposing suspension of evaluation and confrontation with uncertainty. According to Hustvedt “a work of art must be an enigma. It must push me into a position of unknowing or else I find myself bored by my own comprehension” (282). There is certainly little risk of being bored with our own understanding of Trevor’s stories. The task is immense and urgent. When asked to define the art of the short story, Trevor explains in *The Paris Review*: “I think it is the art of the glimpse […] the short story is an impressionist painting. It should be an explosion of truth. Its strength lies in what it leaves out just as much as what it puts in, if not more. It is concerned with the total exclusion of meaninglessness.”
In order to exclude meaninglessness, one of Trevor's most recurrent techniques in his later stories is to use, in addition to the narrator's often complex viewpoint, a double internal viewpoint anchored in the characters. The same event is thus seen from different perspectives; meanwhile, the plot often moves forward thanks to ellipses. He divides his stories into several parts (between 3 and 12), alternating perspectives in order to create an illusion of depth, a third narrative dimension. Such discoursal architecture is not without calling to mind Wheatstone's mirror stereoscope, a visual contraption invented in 1833 which consists in placing two similar pictures in front of two mirrors, with the viewer positioned at the far end of the triangle, at the point of junction between the two mirrors, enabling them to perceive as three dimensional originally two dimensional photographs or drawings, recreating the illusion of solid reality.

The opening story of *A Bit on the Side*, “Sitting with the Dead” (1-19), experiments with this device in multiple ways. The paratext—the title and the Irish context—raises expectations of a wake; presumably, someone is dead and the reader expects people gathering to share stories and memories about the dead person, in a not necessarily lugubrious atmosphere. The first part operates a radical reorientation of perspective:

His eyes had been closed and he opened them, saying he wanted to see the stable-yard.

Emily's expression was empty of response. Her face, younger than his and yet not seeming so, was empty of everything except the tiredness she felt. “From the window?” she said.

No he'd go down, he said. “Will you get me the coat, and have the boots by the door.”

She turned away from the bed. He would manage on his own if she didn't help him: she'd known him for twenty-eight years, been married to him for twenty-three.
Whether or not she brought the coat up to him would make no difference, anymore than it would if she protested.

“It could kill you,” she said.

“The fresh air’d strengthen a man.”

Downstairs, she placed the boots ready for him at the back door. She brought his cap and muffler to him with his overcoat. A stitch was needed where the left sleeve met the shoulder, she noticed. She hadn’t before and knew he wouldn’t wait while she repaired it now.

“What’re you going to do there?” she asked, and he said nothing much. Tidy up a bit, he said. (1-2)

The dead man is not dead; the one-line first paragraph represents a step aside in the uncanny; the referent of the “he” is unknown; there is no acknowledged addressee, and the request seems arbitrary. The interlocution patterning is unbalanced, direct speech is answered in free indirect speech, confirming the erasing of the addressee; Geoffrey Leech’s Politeness Principle cannot be said to be acknowledged either by the male character who gives unmitigated orders. The point of view soon branches off into internality through the use of free indirect thought, anchored in the female character whose identity, via naming, is acknowledged by the narrator (contrary to the male character’s). It only takes a few lines for the narrative to foreground the complexity of marital relationships as the main subject of the story and raise another set of expectations in the reader’s mind. Emily is granted little existence in her husband’s eyes; yet narrative choices establish her as the reflector of the story. The husband’s perspective on her is mainly interpreted through her own perception of it, as well as through the deciphering of the relationship with the reader’s own sensitivity. Yet, Emily’s concerned noticing of the missing stitch tends to invite the reader to maintain an open evaluation.

The second part, after an eight-day ellipsis, sees the arrival of the Geraghtys, “two middle-aged women, sisters […] who sat with the dying” (2). Emily’s husband has just died. The perspective shifts on the two sisters, Kathleen and Norah, and alternates in the following parts between Emily’s perception of them, what she imagined her husband’s perception of them would have been had they come before his death, the fear of what could have been their perception of him had they met him, evolving into her renewed and articulately voiced ambivalent perception of her husband, before closing on the sisters’ perspective on her and on their shared experience of the evening: “A visit had not before turned out so strangely, so different from what had been the sisters’ familiar expectation.” Norah is eventually left with the last words of the story, echoing the title and giving it its full meaning: “‘I’d say, myself, it was the dead we were sitting with’” (17). The story might well have been called “The Sisters,” had the title not already been taken by James Joyce for his opening story of Dubliners; an intertextual wink cannot be excluded: “The Sisters” operates a similar step aside from the expectations raised by the title; it is less about sisters than about a young boy’s confrontation to death and might well have been called “The Dead”...

The main feat of Trevor’s story is to open a bewildering intermediary space in which the main character can voice the complexity of her relation with her husband while maintaining the reader’s evaluation suspended: “How could these two unmarried women understand? Emily thought. How could they understand that even if there was neither love nor mourning there had been some love left for the man who’d died?” (15). Although, or rather because, they remain “a bit on the side,” the Geraghtys are essential in this story; as interlocution partners, they are like midwives creating the conditions for
the emergence of Emily’s ambivalent discourse, liberating her from a dark and confused resentment which needed a listening ear to be voiced; at the same time, their evaluation on the situation is rather conventional in the final sympathy expressed for the dead man; and they do have the last word. Yet the two major perspectives eventually combine into a textual vanishing point, sacrificing nothing to the depth of meaning and the complexity of judgment, urging the reader to clear-sightedness as the main character had been urged to lucidity and acceptance; the fact that the Geraghty sisters apparently did not reach that far makes them a landmark to evaluate our own intuitive understanding.

15 Narrative silence, the “carving out” Trevor insists on as part of writing can be likened to the photographic strategy of reducing the aperture to create depth of field. Letting in minimum light is a way of making it possible to see clearly further, to the point of perceiving the irony behind the seemingly acceptable viewpoint of the sisters, and then, further to a luminous point beyond textual borders. Trevor repeatedly emphasizes the fact that characters have a life before and beyond the limits of the story proper (Shouldice); his art is to make us receptive to that textual “yonder” Siri Hustvedt describes as “a new space—a middle region that [is] neither here nor there” (Yonder 4).

16 Sometimes, the technique of stereoscopic writing is used more rigorously; thus in “An Evening Out”(59-84), “Sacred Statues” (128-153), “On the Streets” (193-213), or “A Bit on the Side” (228-245), which all deal with the intricacies of heterosexual love, the shifts between reflectors are strictly respected. The masculine and the feminine viewpoints unfailingly alternate in the successive parts of the stories—after the systematic ellipsis, the chiseled out bit which enables the plot to develop in the wings of the text, since “what you leave out is the most important” (Allardice interview)—to ensure the readers can eventually see things “in the round.” They are thereby invited to define their own point of view, prolonging the double textual lines towards a vanishing point of interpretation. It is worth noting that this vanishing point is often “a bit on the side,” biased towards the feminine perspective, which Trevor partly justifies: “I write out of curiosity more than anything else. That’s why I write about women, because I’m not a woman and I don’t know what it’s like. The excitement of it is to know more about something that I’m not and can’t be” (Allardice interview).

17 Yet, in some stories, the oblique lines traced in the text do not converge to create any textual vanishing point to liberate lucidity and awareness; they rather seem to end up in a complex, intricate, ambiguous and problematic bundle in the textual foreground which defies deciphering.
Textual impossible objects

“On the Streets” is a seven-part story about Arthurs, a paranoid waiter, presumably severely mentally deranged, who appears to be a serial killer, and Cheryl, who had married him without being aware of his mental state; ever since the failure of their five-month marriage, she has been attempting to flee him; yet he seems to know every detail about her life now. One afternoon, he suddenly reappears and, over tea, describes the details of what we understand to be his latest murder, the acting out of his long-planned revenge on a dissatisfied customer who had caused him to be downgraded from waiter to breakfast-waiter only. The story is gloomy, deeply disturbing. Points of view regularly alternate between Arthurs (whose Christian name we never know) and Cheryl; but to these, a third, discontinuous narrative line must be added that comes and goes between the past and the present, irrespective of the alternating viewpoints, allowing interfering embeddings of perspectives, blurring the time line through memories. Eventually, the resulting combination of perspective lines is more akin to Penrose’s triangle, barring all possibilities of constructing a vanishing point, confining the viewer in endless puzzlement over the textual object.

Yet, denying the reader any way out of this stifling story is nothing but the blatant manifestation of the success of mimetic strategies. Indeed, the very subject of the narrative is the distressing tension between Cheryl’s will to break the link and the painful obviousness of the impossibility of severance: “She had never said she knew it was her nature that had drawn her to go for walks with him and to accept his reticent embrace, that her pity was his nourishment. She had never wanted to talk with Daph about him” (212). And yet, Cheryl’s friend Daph could have had the same liberating function that the Geraghtys had for Emily in “Sitting with the Dead”; still, this would have opened a vanishing point in the story, which Trevor does not allow here. The final paragraph,
closing on Cheryl’s perspective, transmits the inescapability of her predicament, her awareness of it and of her share in it, possibly her silent and resigned acceptance of it: “Her tears, tonight, allowed him peace” (212). Trevor simply chooses here to make us share a complex and obscure experience of self-sacrifice, close in that particular case to a tragic error of judgment. He takes us to the limits of our own acceptance in order to achieve suspension of evaluation; here is a most precious key to his fictional universe.

Although rare in Trevor’s stories, this is not the only instance of such tactics. “Gilbert’s Mother,” a story from a preceding volume published in 1996, After Rain, explores the complexities of the relationship between a mother and her mentally deranged son who is most probably guilty of murder, although all certainty about that is cleverly denied:

Before his birth she had possessed him. She had felt the tug of his lips on her breasts, a helpless creature then, growing into the one who controlled her now, who made her isolation total. Her fear made him a person, enriching him with power. [...] Her role was only to accept: he had a screw loose, she had willed him to be born. No one would ever understand the mystery of his existence, or the unsheathed tears they shared. (Selected Stories 94)

The only possibility for the readers is once more to step aside, but this time, they are left alone, facing the limits of their understanding. Yet, although the reading experience is rather disturbing, and in a way, unpleasant, it sharpens our discernment, longing and receptivity. We had been warned: “I don’t believe in the black and white. I believe in the grey shadows, the murkiness, the not-quite-known” (qtd. in Schiff 160).

Anamorphosis and anagnorisis

Yet it sometimes happens that some originally obscure and perturbing elements in Trevor’s stories make sense when a shift in vantage point is achieved, revealing the presence of what could be termed anamorphic writing. In what has come to be considered one of the most famous examples of oblique anamorphosis, Holbein’s painting of The Ambassadors, the enigmatic oblong shape in the foreground of the picture can only be deciphered if viewed from the right hand side, very close to the plane of the painting. The skull that then appears can be seen as a memento mori, reminding the admirers of science, wealth and power that in the words of Genesis (3,19): “Dust thou art and unto dust thou shalt return,” tracing a dark line across the painting, undermining its in-front message. In many of Trevor’s stories, the opposite occurs; in the chiaroscuro of narratives, darkness becomes radiant. “Dark nourished light’s triumphant blaze, but who should want to know” (120), remarks the character in “Solitude” in her maturity. This phenomenon is essentially linked to vanishing points and three dimensional writing, but it also depends on the opening up of other dimensions in the text, in particular the fourth dimension of time. Growth, continuity and futurity, promise and renewal are essential if the reader is to experience true epiphany and catharsis. That aspect in Trevor’s writing is probably one of the most secret and the easiest to overlook.

“Graillis’s Legacy” (84-100) is the story of a fifty-five year old man, now a widower (after what will only be alluded to as “the tragedy of a winter’s night, on an icy road three years ago” (89)) who is informed by a lawyer, Mr. Clifterty, of his “being left a sum of money that’s not inconsiderable” (87) by a former woman friend. After some deliberating, he eventually chooses not to take anything. The story, as always, simultaneously develops different viewpoints; that of the lawyer on the actual situation, neutral and prudent; that
of Graillis, imagining the lawyer's misunderstandings of the situation, remembering in micro scenes that work like magic lantern slides his past double life, sadness and tenderness intertwined; and lastly, his developing perspective on the present situation with the decision to be taken about his former lover's will. The story is strikingly allusive: “He hadn’t explained because you couldn’t explain, because there was too little to explain, not too much” (90); “He didn’t know why he’d gone to the house; he didn’t know why he’d got into a state because he hadn’t told a man who was a stranger to him that he was widowed” (91). Whatever explanations are given are dismissed as eventually inescapable misunderstandings: “A crudity still remained in the solicitor’s reading of the loose ends that still were there: the wronged wife haunting restlessly from her grave, the older woman claiming from hers the lover who had slipped away from her” (92). The narration is told so to speak in the negative: “Driving on, he tried to think of nothing, not of the girl who had become his wife when he was still a junior in the Munster and Leinster Bank, not of the woman he’d got to know when she borrowed novels from his branch library” (93).

The exact nature of their relationship remains encased in the secret of a story that metamorphoses into poetry in its epiphanic closure, worth quoting in its entirety:

The whiskey talk was private now, a whisper from his orderly remembering that no longer nurtured panic. In visiting the solicitor, in going to the house, he had touched what should not be touched except in memory, where everything was there forever and nothing could be changed. Retirement from a branch library would not bring much and so there’d been a gesture. A stranger’s interpretation of that—what curiosity hatched or gossip spun—was neither here nor there. Again, instead, there was the fresh, bright face, the gentle shyness. Again, instead, the older woman lifted to her lips a tan-tipped cigarette touched with crimson. Again there was the happiness of marriage, again embraces were imagined. There was no more, nor would there be. Not even an ornament, for that would cheat reality. Not even a piece of china, and he would write to say so. The winter flowers lay scattered in the shadow of a secret, deception honouring a silent love.

The sense of appeasement which is eventually reached at the end of the story by the character experiencing anagnorisis cannot be better transmitted to the reader than through the music of words, the web of assonances and alliterations, the rhythmic structuring of anaphora (again) or the significant patterning of sound: the iconicity of “gossip spun,” the sound-based chiasm, “There was no more, nor would there be,” engraining immutability in the very texture of language. The assonance in /i:/ significantly expresses the inescapable link between be, cheat, reality, piece just as the assonance in /i/ weaves an intricate web between whiskey, whisper, panic, visiting, solicitor, memory, everything, nothing, bring, interpretation, curiosity, lifted, lips, tipped, cigarette, crimson, happiness, imagined, connecting everything to nothing, the past to the present, memory to happiness and imagination. The final alliteration in /s/ closes the story on the essential and unsolvable tension at the heart of the plot between discontinuity (at the level of content) and continuity (at the level of form): scattered, shadow, secret, deception, silent. When interpretation takes the path of sound, it can easily turn to endless subjective speculation although there is probably too much emphasis in Trevor’s prose on music for it to be meaningless. In 1981, novelist John Updike noted in his review of Other People’s Worlds: “Mr Trevor has worked his text closely, to the compression, often, of poetry. Strange chimings, perhaps unintended, play across the surface” (156). Siri Hustvedt writes, “reading is creative listening that alters the reader” (140); any attentive reader of
Trevor’s stories repeatedly makes that experience of epiphanic listening to “the music of what happens.”

“The delicacy of their reticence”

The last story, which very aptly gave its title to the whole volume, “A Bit on the Side,” contains the different techniques that have been studied in this paper. As a story about breaking up an illicit love affair, it conscientiously adopts the form of stereoscopic writing, developing the double internal viewpoints and creating three dimensional perspective through ellipsis and the (relative) suspension of evaluation; out of a dark story of disappointment and failure emerges the luminous perspective of a clear-sighted woman who, much like her masculine counterpart in “Graillis’s Legacy” refuses “to claw back fragments from the debris” (244), thereby becoming Graillis’s inheritor, giving the title of that former story a new direction, a new sense.

Once again, anamorphosis is indissociable from anagnorisis. The ending is handled by the narrator, which is not usual in Trevor’s stories; here, it seems a way of legitimating the reader’s instinctive quest for open vanishing points, like a writer’s legacy at the close of the volume:

In the plate-glass of a department store window their reflection was arrested while they embraced. They did not see that image recording for an instant a stylishness they would not have claimed as theirs, or guessed that, in their love affair, they had possessed. Unspoken, understood, their rules of love had not been broken in the distress of ending what was not ended and never would be. Nothing of love had been destroyed today: they took that with them as they drew apart and walked away from one another, unaware that the future was less bleak than now it seemed, that in there still would be the delicacy of their reticence, and they themselves as love had made them for a while. (244-245)

This final stepping aside of a heterodiegetic narrator to offer reorientation of perspective as an ultimate gift to readers and characters alike seems to assert obliquity as the privileged path to lucidity. Reading with a difference is required to match the writing with a difference that definitely characterises William Trevor’s narrative choices. Differre in Latin means to set apart; it then developed into differ and defer, both being relevant to describe the process at work here, calling to mind Jacques Derrida’s coinage of the word differAnce to hold both meanings together. We are thus invited to a form of open, free-float, meditative and slow reading, taking time to be receptive to sound and rhythm as well as sense, yet another way of “seeing things in a round.”

At the close of this reflection, we clearly reach a point where writing aslant necessarily calls for a reading aslant, grounded in a capacity to relinquish ready-made evaluative positions to maintain, through multiple internal perspectives, compassion and sympathy for characters sometimes most alien to us, tapping the spring of alterity in ourselves, inviting us to “that excursion into You that is also I” (Living 354), thereby connecting with one of the most fascinating recent discoveries in neuroscience, that of mirror neurons by Giacomo Rizzolatti and his team in 1996. Although Rizzolatti’s observation first focused on monkeys, it has then been extended to the functioning of the human brain (Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia), watching someone perform an action or express a feeling apparently fires the same neurons in our brains as in theirs. This gives rise to endless speculation, as V.S. Ramachandran, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of California at San Diego explains:
With knowledge of these neurons, you have the basis for understanding a host of very enigmatic aspects of the human mind: ‘mind reading,’ empathy [he humorously calls them Gandhi neurons], imitation learning, and even the evolution of language. Anytime you watch someone else doing something (or even starting to do something), the corresponding mirror neuron might fire in your brain, thereby allowing you to ‘read’ and understand another’s intentions, and thus to develop a sophisticated ‘theory of other minds.’ (Ramachandran)

30 A similar situation has been observed by Battaglia and Freeberg with viewers looking at a painting. This ground breaking discovery might turn out to be of great interest to researchers in the aesthetics of reception in particular, offering a scientific perspective on this third dimension in reading which is too often perceived—and often too readily dismissed as mere intuitive deciphering.

31 Yet, receptivity to intentionality and perceptive intuition is what reading William Trevor is about. It constitutes the very essence of his writing. Trevor repeatedly insists on the intimacy of his relationship with his characters, his knowledge of them, his sympathy for every one of them; he tells John Tusa “I think one of the things which you do as a writer is you, you have to get into, literally, into the skin of your characters [...] I have sympathy for the worst of my characters, for the most difficult, and the naughtiest of my characters, I have sympathy.” It might even be constitutive of Trevor the man who mischievously explains in The Paris Review interview: “I liked teaching maths best because I don’t have a natural way with figures and therefore had sympathy with the children who didn’t either.” And most importantly, it is definitely the very yarn of his stories, the very stuff they are made of.

32 The very last word will therefore be given to his latest character to date. Cecilia is a fourteen year old teenager living alone with her father in London, nourishing illusions about her mother’s death; yet, she accidentally discovers her real identity, one day, in her boarding school, through an altercation between two mysterious older women. She spends her summer holidays with her father in the beautiful little French island of Porquerolles, fearfully longing for him to “tell her what she had to know,” which her father tactfully—or cowardly does not do while silently acknowledging her discovery. Trevor’s most recently published story “The Women” closes on these words, which, besides evoking the different writerly strategies of obliquity that this study has been trying to delineate, sound as a patient reassertion, in our rather intransigent age of certainties, of the urgent necessity of John Keats’ Negative Capability, and a most delicate description of reading by a major 21st century sculptor of meaning: “Shakily challenging the apparent, the almost certain, this flimsy exercise in supposition was tenuous and vague. But Cecilia knew it would not go away and reached out for its whisper of consoling doubt” (64).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

NOTES

1. I have chosen to place this study of William Trevor’s volume, A Bit on the Side, under Siri Hustvedt’s auspices, although I couldn’t trace any writing of hers concerning William
Trevor directly. Yet, much of her thinking deeply resonates with my reading of Trevor. Furthermore, in a study of oblique perspectives, that a writer of Norwegian origins, living in Brooklyn, who repeatedly describes herself as “an outsider, an unaffiliated intellectual roamer” should be our guide in an exploration of an Irish artist living in Devon, who has been publishing his short stories in the New Yorker for 36 years (Trevor’s story “Torridge” was the first to be published in The New Yorker on 12 Sept. 1977) did not seem altogether inappropriate. Most references, unless otherwise specified, are to her latest volume of essays, Living, Thinking, Looking. Page numbers are given parenthetically.

2. All quotations are from the 2005 Penguin edition and page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

3. Dr. Cary D. Kornfeld, from the Computer Systems Institute (ETH Zurich), explains that Sir Charles Wheatstone, whose original drawing is reproduced at the beginning of this part, “invented the Stereoscope in 1833 and then spent the next five years exploring this device and its unique effect before announcing his discovery to the world in his publication, Contributions to the Physiology of Vision—Part the first: On some remarkable, and hitherto unobserved, Phenomena of Binocular Vision (1838). He explained that doubleness of vision, caused by retinal disparity, actually produces the depth sensation that we now call stereopsis.”

4. To go back to the etymological meaning of stereoscopy—from the Greek stereo meaning solid and scopy, sight.

5. See the interview with John Tusa, where the connection between the art of carving and the art of writing explicitly concerns the perception of the third dimension.

6. See Mortensen. A very detailed and stimulating reflection on inconsistent images is to be found on the website of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Adelaide. The picture of the Penrose triangle comes from this site.


8. For further development on Trevor’s musical art, see Majola-Leblond. One could also note that one story in this volume is entitled “The Dancing-Master’s Music.”

9. The suspension of evaluation remains relative here, because there are hints of cowardice and hypocrisy in the man’s position, not wanting his lover “to be his bit on the side,” but not ready for all that to divorce his wife, although he does seem to love his mistress truly.


11. In a letter to George and Thomas Keats, John Keats writes: “that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.”
ABSTRACTS

Avant de se consacrer entièrement à l'écriture, William Trevor Cox fut sculpteur. L'objet de cette étude de *A Bit on the Side* est de mettre en lumière, grâce aux outils d'analyse du discours et aux théories de la réception, la façon dont Trevor, par le jeu des perspectives, le contrepoint des voix et l'art de l'ellipse, parvient à sculpter le sens et à créer une troisième dimension textuelle. Le lecteur se trouve alors placé au cœur même du processus d'interprétation dans une confrontation souvent déroutante à une altérité radicale, résultat de la stratégie exigeante d'un artiste majeur du XXIe siècle.

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