# Peril & Paralysis:

# Narrative Voice in Lasdun's Three Evenings

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In his short story, *Three Evenings*,[1] James Lasdun leads readers on a devastating survey of modern intimacy. To convey the perils and alienation in the sphere of modern intimacy, Lasdun brings to life a sophisticated and subtle narrative style. We will examine the nature of, and argue for the pervasive impact of this narrative voice, beginning with an attempt to pin down its form.

On our first encounter, Lasdun's use of a narrator is, as Katie Vairish, vaguely familiar.

[1] Lasdun, James. 1993. Three Evenings and Other Stories. London Minerva.

The attention given to her crushed velvet dress and Jonathan's recollections all professes verisimilitude. Something close to life. Much of what we see initially are intrusions into the main character's thoughts: '...she seemed to make up her mind to like him."[2] These clearly constitute the familiar third-person perspective. [3] It also is familiar to see a narrator monitoring a character's thought. From the lack of first-person pronouns, it is clear the narrator itself is divulging this to us. We are sharing Jonathan's perceptions. However, beneath this unassuming surface, there are several innovative forms of narrative voice in action, borrowed from the likes of Henry James, through which Lasdun begins to achieve a sublime psychological realism early on in the text.[4] The essential revelation occurs when it becomes clear we are limited to observing Jonathan, and no one else. Oddly, rather than observing other characters and places, this third-person narrator remains present beside Jonathan exclusively. This narrative voice functions as a companion or interpolator, reporting the action as if of past events, yet in real-time, as they occur, besides the protagonist. The effect is of voice that is disembodied, yet not entirely uninvolved in the present moment. Much like Jonathan himself. In contrast, at no point in the story do we ever see the internal world of Katie Vairish or any other character for that matter. We the reader, only travel to places where Jonathan is present. We experience his recollections and actions of the past:

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[2] Ibid, p.1

[3] Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. 2012. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston, Ma Etc.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Cop. p.301

[4] Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. 2012. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston, Ma Etc.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Cop. p.303

> An odd feeling went through him, as if the years since he had last seen it were an interval of distance rather than time, and he was looking at it from a vertiginous height. [5]

And his perceptions and actions of the present:

> A tingling went down his spine. He felt the rush of a half-forgotten complex of sensations: the animal sweetness; the feeling of being concentrated or compacted into a narrower part of himself; the peculiar tension. He opened his mouth to ask where the chandelier came from, but stopped himself.[6]

What is presented to us by the narrator is Jonathan's experiences, conveyed like memories, both long since past and seemingly unfolding just prior to the now. Our guide, the narrator, while limited in perspective, is clearly able to move through and beyond any particular event in the story, so long as it was experienced by Jonathan.[7] This particular temporal freedom gives Jonathan's character a compelling inner world because it functions like memory. Much like memory, access to these thoughts of Jonathan would seem an inherently personal privilege. This limited perspective and tendency towards free indirect discourse (or monitored thought) may well belie the fact our narrator *is* Jonathan Bennett himself. The narrative voice seems to recollect the events of Jonathan's life in the dispassionate, objective perspective of a professional journalist, yet with all the genuine sentiment, absurdity and existential indulgence that a personal memoir might contain. This sense of intimacy gives a psychological depth to the narrative. Besides moments of monitored thought, this

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[5] Lasdun, James. 1993. Three Evenings and Other Stories. London Minerva. p.26
[6] Ibid, p.26
[7] Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. 2012. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston, Ma Etc.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Cop. p.303

relationship is most clear in a technical sense when Jonathan's returns to England and drives around the countryside. Here the narrative voice shifts to an uncharacteristic second-person perspective, and Jonathan seems to step into full control of the narrative voice. It is significant that this occurs when he is in returning to a place he feels he 'no longer live[s] in' despite being born and raised in just such a place. It is here where he encounters and reflects on an existential absurdity seemingly with conclusion or climax: [8]

> He wondered what the undetectable something was that makes a place a place... You come to a group of dwellings; hardly a village—silent, a pale rain-shine on the brick walls. There is a stock car with a joke shark's fin on the roof. A Crystal Refrigeration truck dwarfs its owner's bungalow. The place is quiet, deserted, but undeniably a place, with a little atmosphere and language of its own, that is spoken by the stock car and the refrigeration truck, and then, in another voice, by glistening green dollops of pruned yew trees that seem to contain, swelling through their feathery branches, some liquid light essence of rain and greenness. And there as you turn a corner, the place with its miniature but self-sufficient economy of shapes and surfaces has vanished, leaving you with a feeling of pleasure, or loss, or even dread, as if something in it corresponded to something in yourself...[9]

It is just such an 'indefiniteness', and the vanishing 'capricious' quality of modern individuals that Lasdun seems to point to as the central rot in this tale of modern intimacy. [10] Jonathan's internal world is disclosed to us. We witness, through this shift in narrative voice, the mash of conflicting fears and desires within him. His unbolstered and unsubstantiated character, adrift without the substance and certainty fixed values or social institutions, nor the firmness of love, nor the guidance of a God. It is an experience and frame of reference all too familiar to the modern reader. Where the perils of both life and

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[8] Lasdun, James. 1993. Three Evenings and Other Stories. London Minerva. p.22
[9] Ibid, p.22
[10] Ibid, p.1

intimacy are ever more complex, ever more eroded by the paradox of choice.[11] Just as the other characters we encounter, Jonathan flails for meaning and seems rescued only by the certainty of a forceful character. Power, more properly, the submission to it, is the only certainty we seem to discover. As we see in the final scene, Mr Trenillin, supposed lord of his own manor, on all fours like a dog, Jonathan and Cressida rooted in place as if in the view of a Gorgon: Katie, she is the fierce and resolute power around which the senseless action enters. And as we have seen, she is a cognoscente of cruelty, deceit and betrayal.

At the conclusion of the story, the narrator is seemingly caught up by events. While the unclear temporality of narrative voice may present problems with the story's ending, it is entirely keeping with the narrative subject. The narrative comes to an abrupt end, colliding as it were with the present between the capricious cruelty of the object of his love, Katie, and Jonathan's paralysis when confronted with a present and urgent need to act. It is in fact this in this collision and the messy overspilling of ineffectual impulse, dispassionate observation, and existential alienation that the narrative achieves a true and modern 'sense of tragedy'[12]. All this is due, in great part, to Lasdun's peculiar use of narrative voice. So much so that the narrative voice is essential to the psychological realism of the text. It is upon this psychological realism that we experience Jonathan and Katie's degenerating and modern intimacy. We see this in the text's final Sisyphean suspense. Indeed, the narrator ultimately guides us to an indeterminate place where there is no truth, nor love, no presence of God and certainly no restitution, be it through marriage, a passionate affair or otherwise.

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[11] Schwartz, Barry. 2005. The Paradox of Choice : Why More Is Less. New York: Harpercollins.
[12] Ibid, p.3

Instead, we see Jonathan, ever the indeterminate, internalise 'a sickness'[13]. This sickness is fitting in its symbolism. It is not the purging fever of love we might encounter in the literature of eras gone by. The presence of this sickness seems to have been slipped into modern intimacy as a surfeit for older, surer things. Absent is the wrenching, redemptive love loss we see Charles Ryder experience in *Brideshead*, or the promissory, edifying love present in *Emma* [14]or *Pride and Prejudice*.[15] The narrative voice of *Three Evenings* is here in stark contrast to the intertextual continuum of the British courtship novel. The latter is chiefly concerned with identity, love and marriage, and exemplified (for our purposes) by Jane Austen and Evelyn Waugh. Austen, even at her most bleak, preserved for her characters the institution of family and promise of love, be it filial, romantic or otherwise. In *Brideshead Revisited,* Waugh has the narrator, Charles Ryder, be left hooked 'upon a thread' of divine love that transcends his failed courtship with Julia and beckons him to his long-sought enduring love. [16]In a twist that is both tragic and hopeful, this enduring love comes to Charles in the form of love not in marriage but with God.

Enduring marriage and love were the ultimate destinations of the good and the beautiful for Austen, while for Waugh, marriage seemed too earthly to make good on such lofty promises. Instead, in *Brideshead*, it seems that Divine Love is the true imposition of love that people must seek out. Lasdun instead presents a bleak unanchored vision of intimacy. In reference to such novels as *Brideshead* and *Pride and Prejudice*, Lasdun gives us

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[13] Ibid, p.30
[14] Austen, Jane, and Juliette Wells. 2015. Emma. New York, New York: Penguin Books.
[15] Austen, Jane, and Vivien Jones. 2003. Pride and Prejudice. London; New York: Penguin Books.
[16] Waugh, Evelyn. 2000. Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder. London: Penguin: 'A Twitch Upon A Thread'.

a specific motif to reckon with, the Palladian home. Speaking of the gardens and grounds of these great houses, the stage and centre for action of the Austen and Waugh, Ladsun's narrator, through Mr. Trenillin, divulges to us the senseless turmoil that has replaced the obsolete old world of Austen and Waugh:

> *"They all worked here, or at least their followers did, each of them digging up and pulling down their predecessor's work—"*[17]

Not so for Lasdun. Instead, we find Kierkegaard, often described as a Christian Existentialist, as the only philosophical reference given for the entirety of these three evenings. Kierkegaard's inclusion (or rather, exclusion) in the short story is emphatic. On the very first page, our narrator broaches the central ideas of this philosopher in a calm and self-possessed tone. "[He] believed what he had read in Kierkegaard about the self: that its task "is to become itself"; and he felt that he had a long time to accomplish this task.'" [18]In tension with this mandate, we will frequently see Jonathan wait, 'diffident' [19]ineffectual and passive as the 'temporal' feet of the story pass him by. Through the monitored thought, we witness Jonathan speculate that: 'At a certain point his nature would declare itself more forcefully.'[20] It is in this use of FID that we discover the emphatic silence of Kierkegaard throughout the story. Never again does Jonathan reflect on this pivotal piece of philosophy that threatens to compel him into some substance. The narrator never again mentions

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[17] Lasdun, James. 1993. Three Evenings and Other Stories. London Minerva. p.25
[18] Ibid, p.1
[19] Ibid, p.1
[20] Ibid, p.1

them. Instead, this reference to existentialism belies the narrative's nihilism. The silence of the Kierkegaard, or for that matter, any positive philosophical ethic within this text, Christian or otherwise, is deafening. Instead, we are left only with the absurdity and nihilistic aspects of existentialism.

While there is undoubtedly an irony here through which we could be mistaken for thinking that Kierkegaard was introduced as use of Thematic Voice - a means for the narrator to comment on and critique the protagonist in their custody - in the passage in question and throughout the story there is none of the irony and mocking from the narrator that we see typically with the use of Thematic Voice. Such as in Austen's *Emma.* Yet Lasdun and Austen share a common tool of narrative voice. That of Free Indirect Discourse (FID), in which our narrator is able to monitor, express and intrude into the thoughts, feelings and perceptions of one or more characters in the narrative. [21]The direct quotation given to us here functions as us stepping into Jonathan's head beside the narrator. Witnessing his thoughts as Austen witnesses those of Emma Woodhouse, or (more properly for our purposes) Elizabeth Bennett. Perhaps instead the narrator of *Three Evenings* has more in common with Waugh's Charles Ryder than any character of Regency literature in this important sense. An inescapable sense of alienation is described by Jonathan himself, through the narrator (once again using FID) as a 'pervasive melancholy'. However, whereas in *Brideshead Revisited,* we are limited to seeing the story from Charles' perspective, and thus have the opportunity to sympathise with him more, in *Three Evenings*

[21] Abrams, M H, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. 2012. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Boston, Ma Etc.: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Cop.

Lasdun has taken a step away from his protagonist. What we arrive at is a greater psychological realism. A character we can observe closely, but never know the entirety of. One whose perceptions of the world our narrator is likewise bound to, but which we can see from a step apart. As if in some sense Jonathan were a Gatsby, and the narrator was our Nick Carraway. [22]Not that the separation is as proper and extreme as Nick Carraway and Jay Gatsby. No. We are kept close to Jonathan, intimate with his perceptions and feelings, yet outside of him, looking in. This particular use of narrative voice, this relationship to the narrator of indefinite separation from and at once deep intimacy with, encapsulates the narrative as a whole. It is in thematic and tonal harmony with the depiction of the sundered, self-sabotaged intimacy between Katie Vairish and Jonathan. Seemingly within reach, yet forever out of reach. It is this essential alienation Lasdun is attempting to portray with the narrative through a deliberate use of form, through a mode of narrative voice which is true to the subject it depicts. The medium is again here the message: Modern intimacy is beset by alienation, indeterminacy and betrayal, not just between individuals, but between individuals and themselves.[23]This is why the powers of the narrator are curbed by Lasdun, to illustrate this 'impenetrability', this edifice of insurmountable alienation that, for both Jonathan and the narrator, seem central to both modern life and by extension, modern intimacy.

To conclude, James Lasdun's form of narrative voice in *Three Evenings* is existential,

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[22] West, Clare, and F S Fitzgerald. 2013. The Great Gatsby. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.

[23] Mcluhan, Marshall, Eric Mcluhan, and W Terrence Gordon. 2005. Marshall McLuhan Unbound / 17, the Medium Is the Message / Introd. By W. Terrence Gordon. Corte Madera, Ca: Gingko Press.

modern and drives straight toward the perils and alienation of contemporary intimacy by means of the psychological realism it achieves. It does this by establishing a particular type of narrative voice. Namely that of a limited, yet third-person narrator, who infrequently uses free indirect discourse to monitor the thoughts and perspectives of the protagonist. This intimacy with the character, yet undeniable separation, provides a keen lens by which we observe the main character. Witnessing the combustion of this intimacy and the definite sense of separation it entails provides a compelling internal psyche to Jonathan. One that we are both privileged to watch and are shackled to. Beyond this, Jonathan Bennett's experience as a character, and the narrative as a whole, is positioned within a continuum of British narrations on intimacy, such as those of Evelyn Waugh and Jane Austen. In these 'novels of manners', much is made of class, identity and courtship, with there ultimately being restitution in the form of love or reconciliation, between lovers, family or even with God. Yet *Three Evenings* breaks with these predecessors. Lasdun instead compresses the classic courtship novel in both time and narrative length, and instead imbues bleak existentialism throughout the story, one compelling in its modernity. The narrative voice achieves a thorough psychological realism, presenting Jonathan and Katie's failed relationship as a treatise on modern intimacy. Much like the Queen on a chessboard, Katie Vairish displays all the social mobility and psychological potency of a god. The wreathed oak embellished chandelier follows her through her conquest of both men, matter and marriage. Dangling above the rooms these collected men encounter her in, poised within the hybrid symbolism of Damocles's sword and the crown of the Imperator. Without a man equal to the task of penetrating her defences, Katie's capriciousness runs amok,

untamed, wild and cruel. By the end of the story, Jonathan seems to recognise as much but is equally bewitched and impotent as in their previous encounters. In keeping with this 'medium as message' approach, the narrative's conclusion robs the reader of any restitution or even the catharsis worthy of tragedy. This is not a narrative of growth and restitution. In one of his rare and brief penetrations of her character, we see him discerning an 'apotheosis' of her 'self-possession,'[24] which by that point is 'indistinguishable from cruelty.'[25] Yet he is unable to break this cycle when the narrative curtain is pulled up. Instead, taken by a modern sickness, he succumbs once more, only now in a 'new and more definite phase'.[26] The narrative perspective begins to take on a dreamlike, crystallised quality, one of 'delirium'.[27]We are left petulant, confronted by the perpetual paradox of the scene in front of us: an undetermined ending, a journey without a destination, our perspective poised permanently between Jonathan's memories of loss and betrayal, and the perils of the present. Suspended, just as Jonathan and Katie, before an eternal crisis of intimacy.

[24] Ibid, p.30
[25] Ibid, p.30
[26] Ibid, p.31
[27] Ibid, p.31

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