

Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

Volume 47
Issue 1 *Centering Black Cultural Production in
Translation*


Article 12

March 2023

Timothy Bewes. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. Columbia U.P., 2022.

Emily Hall
None, emhall74@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sttcl>

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Literature Commons](#), [German Literature Commons](#), [Literature in English, Anglophone outside British Isles and North America Commons](#), [Literature in English, British Isles Commons](#), and the [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#)



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License](#).

Recommended Citation

Hall, Emily (2023) "Timothy Bewes. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. Columbia U.P., 2022.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 47: Iss. 1, Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2254>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature* by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

Timothy Bewes. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. Columbia U.P., 2022.

Abstract

Review of Timothy Bewes. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. Columbia U.P., 2022. 315 pp.

Keywords

novel, contemporary, free indirect, discourse, connection, fiction

Bewes, Timothy. *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*. Columbia U.P., 2022. 315 pp.

In *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age*, Timothy Bewes argues that contemporary writers are working under a new logic that he calls “postfiction.” According to Bewes, postfiction is not a new genre, nor is it an emerging literary era; in other words, it is not a new way to conceive of “post” postmodern works. Instead, this logic indicates that contemporary writers are not convinced that fiction can capably represent thought. Throughout the monograph, he explores how the “thought” of a novel is separate from both the perspectives of its characters and narrators and the thoughts of the reader/critic interpreting the work. To better explicate this crucial difference, Bewes reworks a familiar literary concept—free indirect discourse—to illuminate how the novel’s “thought” cannot be attributed to a specific character or narrator. Although Bewes’s work analyzes cinema and acknowledges that we can locate the logic of postfiction across a wide range of interdisciplinary fields, his primary focus is the novel, specifically the contemporary novel. Ultimately, his monograph has three interconnected aims: to advance the theory of the novel by defining its thought against its form, characters, and narration; to critique the commonly held belief that post-2000 literature has returned to sincerity and Realism; and to interrogate what we understand about fiction’s capacity to represent the actual world.

While Bewes does explore several literary works, the monograph does not provide thorough analyses of them, except perhaps J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*. He relies heavily on Coetzee’s novel, and while he resists framing this novel as the originator of free indirect thought and/or the logic of postfiction, he nevertheless suggests that many novels that have come after it have adopted a similar skepticism about the function of literature today. Indeed, *Free Indirect* examines many contemporary writers that span several countries, such as Jesse Ball, Patrick Modiano, and Zadie Smith. At the same time, by not locating a specific text that inaugurates postfiction, Bewes convincingly reaches back to W. G. Sebald and E. M. Forster and demonstrates how both early and late twentieth-century authors engaged in similar discussions of connection, representation, and fictionalization. That said, he acknowledges the difficulty of applying his theories to specific literary works given that criticism often fails to explicate a novel’s thought without having to rely on theoretical frameworks that cannot fully elucidate it. In a short chapter on Jesse Ball’s novel *Silence Once Begun*, though, he comes the closest to differentiating a novel’s thought from its characterization, form, theme, and narration. This brief interlude, concisely written, highlights Bewes’s arguments remarkably well, in addition to providing a reading of a novel by a writer whose *oeuvre* continues to be understudied.

Bewes's ability to provide a shared context for many contemporary writers grappling with the limits, failures, and purposes of fiction is the strongest contribution that this monograph makes to the field of contemporary literature. Notably, Bewes does not explore writers who make failure the subjects of their novels. Instead, he draws together authors whose novels unpick the relationship between representation and fictionality. Put differently, he argues that many contemporary novels are skeptical of what he refers to as the instantiation relation, or a novel's ability to connect a "thing" in the novel (like a character or object) to a larger message or reality. As Bewes shows, this instantiation relation has been taken for granted by both critics and readers, who believe their task is to interpret the "things" in a novel to better grasp its message. He further posits that for Realist authors like Charles Dickens, this relation is important to uphold so that readers intuit the connections between the plot, characters, and themes with real-world social issues. Yet, as he observes, many recent novels no longer frame this relation as possible, even if their characters, themes, plots, and narrators never say this explicitly.

Given that many theorists after the turn of this century posit that contemporary writers have turned back towards sincerity and Realism, Bewes's argument is provocative. It provides a much-needed context for authors whose fiction does not easily fit into the return to Realism trajectory that critics have discovered. By framing postfiction not as an era but a logic, Bewes distinguishes it without lapsing into a binary that pits two strains of literature against each other, and he instead helpfully provides context around works that persist in questioning the functions and capabilities of the novel. It is worth noting that Bewes does not summarize the critical arguments that favor a return to Realism, nor does he recapitulate the theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism that shape the work by writers like Ball, Smith, and Auster. Readers who are already well versed in these critical discussions will understand the novelty of this argument, whereas readers with less familiarity will need more context to navigate it. But for scholars working on the twenty-first century this is an invaluable text for its examinations of perspective, discourse, thought, and genre.

While Bewes's work motivates us to think of the contemporary novel differently, one of its most important aims compels us to think critically about connection. In an era of neoliberal individualism, polarization, and isolation, many scholars are interrogating connection, both its benefits and its limits. In one of the strongest moments in the text, Bewes finds that we are promised various modes of knowledge and connection, especially in digital contexts, where they are anticipated and delivered to audiences who are conditioned not to critique them. By contrast, he finds that contemporary writers engaged in postfiction resist this tidy packaging of connectivity and thought. Framing the novel within these contexts only serves to enliven it. As critics and readers continue to parse its relevancy

amidst so many competing genres, Bewes's work reminds us of the novel's inherent ability to transform and provoke.

Emily Hall
Independent Scholar