



Micro-Shocks: A Potential Dimension

Twilley

by Bruce Fleming

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Near the end of *Twilley* the narrator flashes back to a moment in the wayfaring hero's past life. The passage knits up several such moments of "feeling" like a string of beads:

And it was not until he was seventeen that he felt this feeling again, the cool summer morning when he walked up the sidewalk of the Cité Universitaire in Paris with his suitcase which was cutting a red ridge in his tightly clenched fist.

What was this feeling?

Perhaps the feeling of being poised on the brink of a world more solid than his own, a world from which he was forever excluded but that made his own formlessness solid by contrast. (321)

The passage alludes to a state of consciousness, a perspective, and a prose style that Fleming navigates with the skill and brio of a master literary mariner. To a large extent, Fleming places us "on the brink," giving us a strange, fish-eye view of our human aquarium, a microscopic perspective on phenomena as they might appear from, let us say, Thumbelina's nutshell sailboat skimming over a miniature ocean.

In the statisticalized mirror of the world that makes up the décor of *Twilley*, we are always on some threshold or other. Fleming's novelistic environment is a "virtual" one in which everything and everyone exist in a potential dimension — in a "perhaps" or a "maybe," a "not quite" or a "not yet" stratum which does not belong to the past but is not yet the future. In describing novels, we are accustomed to talking about them as, to use a fancy term, *diagesis*, which in plainer but longer English means the way a fictional narrative work organizes its representation of time and space. Fleming's diagesis resembles the space-time of particle physics in which phenomena tend to be but never are firmly situated anywhere or in any definite span of time.



Our rewind glimpse of *Twilley* arriving in the area of university student housing in Paris at the age of seventeen is one of several when we see the figure of the "hero" as a fleeting but total image of a man-in-progress. But, much as a musical motif disappears into a composition by Stockhausen or Glass, we lose him again just as soon as we catch the glimpse; he no sooner arrives than he departs, disappears in the welter of micro-events and mini-phenomena that make up the texture of *Twilley*'s world.

What's the value in all these tiny, formic doings? And haven't we seen all this before? As an eternal literary tea party taking place somewhere between the coming of Swift, the carrying on of Carroll, and the goings on of James Joyce, with, perhaps, Robbe-Grillet thrown in for more contemporary measure?

As he strings together these existential beads, one of Fleming's accomplishments is that numerous passages can be lifted from *Twilley* and pasted up as complete and self-sufficient miniature works. Like a mosaic of prose poems, *Twilley* contains hundreds of small compositions. One of my favorites is introduced by the phrase "Où sont les papillons?" (21) which wittily and gracefully recounts a boy's discovery of a cocoon; his subsequent murder of the giant moth to which the cocoon gives birth; and his rediscovery of the dead creature in a drawer years later, laden with the odor of the poison the boy used to bring the insect down. The little story has a true-to-life ring to it, the aura of a moment lived and forever remembered, funny and sad and poignant and painful and beautiful and unfinished. The odor of the poison still emanating from the drawer years later functions a bit like a send-up of the Proustian madeleine. Dipped in the celebrated teacup, the aroma of the little cake resurrects the entire edifice of memory that becomes Proust's masterwork, *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. And much like

young Proust's sensibility, the consciousness inhabiting Twilley is painfully hypersensitive, a mind that registers all the micro-shocks of existence. Pain is inscribed at the cellular level; it is seemingly inevitable, like the red ridge cut into the fist of the hero by the suitcase he carries to Paris.

While such close-up consciousness of the details of existence sometimes results in pain, sometimes in just plain weirdness, it is also sometimes imbued with pure silliness, the sheer battiness of the panorama. Fleming's speculation on the life of pocketbooks on a department-store rack partakes of all these qualities:

The pressures of hanging cause the softest of them to collapse slightly as if afflicted with a sort of debilitating weariness that cracks the edges of their stiff youth under its slight but insistent weight. Their rigid carrying straps grasp the metal hooks and seem to pull against them in an attempt to lessen the pain in the bodies they support, but those that have continued to resist misshaping under the strain show no trace of the fantastic struggle that is taking place beneath their leathery skins. (14-15)

Everything is personified in Twilley; everything comes to life. Maybe Fleming is overly fond of such animistic procedures. Sometimes he successfully invests the inanimate with feeling; sometimes he doesn't.

This brings us to a major difficulty of *Twilley's* narrative construction. While we are presumably tracking a consciousness at very close range through miniature forests and jungles where everything is invested with human feeling, the narrative remains rigorously (and rigidly) in the third person, the "he, she, it" perspective of fiction. The "What is this feeling?" passage quoted at the beginning of this review is one of the devices in the novel intended as a transition or threshold between external and internal worlds, between the narration of events and the narration of feelings. But the very question "*What is this feeling?*" distances us from the feelings that make up the matter of *Twilley*. Despite the virtuosity of Fleming's microscopic descriptions, readers are situated at an awkward remove from the "feelings" to which he alludes. We are thus rarely convinced of their human veracity; we are somehow not being let in on the story. Similarly, the narrative itself lacks the supple and complex dimensionality, modulating between interior and exterior worlds, that would lend the fictionalized central consciousness full credibility and coherence.

This said, the ending of *Twilley*, while adhering strictly to the aesthetic rules the novel sets, almost convinces us of the proximity of the consciousness the whole book has labored to bring into being. It is worth quoting from it at length:

The few remaining boards of the pier seem like the last bones of what was once a magnificent prehistoric creature with beautiful sleek sides that, feeding one morning early by the water's edge, found itself trapped in the treacherous mud by its thick-set ankles. Trumpeting and lashing its huge tail as it might, it was unable to extricate so much as one colossal toe or even change its position to a more comfortable one. Then came the bone-winged birds that settled on its broad back and gouged out the beakfuls of living flesh so that the air rang with the impotent bellows of the pain-crazed beast.

Soon, mercifully soon, the once so-proud creature would be reduced to a skeleton which would bleach gray in the successive generations of summer sun and begin to crumble away one part at a time, until all that was left ... was a rather bent backbone attached to the stumps of the thing's legs on which the birds leave their droppings that bleach brittle and bake on the hard surface until they too might as well be only discolorations of the bones..." (334)

Bruce Fleming is a professor of English at the U.S. Naval Academy and was a Fulbright Professor in Rwanda. He has written several books on modernism and literary theory. *Twilley* is his first novel.