The ART of FICTION

Notes on Craft for
Young Writers

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The writer must decide what point of view he will use, what diction level, what "voice," what psychic-distance range. If he has Helen tell the story in the first person, he has the problem, at once, of establishing the information Helen herself misses (the nature of the Achaians and the Trojans). In any long fiction, Henry James remarked, use of the first-person point of view is barbaric. James may go too far, but his point is worth

considering. First person locks us in one character's mind, locks us to one kind of diction throughout, locks out possibilities of going deeply into various characters' minds, and so forth. What is sometimes called the "third-person-limited point of view," or "third person subjective," has some of the same drawbacks for a long piece of fiction. (This point of view is essentially the same as first person except that each "I" is changed to "she" or "Helen.") The traditional third-person-omniscient point of view, in which the story is told by an unnamed narrator (a persona of the author) who can dip into the mind and thoughts of any character, though he focuses primarily on no more than two or three, gives the writer greatest range and freedom. When he pleases, this narrator can speak in his own voice, filling in necessary background or offering objective observations; yet when the scene is intense and his presence would be intrusive, he can write in the third-person-limited point of view, vanishing for the moment from our consciousness. A related point of view is that of the essayist-narrator, much like the traditional omniscient narrator except that he (or she) has a definite voice and definite opinions, which may or may not be reliable. This narrator may be virtually a character in the story, having a name and some distant relationship to the people and events he describes, or may be simply a particularized but unnamed voice. The choice of point of view will largely determine all other choices with regard to style—vulgar, colloquial, or formal diction, the length and characteristic speed of sentences, and so on. What the writer must consider, obviously, is the extent to which point of view, and all that follows from it, comments on the characters, actions, and ideas. Vulgar diction in the telling of the Helen story would clearly create a white-hot irony, probably all but unmanageable. Colloquial diction and relatively short sentences would have the instant effect of humanizing once elevated characters and events. Highly formal diction and all that goes along with the traditional omniscient narrator might seem immediately appropriate for the seriousness of the story, but it

can easily backfire, providing not suitable pomp but mere pompousness. And some choices in point of view, as well as in other stylistic elements, may have more direct bearing on the theme than would others. For instance, the "town" point of view, in which the voice in the story is some unnamed spokesman for all the community—among the most famous examples is Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily"—might have the immediate effect of foregrounding the story's controlling idea, conflicting community values versus personal values.

should almost always be resisted. A good writer can get anything at all across through action and dialogue, and if he can think of no powerful reason to do otherwise, he should probably leave explanation to his reviewers and critics. The writer should especially avoid comment on what his characters are feeling, or at very least should be sure he understands the common objection summed up in the old saw "Show, don't tell." The reason, of course, is that set beside the complex thought achieved by drama, explanation is thin gruel, hence boring. A woman, say, decides to leave home. As readers, we watch her all morning, study and think about her gestures, her mutterings, her feelings about the neighbors and the weather. After our experience, which can be intense if the writer is a good one, we *know* why the character leaves when finally she walks out the door. We know in a way almost too subtle for words, which is the reason that the writer's attempt to explain, if he's so foolish as to make the attempt, makes us yawn and set the book down.

Careless shifts in psychic distance can also be distracting. By psychic distance we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story. Compare the following examples, the first meant to establish great psychic distance, the next meant to establish slightly less, and so on until in the last example, psychic distance, theoretically at least, is nil.

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul . . .

When psychic distance is great, we look at the scene as if from far away—our usual position in the traditional tale, remote in time and space, formal in presentation (example 1 above would

appear only in a tale); as distance grows shorter—as the camera dollies in, if you will—we approach the normal ground of the yarn (2 and 3) and short story or realistic novel (2 through 5). In good fiction, shifts in psychic distance are carefully controlled. At the beginning of the story, in the usual case, we find the writer using either long or medium shots. He moves in a little for scenes of high intensity, draws back for transitions, moves in still closer for the story's climax. (Variations of all kinds are possible, of course, and the subtle writer is likely to use psychic distance, as he might any other fictional device, to get odd new effects. He may, for instance, keep a whole story at one psychic-distance setting, giving an eerie, rather icy effect if the setting is like that in example 2, an overheated effect that only great skill can keep from mush or sentimentality if the setting is like that in example 5. The point is that psychic distance, whether or not it is used conventionally, must be controlled.) A piece of fiction containing sudden and inexplicable shifts in psychic distance looks amateur and tends to drive the reader away. For instance: "Mary Borden hated woodpeckers. Lord, she thought, they'll drive me crazy! The young woman had never known any personally, but Mary knew what she liked."

Clumsy writing of the kinds I've been discussing cannot help distracting the reader from the dream and thus ruining or seriously impairing the fiction. I've limited myself to the most common kinds, or those that have proved most common in my experience as a writing teacher and sometime editor of books and literary magazines. Among very bad writers even worse faults appear—two or three spring immediately to mind and may as well be mentioned: getting the events in an action out of order, cloddishly awkward insertion of details, and certain persistent oddities of imitation or spelling difficult to account for except by a theory of activity by the Devil. The first of these should need no explanation. I refer simply to the presentation of a series of actions where by some means the writer—perhaps