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Writing with Five Senses

*As an artist, like everyone else on this planet, you encounter the world out there primarily in your bodies, moment to moment through your senses. Everything else derives from that. You are creatures of your senses. All that follows—all the stuff of the mind, all the analysis, all the rationalization, all the abstracting and interpreting—follows up that point of contact, in the moment, through your senses.*

-Robert Olen Butler, *From Where You Dream*

Let’s start at the beginning—before we knew about theme, and metaphor, about symbols, about voice, about plot, about dialogue, about character. What was your first immersive reading experience? When did the book in your hand dissolve and the walls and the furniture and the floor recede and fade away from view? When did your consciousness first slip away and inhabit what John Gardner described as a continuous fictive dream? To answer that question is to answer the question we’ve all asked of ourselves: Why are we here? (In Montpelier, in an MFA program at VCFA).

When you had that first immersive reading experience, and it is just that—we don’t read great writing, we experience it—did you ask, how did the author do that? How did those words on the page reach into us and communicate things that we believe are beyond language? How does the verbal communicate the non-verbal? The writer may be someone just like us, but because we like to consider ourselves all unique snowflakes, there is no one just like us. The writer could be long dead or living. The writer could be of a different gender, or race, or ethnicity, or orientation, or even a different generation. He or she or they are unlike us in every way that human beings may define themselves. And yet, that story, that poem, that essay has become an intimately shared experience. Between you and the writer and among all who have read the same work.

What we share, what all human beings share, is the way we in which we experience the world: Our five senses. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch. Among the many challenges that computer scientists face when creating artificially intelligent systems and natural language processing is the fact that computers lack the most crucial ingredient needed in creating consciousness: the human body. Over fifty years ago, science fiction author Arthur C. Clark imagined a sentient computer named HAL 9000. Despite all the technological advances since then, we are nowhere closer to HAL 9000 than we were in 1968. Maybe when HAL is finally able to sit in the shade of a blossoming sycamore tree on a sweltering summer afternoon, licking a chocolate ice cream cone he will become self-aware.

When we are born, our brains are only halfway done developing. The last nine months of brain development occurs outside the muffled tranquility of the womb and out in the world where we are constantly stimulated by sounds, visions, smells, tastes, and physical sensations. It is an inescapable experience that we all share. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,* James Joyce captures an early sensory milestone:

*When you wet the bed, first it is warm then it gets cold. His mother put on the oilsheet. That had the queer smell. His mother had a nicer smell than his father. She played on the piano the sailor’s hornpipe for him to dance.*

It’s obvious to all of us that invoking the reader’s senses is crucial to creating that fictive dream that John Gardner wrote about. Ultimately, writing should invoke an emotional response in the reader, the more complex, the better. Before the emotional response, however, comes the physical sensation. What’s miraculous, what’s magic, is that the physical response can be, in a sense, replicated by words on the page. We can use the verbal to communicate that which is non-verbal. The great challenge is that, for the most part, language lacks the ability to directly recreate a physical sensation. Instead, we must rely upon the experiences that the reader brings to the text. Not their experience growing up in a dysfunctional family (although that may be present too), not their experience falling in love (which they may or may not have felt), or losing a loved one, or being unjustly accused of a crime, or any of the other things that comprise their personal backstories. Therefore, we must start with something primal. Our senses have memories that are directly connected to our life experiences. If our writing does not stimulate those sense-memories, we will never create those emotional resonances that all great literature does. So instead, we stimulate the senses. The sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and texture of life. The silvery-blue light of a full moon, the high-pitched whine of a dentist’s drill, the taste of the lemon and honey intertwined with the bitterness of black tea, the mixed cocktail of industrial disinfectant and bowel in our grandfather’s hospital room, the warm breath of a lover whispering in our ear.

Of all the five senses, vision is the one most readily available to our writing. We are primarily visual species, and our language provides a rich vocabulary to describe visual imagery. Most of us rely very heavily on visual descriptions in our writing. As Chekhov said, “Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.” And Chekhov was a master at visual imagery. The other four senses are more difficult to use. The language simply doesn’t exist to describe things directly, so we must resort to describing, for example, a smell or a taste and a smell or a taste of something else and count on the reader knowing what that something else tastes or smells like. However, when it comes to taste, smell, sound, and touch, a little goes a long way. If a picture paints a thousand words, then a taste, a smell, or a sound paints a thousand pictures. Take this example from Annie Proulx’s “Brokeback Mountain.” “Brokeback Mountain” has a timeframe that could easily fill a novel, yet Proulx manages to compress twenty years of the characters’ lives into a short story, without losing any of the richness of those lives:

*In December Ennis married Alma Beers and had her pregnant by mid-January. He picked up a few short-lived ranch jobs, then settle in as a wrangler on the old Elwood Hi-Top place, north of Lost Cabin, in Washakie County. He was still working there in September when Alma Jr., as he called his daughter, was born and their bedroom was full of the smell of old blood and milk and baby shit, and the sounds were of squalling and sucking and Alma's sleepy groans, all reassuring of fecundity and life's continuance to one who worked with livestock.*

This passage has far more telling than showing, but the sensory descriptions communicate everything we need to know about Ennis and Alma at that point in their lives: “old blood and milk and baby shit,” …. “squalling and sucking….and groans.” The sensory images are both precise and at once recognizable. It also accounts for ten months in the lives of the characters. Note that there is no visual imagery in this passage at all. Could this scene be rendered as concisely with visual imagery?

Later in the story, Proulx refrains from describing a turgid tryst between Jack and Ennis in a hotel visually (thankfully) and instead simply describes the aftermath relying solely on the sense of smell:

*The room stank of semen and smoke and sweat and whiskey, of old carpet and sour hay, saddle leather, shit, and cheap soap.*

Again, the precision of these non-visual images replaces what might otherwise have been dramatized in an extended scene. The drama is contained within that single sentence.

The effectiveness of even the shortest sensual descriptions cannot be understated. When the proper context is created, it may take only a single sensory image: a taste, a smell, or a touch. In John Updike’s short story, “Wife Wooing” a family is on vacation, presumably on the Cape. Saturday night, in the motel room, the husband is hoping to have sex with the wife. She, however, has different ideas. She’s exhausted and feeling disgusting after being on the beach with the kids all day. They return home the next day with the husband feeling disappointed and a little resentful. Then, later that night, after the kids are asleep, she emerges from the bathroom:

*So, I am taken by surprise at a turning when at the meaningful hour of ten you come with a kiss of toothpaste to me moist and girlish and quick...*

In the context of the story something seemingly ordinary—the taste of toothpaste—becomes unexpectedly erotic. This is from a writer whose novels contain some of the most cringeworthy sex scenes in American literature*. (With the possible exception of one of my second semester packets.)*

Our non-visual senses are the senses most directly connect with our memories. The taste and aroma of an old family recipe, the scent of the pines surrounding your grandparents summer cottage in the Adirondacks. When we experience these sensations, in our dream state, we are transported back to not only the time and place, but the associated emotional state. There are several ways in which this may work. First, the sensation is common enough, and the kinds of memories it relates to are similar, so the reader brings their own “sensual history” to the text. Second, the sensation can trigger a memory and an emotional state in the character. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a sensation experienced directly by the reader; it just needs to be uniquely described. In this case, it is the emotion experience evokes the sensation for the reader. In David Jauss’ s “The Stars at Noon,” a woman’s mental state is affected by the sounds she hears in her hospital room:

*She had been sleeping, it seemed, then she heard someone cough. Who is coughing? she thought. Then she realized: it was herself,*

*Silly old woman, Silly half-dead old woman.*

*Then she noticed that she was sitting up. Why? She looked around the hospital room. The vaporizer breathing the menthol odor of death. The late afternoon light on the linoleum like the outline of someone killed in a highway accident. Anastasia shivered. Why did she have to think such thoughts? This was no time to think like that. This was a time for joy. She lay back into herself, hugged the chill inside her. I wouldn’t be long now. Now what was that? Nurses talking in the hallway? She raised her head from the pillow and strained to hear what they were saying. But she couldn’t make out the words over the hiss of the vaporizer. So, she lay back.*

*Then it wasn’t nurses talking. It was cicadas buzzing in the trees around her father’s farm.*

*She’d heard that ratcheting hum every August when she was growing up. Once, she and Tom collected the brittle, umber-colored husks left in the elms after the humming stopped.*

In this case, Jauss uses the sound to trigger a *character’s* memory as a means of providing a brief flashback and to provide added dimensions to the character. If the reader recalls the sound of cicadas, that’s great, but it’s not necessary that the image invoke a memory for the reader for it to work.

No lecture about the direct connection of the sense with specific memories would be complete without discussing Marcel Proust. The title of his epic seven volume novel, now known as *In Search of Lost Time,* was originally translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*. For my purposes here, that original title, with the word “remembrance,” is just as appropriate. The first volume, *Swann’s Way* begins with narrator, and presumably Proust himself, recalling a very specific childhood memory, recalled sensually:

*No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me.*

Proust’s gateway to the past is unlocked by a long-ago sensual experience. However much sensual experience may engage the reader, for the writer it is an essential part of the creative process.

Sensual experiences may also be universal enough that it can trigger an emotional response from the reader’s past, even if they can’t remember the specific event. Consider this scene from Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*:

*Frieda restuffs the window. I trudge off to bed, full of guilt and self-pity. I lie down in my underwear, the metal in my black garters hurts my legs, but I do not take them off, for it is too cold to lie stockingless. It takes a long time for my body to heat its place in the bed. Once I have generated a silhouette of warmth, I dare not move, for there is a cold place one-half inch in any direction. No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. In an hour or two my mother comes. Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers' full of it at a time and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do--promptly.*

The imagery in this passage is universal: lying in a cold bed waiting for it to warm up, rough hands, the weight of the quilts, and most of all, Vicks salve. Consider that last item. Do the actual words describe a sensation? I looked up the ingredients in Vicks Vapor Rub and found its distinctive smell comes from a mixture of camphor, menthol, and eucalyptus oil. Listing these ingredients is unnecessary and even counterproductive. The word “Vicks” is all we really need to conjure up our childhood memories of being really, really, sick. There’s also nothing visual in this image. It’s all touch and smell and taste, which makes embody young Claudia in a way that a visual image—say, a movie—never could. This is one of the unique qualities of literature that sets it apart from other art forms.

Some writers provide a deeply immersive experience where, as readers, we’re not sure where we end, and the character begins. Charles D’Ambrosio’s short story, “The Point,” takes on a journey as fourteen-year-old Kurt. It’s a thematically rich story that we can study from many different perspectives. We can interpret in terms of western literary tradition, the Telemachia, or Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey, or a coming of age story with Kurt in the role of Huckleberry Finn, or perhaps Holden Caulfield, or Neo-Freudian psychoanalytic study of a boy set adrift without his father. However we may interpret this story, the one thing that is very clear is that we are not on this journey, or this quest, *with* Kurt, we are on this journey *as* Kurt. In the opening of the story, D’Ambrosio uses all five senses to place us physically in Kurt’s body. As I read this, take note of how each of the five senses are touched, either directly or indirectly:

*I had been lying awake after my nightmare, a nightmare in which Father and I bought helium balloons at a circus. I tied mine around my finger and Father tied his around a string bean and lost it. After that, I lay in the dark, tossing and turning, sleepless from all the sand in my sheets and all the uproar out in the living room. Then the door opened, and for a moment the blade of bright light blinded me. The party was still going full blast, and now with the door ajar and my eyes adjusting I glimpsed the silver smoke swirling in the light at all the people suspended in it, hovering around as if they were angels in Heaven--some kind of Heaven where the host serves highballs and the men smoke cigars and the women all smell like rotting fruit. Everything was hysterical out there--the men laughing, the ice clinking, the women shrieking. A woman crossed over at sat on the edge of my bed, bending over me. It was Mother. She was backlit, a vague, looming silhouette, but I could smell lily of the valley and something else--lemon rind from the bitter twist she always chewed when she reached the watery bottom of her vodka-and-tonic. When Father was alive, she rarely drank, but after he shot himself you could say she really let herself go.*

The story continues in this manner, with Kurt struggling to escort a drunken party-goer home to her apartment in the same complex. The emotional climax of the story comes at the end, in the very last sentence. It’s a devastating ending, enabled by how deeply immersed we have become in Kurt’s physical sensations.

In contrast to this overwhelming onslaught of sensual experience, a passage just a few spare images can also be effective. If a picture can paint a thousand words, then a sound or smell can paint a thousand pictures. The opening paragraph of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* contains just a few sensual images, but they are well-chosen and precise:

It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn’t know what I was doing in New York. I’m stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that’s all there was to read about in the papers – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the fusty, peanut-selling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves.

That final sensation isn’t one that Esther, the narrator, experiences, she only imagines it, but it ominously foreshadows what will happen later in the novel.

I’ve used examples from works that couldn’t be more different from one another, from writers who couldn’t be more different from one another—Joyce, Proulx, Updike, Morrison, Jauss, D’Ambrosio, Plath—and they use imagery in different ways for different purposes. In the end, however, I’d like to return to the Butler quote that I read at the beginning of this lecture:

*As an artist, like everyone else on this planet, you encounter the world out there primarily in your bodies, moment to moment through your senses. Everything else derives from that. You are creatures of your senses. All that follows—all the stuff of the mind, all the analysis, all the rationalization, all the abstracting and interpreting—follows up that point of contact, in the moment, through your senses.*

This is how we create what binds us to our readers in an almost non-verbal way: a shared emotional experience.

My final quotation comes from Raymond Carver’s short story, “A Small, Good Thing.” In this story, a couple experience the ultimate tragedy, the death of their son that comes after the frantic and harrowing experience of standing vigil over him in the hospital after he is hit by a car. As I was reading this story for the first time, I did that thing that MFA students do when they read a story like this: I kept saying to myself, “Okay, okay, I get it, but how the hell are you going to end this story, Mr. Carver?” The ending, when it comes, is an example of a sparse, yet vivid sensory experience the goes beyond reaching us emotionally; It becomes spiritual. The mourning couple, are offered communion by a stranger:

*"Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "It's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.*

I’d like to conclude with a small exercise. I’ve got three photographs for you to see. For each of them, write down some sensual images to go with the pictures. Don’t do the visual, I’ve supplied that with the picture. What does the image in the picture make you feel? What does it make you hear, taste, and smell?







I’d like to formally conclude this lecture with my sensual interpretation of this last picture:

*The strip of pictures slid out of the slot on the side of the booth It felt damp and smelled faintly of vinegar. The roller coaster roared overhead and rattled the walls of the booth.. In the corner of my mouth I felt the sting of the mustard that was on the hotdog. My cheeks and shoulders were radiating latent heat from sunburn. And the air smelled of ocean. and English Leather.*

Thank you for your time and attention.