PART 2 // STORYTELLERS AND STORYZONES

A story changes depending on who (or what) is telling it. Narrative point of view acts on the scope or zone of the story: what falls within its purview and therefore what is describable, what is narratable. On Days 1 and 2 we will try get to grips with the possibilities of different narrative positions & points of view, linked to the differences (the viewing and knowing capacities) of narrative agents (or 'actants'), and develop our own vocabularies for describing them. This may lead us to consider important and timely questions around legitimacy and authority – the 'right' to tell stories, one's own story or other people's. Particular emphasis will be put on the voice-over, and the choice of language (and therefore also the work of sub-titling) as important narrative tools. On Day 3 we'll consider how a story changes depending on the claims the teller makes about it: fiction, documentary, poem, essay. Does *composition*, the placing and treatment of materials, pre-exist or pre-empt an understanding or intervention of fiction? If so, what does 'fiction' bring in – what narrative possibilities does it open up, or close down? When working with fiction and / or 'real life', what responsibilities do we have to our materials -- to our (made-up or real-life) stories and their protagonists? To audiences?

Day 4: BEARING STORIES

Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' (1936) -- in *The Narrative Reader,* ed. Martin McQuillan

Trin Minh-Ha 'Grandma's Story' (1989) --- in *The Narrative Reader,* ed. Martin McQuillan

Will Harris, 'Art doesn't own it' (2023) (**https://tlth.co.uk/tlth1**)

the narrative reader

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of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say: 'And then?' If it is in a plot we ask: 'Why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave-men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by 'And then – and then –' they can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also.

Walter Benjamin 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov'*

See also:
Bronfen (4)
de Lauretis (5)
Jameson (8)
Kellner (8)
Minh-Ha (9)

I

. . . . The art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.

One reason for this phenomenon is obvious: experience has fallen in value. And it looks as if it is continuing to fall into bottomlessness. Every glance at a newspaper demonstrates that it has reached a new low, that our picture, not only of the external world but of the moral world as well, overnight has undergone changes which were never thought possible. With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent – not richer, but poorer in communicable experience? What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

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* From *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn (London: HarperCollins, 1992), pp. 83–107.

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An orientation toward practical interests is characteristic of many born storytellers. More pronouncedly than in Leskov this trait can be recognized, for example, in Gotthelf, who gave his peasants agricultural advice; it is found in Nodier, who concerned himself with the perils of gas light; and Hebel, who slipped bits of scientific instruction for his readers into his *Schatzkästlein*, is in this line as well. All this points to the nature of every real story. It contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers. But if today 'having counsel' is beginning to have an old-fashioned ring, this is because the communicability of experience is decreasing. In consequence we have no counsel either for ourselves or for others. After all, counsel is less an answer to a question than a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story. (Quite apart from the fact that a man is receptive to counsel only to the extent that he allows his situation to speak.) Counsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom. The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. This, however, is a process that has been going on for a long time. And nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely a 'symptom of decay,' let alone a 'modern' symptom. It is, rather, only a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing.

V

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. Even the first great book of the genre, *Don Quixote*, teaches how the spiritual greatness, the boldness, the helpfulness of one of the noblest of men, Don Quixote, are completely devoid of counsel and do not contain the slightest scintilla of wisdom. If now and then, in the course of the centuries, efforts have been made – most effectively, perhaps, in *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* – to implant instruction in the novel, these attempts have always amounted to a modification of the novel form. The *Bildungsroman*, on the other hand, does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel. By integrating the social process with the development of a person, it bestows the most frangible justification on the order determining it. The legitimacy it provides stands in direct opposition to reality. Particularly in the *Bildungsroman*, it is this inadequacy that is actualized.

VI

One must imagine the transformation of epic forms occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth's surface in the course of thousands of centuries. Hardly any other forms of human communication have taken shape more slowly, been lost more slowly. It took the novel, whose beginnings go back to antiquity, hundreds of years before it encountered in the evolving middle class those elements which were favourable to its flowering. With the appearance of these elements, storytelling began quite slowly to recede into the archaic; in many ways, it is true, it took hold of the new material, but it was not really determined by it. On the other hand, we recognize that with the full control of the middle class, which has the press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication in information.

Villemessant, the founder of *Le Figaro*, characterized the nature of information in a famous formulation. 'To my readers,' he used to say, 'an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a revolution in Madrid.' This makes strikingly clear that it is no longer intelligence coming from afar, but the information which supplies a handle for what is nearest that gets the readiest hearing. The intelligence that came from afar – whether the spatial kind from foreign countries or the temporal kind of tradition – possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to verification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself.' Often it is no more exact than the intelligence of earlier centuries was. But while the latter was inclined to borrow from the miraculous, it is indispensable for information to sound plausible. Because of this it proves incompatible with the spirit of storytelling. If the art of storytelling has become rare, the dissemination of information has had a decisive share in this state of affairs.

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. Leskov is a master at this (compare pieces like 'The Deception' and 'The White Eagle'). The most extraordinary things, marvellous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to

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VIII

There is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis. And the more natural the process by which the storyteller forgoes psychological shading, the greater becomes the story's claim to a place in the memory of the listener, the more completely is it integrated into his own experience, the greater will be his inclination to repeat it to someone else someday, sooner or later. This process of assimilation, which takes place in depth, requires a state of relaxation which is becoming rarer and rarer. If sleep is the apogee of physical relaxation, boredom is the apogee of mental relaxation. Boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience. A rustling in the leaves drives him away. His nesting places – the activities that are intimately associated with boredom – are already extinct in the cities and are declining in the country as well. With this the gift for listening is lost and the community of listeners disappears. For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling them comes to him all by itself. This, then, is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled. This is how today it is becoming unravelled at all its ends after being woven thousands of years ago in the ambience of the oldest forms of craftsmanship.

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XI

Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back. This is expressed in exemplary form in one of the most beautiful stories we have by the incomparable Johann Peter Hebel. It is found in the *Schatzkästlein des rheinischen Hausfreundes*, is entitled 'Unexpected Reunion,' and begins with the betrothal of a young lad who works in the mines of Falun. On the eve of his wedding he dies a miner's death at the bottom of his tunnel. His bride keeps faith with him after his death, and she lives long enough to become a wizened old woman; one day a body is brought up from the abandoned tunnel which, saturated with iron vitriol, has escaped decay, and she recognizes her betrothed. After this reunion she too is called away by death. When Hebel, in the course of this story, was confronted with the necessity of making this long period of years graphic, he did so in the following sentences: 'In the meantime the city of Lisbon was destroyed by an earthquake, and the Seven Years' War came and went, and Emperor Francis I died, and the Jesuit Order was abolished, and Poland was partitioned, and Empress Maria. Theresa died, and Struensee was executed. America became independent, and the united French and Spanish forces were unable to capture Gibraltar. The Turks locked up General Stein in the Veteraner Cave in Hungary, and Emperor Joseph died also. King Gustavus of Sweden conquered Russian Finland, and the French Revolution and the long war began, and Emperor Leopold II went to his grave too. Napoleon captured Prussia, and the English bombarded Copenhagen, and the peasants sowed and harvested. The millers ground, the smiths hammered, and the miners dug for veins of ore in their underground workshops. But when in 1809 the miners at Falun . . .'

Never has a storyteller embedded his report deeper in natural history than Hebel manages to do in this chronology. Read it carefully. Death appears in it with the same regularity as the Reaper does in the processions that pass around the cathedral clock at noon.

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XIII

It has seldom been realized that the listener's naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told. The cardinal point for the unaffected listener is to assure himself of the possibility of reproducing the story. Memory is the epic faculty *par excellence*. Only by virtue of a comprehensive memory can epic writing absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other. It is not surprising that to a simple man of the people, such as Leskov once invented, the Czar, the head of the sphere in which his stories take place, has the most encyclopedic memory at his command. 'Our Emperor,' he says, 'and his entire family have indeed a most astonishing memory.'

Mnemosyne, the rememberer, was the Muse of the epic art among the Greeks. This name takes the observer back to a parting of the ways in world history. For if the record kept by memory – historiography – constitutes the creative matrix of the various epic forms (as great prose is the creative matrix of the various metrical forms), its oldest form, the epic, by virtue of being a kind of common denominator includes the story and the novel. When in the course of centuries the novel began to emerge from the womb of the epic, it turned out that in the novel the element of the epic mind that is derived from the Muse – that is, memory – manifests itself in a form quite different from the way it manifests itself in the story.

Memory creates the chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation. It is the Muse-derived element of the epic art in a broader sense and encompasses its varieties. In the first place among these is the one practised by the storyteller. It starts the web which all stories together form in the end. One ties on to the next, as the great storytellers, particularly the Oriental ones, have always readily shown. In each of them there is a Scheherazade who thinks of a fresh story whenever her tale comes to a stop. This is epic remembrance and the Muse-inspired element of the narrative. But this should be set against another principle, also a Muse-derived element in a narrower sense, which as an element of the novel in its earliest form – that is, in the epic – lies concealed, still undifferentiated from the similarly derived element of the story. It can, at any rate, occasionally be divined in the epics, particularly at moments of solemnity in the Homeric epics, as in the invocations to the Muse at their beginning. What announces itself in these passages is the perpetuating remembrance of the novelist as contrasted with the short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller. The first is dedicated

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to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* diffuse occurrences. It is, in other words, *remembrance* which, as the Muse-derived element of the novel, is added to reminiscence, the corresponding element of the story, the unity of their origin in memory having disappeared with the decline of the epic.

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XV

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. (For even the reader of a poem is ready to utter the words, for the benefit of the listener.) In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it completely his own, to devour it, as it were. Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as the fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stimulates the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play.

It is a dry material on which the burning interest of the reader feeds. 'A man who dies at the age of thirty-five,' said Morits Heimann once, 'is at every point of his life a man who dies at the age of thirty-five.' Nothing is more dubious than this sentence – but for the sole reason that the tense is wrong. A man – so says the truth that was meant here – who died at thirty-five will appear to *remembrance* at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. In other words, the statement that makes no sense for real life becomes indisputable for remembered life. The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the 'meaning' of his life is revealed only in his death. But the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives the 'meaning of life.' Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death – the end of the novel – but preferably their actual one. How do the characters make him understand that death is already waiting for them – a very definite death and at a very definite place? That is the question which feeds the reader's consuming interest in the events of the novel.

The novel is significant, therefore, not because it presents someone else's fate to us, perhaps didactically, but because this stranger's fate by virtue of the flame which consumes it yields us the warmth which we never draw from our own fate. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.

XVI

'Leskov,' writes Gorky, 'is the writer most deeply rooted in the people and is completely untouched by any foreign influences. A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people, primarily in a milieu of craftsmen. But just as this includes the rural, the maritime, and the urban elements in the many stages of their economic and technical development, there are many gradations in the concepts in which their store of experience comes down to us. (To say nothing of the by no means insignificant share which traders had in the art of storytelling; their task was less to increase its didactic content than to refine the tricks with which the attention of the listener was captured. They have left deep traces in the narrative cycle of *The Arabian Nights*.) In short, despite the primary role which storytelling plays in the household of humanity, the concepts through which the yield of the stories may be garnered are manifold. What may most readily be put in religious terms in Leskov seems almost automatically to fall into place in the pedagogical perspectives of the Enlightenment in Hebel, appears as hermetic tradition in Poe, finds a last refuge in Kipling in the life of British seamen and colonial soldiers. All great storytellers have in common the freedom with which they move up and down the rungs of their experience as on a ladder. A ladder extending downward to the interior of the earth and disappearing into the clouds is the image for a collective experience to which even the deepest shock of every individual experience, death, constitutes no impediment or barrier.

'And they lived happily ever after,' says the fairy tale. The fairy tale, which to this day is the first tutor of children because it was once the first tutor of mankind, secretly lives on in the story. The first true storyteller is, and will continue to be, the teller of fairy tales. Whenever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest. This need was the need created by the myth. The fairy tale tells us of the earliest arrangements that mankind made to shake off the nightmare which the myth had placed upon its chest. In the figure of the fool it shows us how mankind 'acts dumb' toward the myth; in the figure of the youngest brother it shows us how one's chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind; in the figure of the man who sets out to learn what fear is it shows us that the things we are afraid of can be seen through; in the figure of the wiseacre it shows us that the questions posed by the myth are simple-minded, like the riddle of the Sphinx; in the shape of the animals which come to the aid of the child in the fairy tale it shows that nature not only is subservient to the myth, but much prefers to be aligned with man. The wisest thing – so the fairy tale taught mankind in olden times, and teaches children to this day – is to meet the forces of the mythical world with cunning and with high spirits. (This is how the fairy tale polarizes *Mut*, courage, dividing it dialectically into *Untermut*, that is, cunning, and *Übermut*, high spirits.) The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man. A mature man feels this complicity only occasionally, that is, when he is happy; but the child first meets it in fairy tales, and it makes him happy.

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In fact, one can go on and ask oneself whether the relationship of the storyteller to his material, human life, is not in itself a craftsman's relationship, whether it is not his very task to fashion the raw material of experience, his own and that of others, in a solid, useful, and unique way. It is a kind of procedure which may perhaps most adequately be exemplified by the proverb if one thinks of it as an ideogram of a story. A proverb, one might say, is a ruin which stands on the site of an old story and in which a moral twines about a happening like ivy around a wall.

Seen in this way, the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations, as the proverb does, but for many, like the sage. For it is granted to him to reach back to a whole lifetime (a life, incidentally, that comprises not only his own experience but no little of the experience of others; what the storyteller knows from hearsay is added to his own). His gift is the ability to relate his life; his

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distinctions to be able to tell his entire life. The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. This is the basis of the incomparable aura about the storyteller, in Leskov as in Hauff, in Poe as in Stevenson. The storyteller is the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself.

Mikhail Bakhtin, from *The Dialogic Imagination**

Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel Notes toward a Historical Poetics

See also:
Propp (1.iii)
Shlovsky (1.iii)
Tomashevsky (1.iii)
Lévi-Strauss (2.i)
Heath (4)
Miller (6)
Ricoeur (7)
Jameson (8)
Said (9)

The process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature has a complicated and erratic history, as does the articulation of actual historical persons in such a time and space. Isolated aspects of time and space, however – those available in a given historical stage of human development – have been assimilated and corresponding generic techniques have been devised for reflecting and artistically processing such appropriated aspects of reality.

We will give the name *chronotope* (literally, 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature; we will not deal with the chronotope in other areas of culture.[1]

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope.

The chronotope in literature has an intrinsic *generic* significance. It can even be said that it is precisely the chronotope that defines genre and generic distinctions, for in literature the primary category in the chronotope is time. The chronotope as a formally

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* *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), pp. 84–5, 243–7, 250.

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> these highly adaptable and mobile warriors took maximum advantage of local environments, striking and withdrawing with great rapidity, making extensive use of bushes to catch their adversaries in cross-fire, fighting only when and where they chose, depending on reliable intelligence networks among non-maroons (both slave and white settlers) and often communicating by horns.

Both gentleman and slave, with different cultural means and to very different historical ends, demonstrate that forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification. This does not prevent these positions from being effective in a political sense, although it does suggest that positions of authority may themselves be part of a process of ambivalent identification. Indeed the exercise of power may be both politically effective and psychically *affective* because the discursive liminality through which it is signified may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation.

It is precisely in reading between these borderlines of the nation-space that we can see how the concept of the 'people' emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement. The people are not simply historical events or parts of a patriotic body politic. They are also a complex rhetorical strategy of social reference: their claim to be representative provokes a crisis within the process of signification and discursive address. We then have a contested conceptual territory where the nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical 'objects' of a nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin *in the past*; the people are also the 'subjects' of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious, living principles of the people as contemporaneity as that sign of the *present* through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process.

The scraps, patches and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*.

Trin Minh-Ha, 'Grandma's Story'*

See also
Benjamin (1.iii)
Chatman (2.ii)
Smith (3.ii)
Berger (3.iii)
Lanser (5)
Derrida (6)

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* In *Women, Native, Other: Writing, Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 119–51.

Cohn (7)
Felman (8)

See all things howsoever they flourish
Return to the root from which they grew
This return to the root is called Quietness

(Lao Tzu, *Tao-te-ching*, 16 (trans. A. Waley))

TRUTH AND FACT: STORY AND HISTORY

Let me tell you a story. For all I have is a story. Story passed on from generation to generation, named Joy. Told for the joy it gives the storyteller and the listener. Joy inherent in the process of storytelling. Whoever understands it also understands that a story, as distressing as it can be in its joy, never takes anything away from anybody. Its name, remember, is Joy. Its double, Woe Morrow Show.

> Let the one who is diseuse, one who is mother who waits nine days and nine nights be found. Restore memory. Let the one who is diseuse, one who is daughter restore spring with her each appearance from beneath the earth. The ink spills thickest before it runs dry before it stops writing at all.
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> (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha)

Something must be said. Must be said that has not been *and* has been said before. 'It will take a long time, but the story must be told. There must not be any lies' (Leslie Marmon Silko). It will take a long time for living cannot be told, not merely told: living is not livable. Understanding, however, is creating, and living, such an immense gift that thousands of people benefit from each past or present life being lived. The story depends upon every one of us to come into being. It needs us all, needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep on coming into being. The story of a people. Of us, peoples. Story, history, literature (or religion, philosophy, natural science, ethics) – all in one. They call it the tool of primitive man, the simplest vehicle of truth. When history separated itself from story, it started indulging in accumulation and facts. Or it thought it could. It thought it could build up to History because the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related. The act of revealing bears in itself a magical (not factual) quality – inherited undoubtedly from 'primitive' storytelling – for the Past perceived as such is a well-organized past whose organization is already given. Managing to identify with History, history (with a small letter h) thus manages to oppose the factual to the fictional (turning a blind eye to the 'magicality' of its claims); the story-writer – the historian – to the storyteller. As long as the transformation, manipulations, or redistributions inherent in the collecting of events are overlooked, the division continues its course, as sure of its itinerary as it certainly dreams to be. Story-writing becomes history-writing, and history quickly sets itself apart, consigning story to the realm of tale, legend, myth, fiction, literature. Then, since fictional and factual have come to a point where they mutually exclude each other, fiction, not infrequently, means lies, and fact, truth. DID IT REALLY HAPPEN? IS IT A TRUE STORY?

16 (trans. A. Waley))

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> I don't want to listen to any more of your stories [Maxine Hong Kingston screamed at her champion-story-talker mother]; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you made up.

Which truth? the question unavoidably arises. The story has been defined as 'a free narration, not necessarily factual but truthful in character . . . [It] gives us human nature in its bold outlines; history, in its individual details.' Truth. Not one but two: truth and fact, just like in the old times when queens were born and kings were made in Egypt. (Queens and princesses were then 'Royal Mothers' from birth, whereas the king wore the crown of high priest and did not receive the Horus-name until his coronation.) Poetry, Aristotle said, is truer than history. Storytelling as literature (narrative poetry) must then be truer than history. If we rely on history to tell us what happened at a specific time and place, we can rely on the story to tell us not only what might have happened, but also what is happening at an unspecified time and place. No wonder that in old tales storytellers are very often women, witches, and prophets. The African griot and griotte are well known for being poet, storyteller, historian, musician, and magician – all at once. But why truth at all? Why this battle for truth and on behalf of truth? I do not remember having asked grandmother once whether the story she was telling was true or not. Neither do I recall her asking me whether the story I was reading to her was true or not. We knew we could make each other cry, laugh, or fear, but we never thought of saying to each other, 'This is just a story.' A story is a story. There was no need for clarification – a need many adults considered 'natural' or imperative among children – for there was no such thing as 'a blind acceptance of the story as literally true.' Perhaps the story has become *just* a story when I have become adept at consuming truth as fact. Imagination is thus equated with falsification, and I am made to believe that if, accordingly, I am not told or do not establish in so many words what is true and what is false, I or the listener may no longer be able to differentiate fancy from fact (*sic*). Literature and history once were/still are stories: this does not necessarily mean that the space they form is undifferentiated, but that this space can articulate on a different set of principles, one which may be said to stand outside the hierarchical realm of facts. On the one hand, each society has its own politics of truth; on the other hand, being truthful is being in the in-between of all regimes of truth. Outside specific time, outside specialized space: 'Truth embraces with it all other abstentions other than itself' (T. Hak Kyung Cha).

KEEPERS AND TRANSMITTERS

Truth is when it is itself no longer. Diseuse, Thought-Woman, Spider-Woman, griotte, story-teller, fortune-teller, witch. If you have the patience to listen, she will take delight in relating it to you. An entire history, an entire vision of the world, a lifetime story. Mother always has a mother. And Great Mothers are recalled as the goddesses of all waters, the sources of diseases and of healing, the protectresses of women and of child-bearing. To listen carefully is to preserve. But to preserve is to burn, for understanding means creating.

> Let the one who is diseuse, Diseuse de bonne aventure. Let her call forth.
> Let her break open the spell cast upon time upon time again and again.
> (T. Hak Kyung Cha)

The world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women. Patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand. In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. It destroys, brings into life, nurtures. Every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission. In Africa it is said that every griotte who dies is a whole library that burns down (a 'library in which the archives are not classified but are completely inventoried' [A. Hampate Ba]). Phrases like 'I sucked it at my mother's breast' or 'I have it from Our Mother' to express what has been passed down by the elders are common in this part of the world. Tell me and let me tell my hearers what I have heard from you who heard it from your mother and your grandmother, so that what is said may be guarded and unfailingly transmitted to the women of tomorrow, who will be our children and the children of our children. These are the opening lines she used to chant before embarking on a story. I owe that to you, her and her, who owe it to her, her and her. I memorize, recognize, and name my source(s), not to validate my voice through the voice of an authority (for we, women, have little authority in the History of Literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing. The bond between women and word. Among women themselves. To produce their full effect, words must, indeed, be chanted rhythmically, in cadences, off cadences.

> My great-grandmama told my grandmama the part she lived through that my grandmama didn't live through and my grandmama told my mama what they both lived through and my mama told me what they all lived through and we were supposed to pass it down like that from generation to generation so we'd never forget. Even though they'd burned everything to play like it didn't ever happen.
> (Gayl Jones)

In this chain and continuum, I am but one link. The story is me, neither me nor mine. It does not really belong to me, and while I feel greatly responsible for it, I also enjoy the irresponsibility of the pleasure obtained through the process of transferring. Pleasure in the copy, pleasure in the reproduction. No repetition can ever be identical, but my story carries with it their stories, their history, and our story repeats itself endlessly despite our persistence in denying it. *I don't believe it. That story could not happen today.* Then someday our children will speak about us here present, about those days when things like that could happen:

> It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora – like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to *her*, to *them*, any worse than what Mutt had done to me, than what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy, or what he had done to her in return. . . .
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> Upon seeing her you know how it was for her. You know how it might have been. You recline, you lapse, you fall, you see before you what you have seen before. Repeated, without your even knowing it. It is you standing there. It is you waiting outside in the summer day.
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> (T. Hak Kyung Cha)

Every gesture, every word involves our past, present, and future. The body never stops accumulating, and years and years have gone by mine without my being able to stop them, stop it. My sympathies and grudges appear at the same time familiar and unfamiliar to me; I dwell in them, they dwell in me, and we dwell in each other, more as guest than as owner. My story, no doubt, is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me. Younger than me, older than the humanized. Unmeasurable, uncontainable, so immense that it exceeds all attempts at humanizing. But humanizing we do, and also overdo, for the vision of a story that has no end – no end, no middle, no beginning; no start, no stop, no progression; neither backward nor forward, only a stream that flows into another stream, an open sea – is, the vision of a madwoman. 'The unleashed tides of muteness,' as Clarice Lispector puts it. We fear heights, we fear the headless, the bottomless, the boundless. And we are in terror of letting ourselves be engulfed by the depths of muteness. This is why we keep on doing violence to words: to tame and cook the wild-raw, to adopt the vertiginously infinite. Truth does not make sense; it exceeds meaning and exceeds measure. It exceeds all regimes of truth. So, when we insist on telling over and over again, we insist on repetition in re-creation (and vice versa). On distributing the story into smaller proportions that will correspond to the capacity of absorption of our mouths, the capacity of vision of our eyes, and the capacity of bearing of our bodies. Each story is at once a fragment and a whole; a whole within a whole. And the same story has always been changing, for things which do not shift and grow cannot continue to circulate. Dead. Dead times, dead words, dead tongues. Not to repeat in oblivion.

> Sediment. Turned stone. Let the one who is diseuse dust breathe away the distance of the well. Let the one who is diseuse again sit upon the stone nine days and nine nights. thus. Making stand again, Eleusis.
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> (T. Hak Kyung Cha)

STORYTELLING IN THE 'CIVILIZED' CONTEXT

The simplest vehicle of truth, the story is also said to be 'a phase of communication,' 'the natural form for revealing life.' Its fascination may be explained by its power both to give a vividly felt insight into the life of other people and to revive or keep alive the forgotten, dead-ended, turned-into-stone parts of ourselves. To the wo/man of the West who spends time recording and arranging the 'data' concerning storytelling as well as 'the many rules and taboos connected with it,' this tool of primitive wo/man has provided primitive peoples with opportunities 'to train their speech, formulate opinions, and express themselves' (Anna Birgitta Rooth). It gives 'a sympathetic understanding of their limitations in knowledge, and an appreciation of our privileges in civilization, due largely to the struggles of the past' (Clark W. Hetherington). It informs of the explanations they invented for 'the things [they] did not understand,' and represents their religion, 'a religion growing out of fear of the unknown' (Katherine Dunlap Cather). In summary, the story is either a mere practice of the art of rhetoric or 'a repository of obsolete customs' (A. Skinner). It is mainly valued for its artistic potential and for the 'religious beliefs' or 'primitive-mind'-revealing superstitions mirrored by its content. (Like the supernatural, is the superstitious another product of the Western mind? For to accept even temporarily Cather's view on primitive religion, one is bound to ask: which [institutionalized] religion does not grow out of fear of the unknown?) Associated with backwardness, ignorance, and illiteracy, storytelling in the more 'civilized' context is therefore relegated to the realm of children. 'The fact that the story is the product of primitive man,' wrote Herman H. Home, 'explains in part why the children hunger so for the story.' 'Wherever there is no written language, wherever the people are too unlettered to read what is written,' Cather equally remarked, 'they still believe the legends. They love to hear them told and retold . . . As it is with unlettered peasants today, as it was with tribesmen in primitive times and with the great in medieval castle halls, it still is with the child.' Primitive means elementary, therefore infantile. No wonder then that in the West storytelling is treasured above all for its educational force in the kindergarten and primary school. The mission of the storyteller, we thus hear, is to 'teach children the tales their *fathers* knew,' to mold ideals, and to 'illuminate facts.' For children to gain 'right feelings' and to 'think true,' the story as a pedagogical tool must inform so as to keep their opinion 'abreast of the scientific truth of the time, instead of dragging along in the superstitions of the past.' But for the story to be well-told information, it must be related 'in as fascinating a form as [in] the old myths and fables.' Patch up the content of the new and the form of the old, or impose one on the other. The dis-ease lingers on. With (traditional but non-superstitious?) formulas like 'once upon a time' and 'long, long ago,' the storyteller can be reasonably sure of 'making a good beginning.' For many people truth has the connotation of uniformity and prescription. Thinking true means thinking in conformity with a certain scientific (read 'scientistic') discourse produced by certain institutions. Not only has the 'civilized' mind classified many of the realities *it does not understand* in the categories of the untrue and the superstitious, it has also turned the story – as total event of a community, a people – into a *fatherly* lesson for children of a certain age. Indeed, in the 'civilized' context, only children are allowed to indulge in the so-called fantastic or the fantastic-true. They are perceived as belonging to a world apart, one which adults (compassionately) control and populate with toys – that is to say, with false human beings (dolls), false animals, false objects (imitative, diminutive versions of the 'real'). 'Civilized' adults fabricate, structure, and segregate the children's world; they invent toys for the latter to *play* with and stories of a specially adapted, more digestive kind to absorb, yet they insist on molding this world according to the scientifically true – the real, obviously not in its full scale, but in a reduced scale: that which is supposed to be the (God-like-) child's scale. Stories, especially 'primitive-why stories' or fairy tales, must be carefully sorted and graded, for children should neither be 'deceived' nor 'duped' and 'there should never be any doubt in [their] mind as to what is make-believe and what is real.' In other words, the difference 'civilized' adults recognize in the little people's world is a mere matter of scale. The forms of constraint that rule these bigger people's world and allow them to distinguish with certainty the false from the true must, unquestionably, be exactly the same as the ones that regulate the smaller people's world. The apartheid type of difference continues to operate in

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all spheres of 'civilized' life. There does not seem to be any possibility either as to the existence of such things as, for example, two (or more) different realms of make-believe or two (or more) different realms of truth. The 'civilized' mind is an indisputably clear-cut mind. If once upon a time people believed in the story and thought it was true, then why should it be false today? If true and false keep on changing with the times, then isn't it true that what is 'crooked thinking' today may be 'right thinking' tomorrow? What kind of people, we then wonder, walk around asking obstinately: 'Is there not danger of making liars of children by feeding them on these [fairy] stories?' What kind of people set out for northern Alaska to study storytelling among the Indians and come round to writing: 'What especially impressed me was their eagerness to make me understand. To me this eagerness became a proof of the high value they set on their stories and what they represented'? What kind of people, indeed, other than the very kind for whom the story is '*just* a story'?

A REGENERATING FORCE

An oracle and a bringer of joy, the storyteller is the living memory of her time, her people. She composes on life but does not lie, for composing is not imagining, fancying, or inventing. When asked, 'What is oral tradition?' an African 'traditionalist' (a term African scholars consider more accurate than the French term 'griot' or 'griotte,' which tends to confuse traditionalists with mere public entertainers) would most likely be nonplussed. As A. Hampate Ba remarks, '[s/he] might reply, after a lengthy silence. 'It is total knowledge,' and say no more.' She might or might not reply so, for what is called here 'total knowledge' is not really nameable. At least it cannot be named (so) without incurring the risk of sliding right back into one of the many slots the 'civilized' discourse of knowledge readily provides it with. The question 'What is oral tradition?' is a question-answer that needs no answer at all. Let the one who is civilized, the one who invents 'oral tradition,' let him define it for himself. For 'oral' and 'written' or 'written' versus 'oral' are notions that have been as heavily invested as the notions of 'true' and 'false' have always been. (If writing, as mentioned earlier, does not express language but encompasses it, then where does the written stop? The line distinguishing societies with writing from those without writing seems most ill-defined and leaves much to be desired . . .) Living is neither oral nor written – how can the living and the lived be contained in the merely oral? Furthermore, when she composes on life she not only gives information, entertains, develops, or expands the imagination. Not only educates. Only practices a craft. 'Mind breathes mind,' a civilized man wrote, 'power feels power, and absorbs it, as it were. The telling of stories refreshes the mind as a bath refreshes the body; it gives exercise to the intellect and its powers; it tests the judgment and the feelings.' Man's view is always reduced to man's mind. For this is the part of himself he values most. THE MIND. The intellect and its powers. Storytelling allows the 'civilized' narrator above all to renew his mind and exercise power through his intellect. Even though the motto reads 'Think, act, and feel,' his task, he believes, is to ease the passage of the story *from mind to mind*. She, however, who sets out to revive the forgotten, to survive and supersede it ('From stone. Layers. Of stone upon stone between the layers, dormant. No more' [T. Hak Kyung Cha].), she never speaks of and cannot be content with mere matters of the mind – such as mind transmission. The storyteller has long been known as a personage of power. True, she partakes in this living heritage of power. But her powers do more than illuminate or refresh the mind. They extinguish as quickly as they set fire. They wound as easily as they soothe. And not necessarily the mind. Abraham Lincoln accurately observed that the sharpness of a refusal, or the edge of a rebuke, may be blunted by an appropriate story, so as to save wounded feeling and yet serve the purpose . . . story-telling as an emollient saves me much friction and distress.' Yet this is but one more among the countless functions of storytelling. Humidity, receptivity, fecundity. Again, her speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. Great Mother is the goddess of all waters, the protectress of women, and of childbearing, the unweary sentient hearer, the healer and also the bringer of diseases. She who gives always accepts, she who wishes to preserve never fails to refresh. Regenerate.

> She was already in her mid-sixties
> when I discovered that she would listen to me
> to all my questions and speculations.
> I was only seven or eight years old then.
> (Leslie Marmon Silko)

Salivate, secrete the words. No water, no birth, no death, no life. No speech, no song, no story, no force, no power. The entire being is engaged in the act of speaking-listening-weaving-procreating. If she does not cry she will turn into stone. Utter, weep, wet, let it flow so as to break through (it). Layers of stone amidst layers of stone. Break with her own words. The interrelation of woman, water, and word pervades African cosmogonies. Among the Dogon, for example, the process of regeneration which the eight ancestors of the Dogon people had to undergo was carried out in the waters of the womb of the female Nummo (the Nummo spirits form a male and female Pair whose essence is divine) *while she spoke* to herself and to her own sex, accompanied by the male Nummo's voice. 'The spoken Word entered into her and wound itself round her womb in a spiral of eight turns . . . the spiral of the Word gave to the womb its regenerative movement.' Of the fertilizing power of words and their transmissions through women, it is further said that:

> the first Word had been pronounced [read 'scanned'] in front of the genitalia of a woman . . . The Word finally came from the ant-hill, that is, from the mouth of the seventh Nummo [the seventh ancestor and master of speech], which is to say from a woman's genitalia.
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> The Second Word, contained in the craft of weaving, emerged from a mouth, which was also the primordial sex organ, in which the first childbirths took place.

Thus, as a wise Dogon elder (Ogotemmêli) pointed out, 'issuing from a woman's sexual part, the Word enters another sexual part, namely the ear.' (The ear is considered to be bisexual, the auricle being male and the auditory aperture, female.) From the ear, it will, continuing the cycle, go to the sexual part where it encircles the womb. African traditions conceive of speech as a gift of God/dess and a force of creation. In Fulfulde, the word for 'speech' (*haala*) has the connotation of 'giving strength,' and by extension of 'making material.' Speech is the materialization, externalization, and internalization of the vibrations of forces. That is why, A. Hampate Ba noted, 'every manifestation of a force in any form whatever is to be regarded as its speech . . . everything in the universe speaks . . . If speech is strength, that is because it creates a *bond of coming-and-going* which generates *movement and rhythm* and therefore *life and action* [my italics]. This movement to and fro is symbolized by the weaver's feet going up and down . . . (the symbolism of the loom is entirely based on creative speech in action).' Making material: spinning and weaving is a euphonious heritage of wo/mankind handed on from generation to generation of weavers within the clapping of the shuttle and the creaking of the block – which the Dogon call 'the creaking of the Word.' 'The cloth was the Word'; the same term, *soy*, is used among the Dogon to signify both the woven material and the spoken word. Life is a perpetual to and fro, a dis/continuous releasing and absorbing of the self. Let her weave her story within their stories, her life amidst their lives. And while she weaves, let her whip, spur, and set them on fire. Thus making them sing again. Very softly a-new a-gain.

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'TELL IT THE WAY THEY TELL IT'

It is a commonplace for those who consider the story to be just a story to believe that, in order to appropriate the 'traditional' storytellers' powers and to produce the same effects as theirs, it suffices to 'look for the structure of their narratives.' *See them as they see each other*, so goes the (anthropological) creed. 'Tell it the way *they* tell it instead of imposing *our* structure,' they repeat with the best of intentions and a conscience so clear that they pride themselves on it. Disease breeds disease. Those who function best within definite structures and spend their time structuring their own or their peers' existences must obviously 'look for' that which, according to their 'findings' and analyses, is supposed to be 'the structure of their [the storytellers'] narratives.' What we 'look for' is un/fortunately what we shall find. The anthropologist, as we already know, does not find things; s/he *makes* them. And makes them up. The structure is therefore not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person's way of handling realities, here narratives. It is perhaps difficult for an analytical or analytically trained mind to admit that recording, gathering, sorting, deciphering, analyzing and synthesizing, dissecting and articulating are already 'imposing our [/a] structure,' a structural activity, a structuring of the mind, a whole mentality. (Can one 'look for a structure' without structuring?) But it is particularly difficult for a dualistic or dualistically trained mind to recognize that 'looking for the structure of their narratives' already involves the separation of the structure from the narratives, of the structure from that which is structured, of the narrative from the narrated, and so on. It is, once more, as if form and content stand apart; as if the structure can remain fixed, immutable, independent of and unaffected by the changes the narratives undergo; as if a structure can only function as a standard mold within the old determinist schema of cause and product. Listen, for example, to what a man of the West had to say on the form of the story:

> Independent of the content which the story carries, and which may vary from history to nonsense, is the form of the story which is practically the same in all stories. The content is varied and particular, the form is the same and universal.

> Now there are four main elements in the form of each story, viz. the beginning, the development, the climax, and the end.

Just like the Western drama with its four or five acts. A drama whose naïve claim to universality would not fail to make this man of the West our laughingstock. 'A good story,' another man of the West asserted, 'must have a beginning that rouses interest, a succession of events that is orderly and complete, a climax that forms the story's point, and an end that leaves the mind at rest.' No criteria other than those quoted here show a more thorough investment of the Western mind. Get *them* – children, story-believers – *at the start*; *make your point* by ordering events to a definite *climax*; then *round out to completion*; descend to a rapid close – not one, for example, that puzzles or keeps them puzzling over the story, but one that *leaves the mind at rest*. In other words, to be 'good' a story must be built in conformity with the ready-made idea some people – Western adults – have of reality, that is to say, a set of prefabricated schemata (prefabricated by whom?) they value out of habit, conservatism, and ignorance (of other ways of telling and listening to stories). If these criteria are to be adopted, then countless non-Western stories will fall straight into the category of 'bad' stories. Unless one makes it up or invents a reason for its absence, one of these four elements required always seems to be missing. The stories in question either have no development, no climax that forms the story's point, or no end that leaves the mind at rest. (One can say of the majority of these stories that their endings precisely refute such generalization and rationale for they offer no security of this kind. An example among endless others is the moving story of 'The Laguna People' passed on by Marmon Silko, which ends with a little girl, her sister, and the people turning into stone while they sat on top of a mesa, after they had escaped the flood in their home village below. Because of the disquieting nature of the resolution here, the storytellers (Marmon Silko and her aunt) then add, as a compromise to the fact-oriented mind of today's audience: 'The story ends there. / Some of the stories / Aunt Susi told / have this kind of ending. / There are no explanations.' There is no point (to be) made either.) 'Looking for the structure of *their* narratives' so as to 'tell it the way *they* tell it' is an attempt at remedying this ignorance of other ways of telling and listening (and, obviously, at re-validating the nativist discourse). In doing so, however, rare are those who realize that what they come up with is not 'structure of *their* narratives' but a reconstruction of the story that, at best, makes a number of its functions appear. Rare are those who acknowledge the unavoidable transfer of values in the 'search' and admit that 'the attempt will remain largely illusory: we shall never know if the other, into whom we cannot, after all, dissolve, fashions from the elements of [her/]his social existence a synthesis exactly superimposable on that which we have worked out.' The attempt will remain illusory as long as the controlled succession of certain mental operations which constitutes the structural activity is not made explicit and dealt with – not just mentioned. Life is not a (Western) drama of four or five acts. Sometimes it just drifts along; it may go on year after year without development, without climax, without definite beginnings or endings. Or it may accumulate climax upon climax, and if one chooses to mark it with beginnings and endings, then everything has a beginning and an ending. There are, in this sense, no good or bad stories. In life, we usually don't know when an event is occurring; we think it is starting when it is already ending; and we don't see its in/significance. The present, which saturates the total field of our environment, is often invisible to us. The structural activity that does not carry on the cleavage between form and content but emphasizes the interrelation of the material and the intelligible is an activity in which structure should remain an unending question: one that speaks him/her as s/he speaks it, brings it to intelligibility.

'THE STORY MUST BE TOLD. THERE MUST NOT BE ANY LIES'

'Looking for the structure of their narratives' is like looking for the pear shape in Erik Satie's musical composition *Trois Pièces en Forme de Poire* (Three Pieces in a Pear Shape). (The composition was written after Satie met with Claude Debussy, who criticized his music for 'lacking of form.') If structure, as a man (R. Barthes) pertinently defines it, is 'the residual deposit of duration,' then again, rare are those who can handle it by letting it come, instead of hunting for it or hunting it down, filling it with their own marks and markings so as to consign it to the meaningful and lay claim to it. *'They see no life / When they look / they see only objects.'* The ready-made idea they have of reality prevents their perceiving the story as a living thing, an organic process, a way of life. What is taken for stories, only stories, are fragments of/in life, fragments that never stop interacting while being complete in themselves. A story in Africa may last three months. The storyteller relates it night after night, continually, or s/he starts it one night and takes it up again from that point three months later. Meanwhile, as the occasion arises, s/he may start on yet another story. Such is life . . . :

> The gussucks [the Whites] did not understand the story; they could not see the way it must be told, year after year as the old man had done, without lapse or silence. . . .
>
> It began a long time ago,' she intoned steadily . . . she did not pause or hesitate; she went on with the story, and she never stopped. . . .

'Storyteller,' from which these lines are excerpted, is another story, another gift of life passed on by Marmon Silko. It presents an example of multiple storytelling in which story and life merge, the story being as complex as life and life being as simple as a story. The story of 'Storyteller' is the layered making of four storytellers: Marmon Silko, the woman in the story, her grandmother, and the person, referred to as 'the old man.' Except for Marmon Silko who plays here the role of the coordinator, each of these three storytellers has her/his own story to live and live with. Despite the differences in characters or in subject matter, their stories closely interact and constantly overlap. The woman makes of her story a continuation of her grandmother's, which was left with no ending – the grandmother being thereby compelled to bear it (the story) until her death, her knees and knuckles swollen grotesquely, 'swollen with anger' as she explained it. She bore it, knowing that her granddaughter will have to bear it too: 'It will take a long time,' she said 'but the story must be told. There must not be any lies.' Sometime after her death, exactly when does not matter, when the time comes, the granddaughter picks up the story where her grandmother left it and carries it to its end accordingly, the way 'it must be told.' She carries it to a certain completion by bringing in death where she intends to have it in her story: the white storeman who lied in her grandma's story and was the author of her parents' death would have to pay for his lies, but his death would also have to be of his own making. The listener/reader does not (have to) know whether the storeman in the granddaughter's story is the same as the one who, according to the grandmother, 'left right after that [after he lied and killed]' (hence making it apparently impossible for the old woman to finish her story). A storeman becomes *the* storeman, the man in the store, the man in the story. (The truthfulness of the story, as we already know, does not limit itself to the realm of facts.) Which story? The story. What grandma began, granddaughter completes and passes on to be further completed. As a storyteller, the woman (the granddaughter) does not, directly kill; she decides when and where that storeman will find death, but she does not carry out a hand-to-hand fight and her murder of him is no murder in the common, factual sense of the term: all she needs to do is set in motion the necessary forces and let them act on their own.

> They asked her again, what happened to the man from the Northern Commercial Store. 'He lied to them. He told them it was safe to drink. But I will not lie. . . . I killed him,' she said, 'but I don't lie.'

When she is in jail, the Gussuck attorney advises her to tell the court the truth which is that it was an accident, that the storeman ran after her in the cold and fell through the ice. That's all what she has to say – then 'they will let [her] go home. Back to [her] village.'

> She shook her head. 'I will not change the story, not even to escape this place and go home. I intended that he die. The story must be told as it is.' The attorney exhaled loudly; his eyes looked tired. 'Tell her that she could not have killed him that way. He was a white man. He ran after her without a parka or mittens. She could not have planned that.'

When the helpful, conscientious (full-of-the-white-man's-complex-of-superiority) attorney concludes that he will do 'all [he] can for her' and will explain to the judge that 'her mind is confused,' she laughs out loud and finally decides to tell him the story anew: '*It began a long time ago* . . . ' (my italics). He says she could not have killed that white man because, again, for him the story is just a story. But Thought-Woman, Spider-Woman is a fairy and a witch who protects her people and tells stories to effect cures. As she names Death, Death appears. The spell is cast. Only death gives an ending to the stories in 'Storyteller.' (The old man's story of the giant bear overlaps with the granddaughter's story and ends the moment the old man – the storyteller – dies.) Marmon Silko as a storyteller never loses sight of the difference between truth and fact. Her naming retains the accuracy and magic of our grandmothers' storytelling without ever confining itself to the realm of factual naming. It is accurate because it is at once extremely flexible and rigid, not because it wishes to stick to certain rules of correctness for reasons of mere conservatism (scholars studying traditional storytelling are often impressed by the storyteller's 'necessity of telling the stories correctly,' as they put it). It is accurate because it partakes in the setting into motion of forces that lie dormant in us. Because, as African storytellers sing, 'the tongue that falsifies the word / taints the blood of [her/]him that lies.' Because she who bears it in her belly cannot cut herself off from herself. Off from the bond of coming-and-going. Off from her great mothers.

Day 5: FRAMING NARRATIVES & AUTHORITY:

What happens when one story is framed by (or nested within) another? It's one of the most ancient forms of narrative organisation. It is as a way of introducing a counter view, a way of staging or disrupting authority – frame or nested narratives as exercises in offsetting points of view and exploring their limitations.

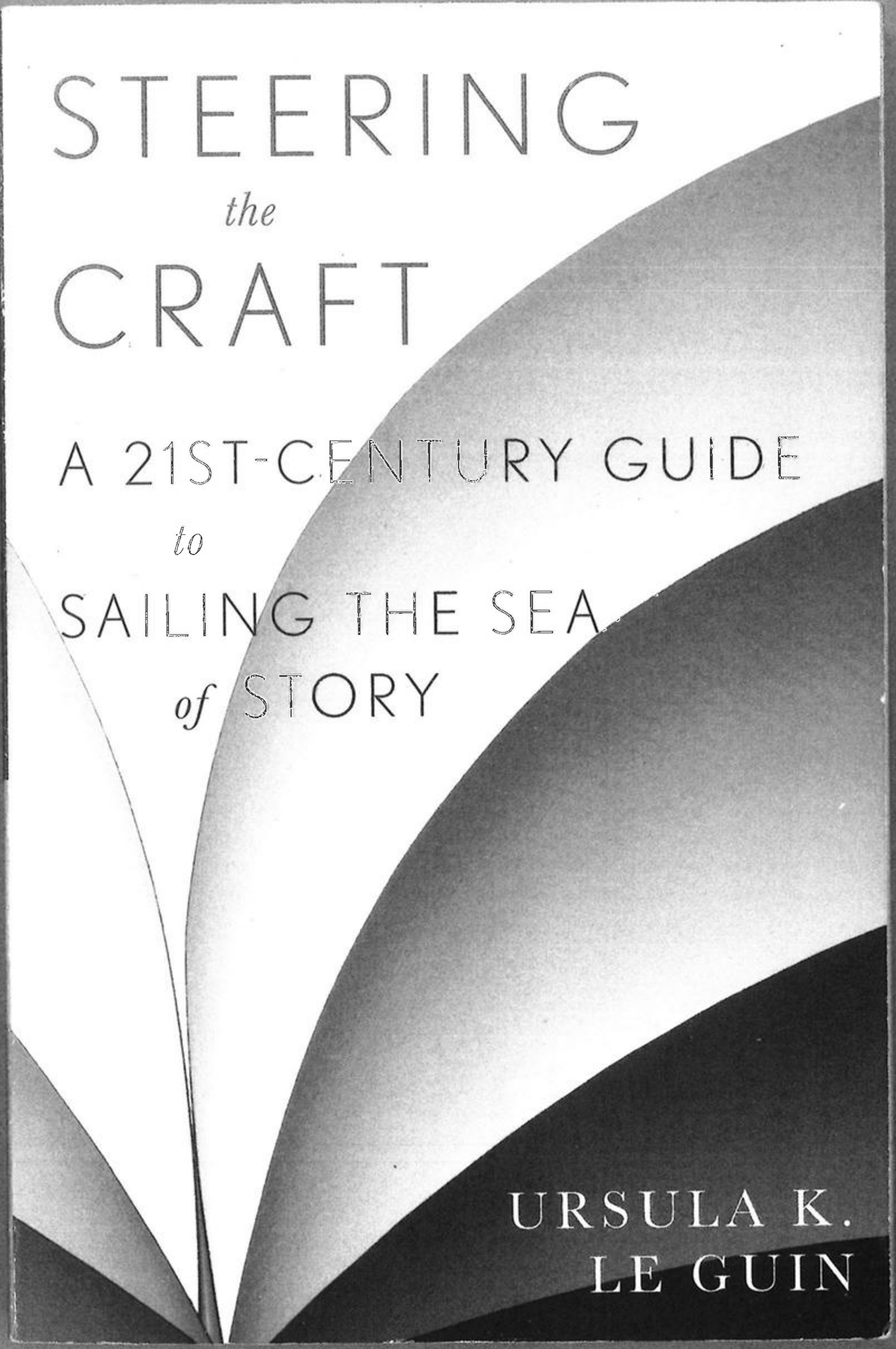
Screening of *Weightless* (2022) and Q&A with the artists.

Day 6: WHO / WHAT TELLS?

Ursula Le Guin, ‘Point of View and Voice’ and ‘Changing Point of View’ from Steering the Craft: A 21st Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story (2015)

Jane Bennett, excerpt from *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009)

End of day round up of the thematic: new vocabulary and questions to carry forward…



STEERING *the* CRAFT

A 21ST-CENTURY GUIDE *to* SAILING THE SEAS *of* STORY

URSULA K.
LE GUIN

To think or talk about after writing: Were you more at ease writing past or present tense? First or third person? Why?

It can be useful to read narrative prose with a particular consciousness of what persons and tenses of the verb are used, why the author may have used them, how well they're used, what effect they give, whether and how often and why the narrative tense is changed.

I saw that he was lost in his memories, like a boat that drifts on its own reflection.

7. point of view and voice

POINT OF VIEW (POV FOR SHORT) IS THE technical term for *who is telling the story and what their relation to the story is.*

This person, if a character in the story, is called the *viewpoint character.* The only other person it can be is the author.

Voice is a word critics often use in discussing narrative. It's always metaphorical, since what's written is voiceless until read aloud. Often *voice* is a kind of shorthand for authenticity (writing in your own voice, catching the true voice of a person, and so on). I'm using it naively and pragmatically to mean *the voice or voices that tell the story,* the narrating voice. In this book, at this point, I'll treat voice and point of view as so intimately involved and interdependent as to be the same thing.

THE PRINCIPAL POINTS OF VIEW

What follows is my attempt to define and describe the five principal narrative points of view. Each description is followed by an example: a paragraph told in that POV, from a nonexistent story called "Princess Sefrid." It's the same scene each time, the same people, the same events. Only the viewpoint changes.

A Note on the "Reliable Narrator"

In autobiography and memoir — in nonfiction narrative of any kind — the *I* (whether the writer uses it or not) is the author. In these forms, we normally expect the author/narrator to be reliable: to try honestly to tell us what they think happened — not to invent, but to relate.

The immense difficulty of relating facts honestly has been used to justify the choice not to relate facts honestly. Some nonfiction writers, claiming fiction's privilege of invention, deliberately alter facts in order to present a "truth" superior to what merely happened. The memoirists and nonfiction writers I respect are fully aware of the impossibility of being perfectly factual, and wrestle with it as with an angel, but never use it to excuse lying.

In fiction, however autobiographical-confessional it may be, the narrator is by definition fictive. All the same, most narrators, first or third person, in serious fiction used to be trustworthy. But our shifty age favors "unreliable narrators" who — deliberately or innocently — misrepresent the facts.

The motivation here is very different from that of the dishonest nonfiction writer. Fictional narrators who suppress or distort facts or make mistakes in relating or interpreting the events are almost always telling us something about themselves (and perhaps about us). The author lets us see or guess what "really" happened, and using this as a touchstone, we readers are led to understand how other people see the world, and why they (and we?) see it that way.

A familiar example of a semireliable narrator is Huck Finn. Huck is an honest person, but he misinterprets a good deal of what he sees. For instance, he never understands that Jim is the only adult in his world who treats him with love and honor, and he never really understands that he loves and honors Jim. The fact that he can't understand it tells us an appalling truth about the world he and Jim — and we — live in.

Princess Sefrid, as you will see by comparing her relation with those of other viewpoint characters, is entirely reliable.

First Person

In first-person narration, the viewpoint character is "I." "I" tells the story and is centrally involved in it. Only what "I" knows, feels, perceives, thinks, guesses, hopes, remembers, etc., can be told. The reader can infer what other people feel and who they are only from what "I" sees, hears, and says of them.

Princess Sefrid: First-Person Narration

I felt so strange and lonesome entering the room crowded with strangers that I wanted to turn around and run, but Rassa

> was right behind me, and I had to go ahead. People spoke to me, asked Rassa my name. In my confusion I couldn't tell one face from another or understand what people were saying to me and answered them almost at random. Only for a moment I caught the glance of a person in the crowd, a woman looking directly at me, and there was a kindness in her eyes that made me long to go to her. She looked like somebody I could talk to.

Limited Third Person

The viewpoint character is "he" or "she." "He" or "she" tells the story and is centrally involved in it. Only what the viewpoint character knows, feels, perceives, thinks, guesses, hopes, remembers, etc., can be told. The reader can infer what other people feel and are only from what the viewpoint character observes of their behavior. This limitation to the perceptions of one person may be consistent throughout a whole book, or the narrative may shift from one viewpoint character to another. Such shifts are usually signaled in some way, and usually don't happen at very short intervals.

Tactically, limited third is identical to first person. It has exactly the same essential limitation: that nothing can be seen, known, or told except what the narrator sees, knows, and tells. That limitation concentrates the voice and gives apparent authenticity.

It seems that you could change the narration from first to limited third person by merely instructing the computer to switch the pronoun, then correct verb endings throughout, and voilà. But it isn't that simple. First person is a different voice from limited third. The reader's relationship to that voice is different —because the author's relationship to it is different. Being "I" is not the same as being "he" or "she." In the long run, it takes a quite different imaginative energy, both for the writer and for the reader.

There is no guarantee, by the way, that the limited third-person narrator is reliable.

Stream of consciousness* is a particularly inward form of limited third person.

Princess Sefrid: Limited Third Person

> Sefrid felt isolated, conspicuous, as she entered the room crowded with strangers. She would have turned around and run back to her room, but Rassa was right behind her, and she had to go ahead. People spoke to her. They asked Rassa her name. In her confusion she could not tell one face from another or understand what people said to her. She answered them at random. Only once, for a moment, a woman looked directly at her through the crowd, a keen, kind gaze that made Sefrid long to cross the room and talk to her.

√ *Involved Author ("Omniscient Author")*

The story is not told from within any single character. There may be numerous viewpoint characters, and the narrative voice may change at any time from one to another character within the story, or to a view, perception, analysis, or prediction that only the author could make. (For example, the description of what a person who is quite alone looks like, or the description of a landscape or a room at a moment when there's nobody there to see it.) The writer may tell us what anyone is thinking and feeling, interpret behavior for us, and even make judgments on characters.

This is the familiar voice of the storyteller, who knows what's going on in all the different places the characters are at the same time, and what's going on inside the characters, and what has happened, and what has to happen.

All myths and legends and folktales, all young children's stories, almost all fiction until about 1915, and a vast amount of fiction since then use this voice.

I don't like the common term "omniscient author," because I hear a judgmental sneer in it. I prefer "involved author." "Authorial narration" is a neutral term which I will also use.

Limited third person is the predominant modern fictional voice – partly in reaction to the Victorian fondness for involved-author narration and the many possible abuses of it.

Involved author is the most openly, obviously manipulative of the points of view. But the voice of the narrator who knows the whole story, tells it because it is important, and is profoundly involved with all the characters cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned or uncool. It's not only the oldest and the most widely used storytelling voice, it's also the most versatile, flexible, and complex of the points of view – and probably, at this point, the most difficult for the writer.

Princess Sefrid: Involved Author ("Omniscient Author")

The Tufarian girl entered the room hesitantly, her arms close to her sides, her shoulders hunched; she looked both frightened and indifferent, like a captured wild animal. The big Hemmian ushered her in with a proprietary air and introduced her complacently as "Princess Sefrid" or "the princess of Tufar." People pressed close, eager to meet her or simply to stare at her. She endured them, seldom raising her head, replying to their inanities briefly, in a barely audible voice. Even in the pressing, chattering crowd she created a space around herself, a place to be lonely in. No one touched her. They were not aware that they avoided her, but she was. Out of that solitude she looked up to meet a gaze that was not curious but open, intense, compassionate – a face that said to her, through the sea of strangeness, "I am your friend."

Detached Author ("Fly on the Wall," "Camera Eye," "Objective Narrator")

There is no viewpoint character. The narrator is not one of the characters and can say of the characters only what a totally neutral observer (an intelligent fly on the wall) might infer of them from behavior and speech. The author never enters a character's mind. People and places may be exactly described, but values and judgments can only be implied indirectly. A popular voice around 1900 and in "minimalist" and "brand-name" fiction, it is the least overtly, most covertly manipulative of the points of view.

It's excellent practice for writers who expect codependent readers. When we're new at writing, we may expect our readers to respond just as we respond to what we're writing about – to cry because we're crying. But this is a childish, not a writerly, relation to the reader. If you can move a reader while using this cool voice, you've got something really moving going on.

Princess Sefrid: Detached Author ("Fly on the Wall," "Camera Eye," "Objective Narrator")

The princess from Tufar entered the room, followed closely by the big man from Hemm. She walked with long steps, her arms close to her sides and her shoulders hunched. Her hair was thick and frizzy. She stood still while the Hemmian introduced her, calling her Princess Sefrid of Tufar. Her eyes did not meet the eyes of any of the people who crowded around her, staring at her and asking her questions. None of them tried to touch her. She replied briefly to everything said to her. She and an older woman near the tables of food exchanged a brief glance.

Observer-Narrator, Using the First Person

The narrator is one of the characters but not the principal character — present, but not a major actor in the events. The difference from first-person narration is that the story is not about the narrator. It's a story the narrator witnessed and wants to tell us. Both fiction and nonfiction use this voice.

Princess Sefrid: Observer-Narrator in First Person

She wore Tufarian clothing, the heavy red robes I had not seen for so long; her hair stood out like a storm cloud around the dark, narrow face. Crowded forward by her owner, the Hemmian slavemaster called Rassa, she looked small, hunched, defensive, but she preserved around herself a space that was all her own. She was a captive, an exile, yet I saw in her young face the pride and kindness I had loved in her people, and I longed to speak with her.

Observer-Narrator, Using the Third Person

This point of view is limited to fiction. The tactic is much the same as the last one. The viewpoint character is a limited third-person narrator who witnesses the events.

As unreliability is a complex and subtle way of showing the narrator's character and the observer-narrator isn't the protagonist, the reader is usually safe in assuming that this viewpoint character is fairly reliable, or at least transparent, both in first and third person.

Princess Sefrid: Observer-Narrator in Third Person

She wore Tufarian clothing, the heavy red robes Anna had not seen for fifteen years. Crowded forward by her owner, the Hemmian slavemaster called Rassa, the princess looked small, hunched, defensive, but she preserved around herself a space that was all her own. She was a captive, an exile, yet Anna saw in her young face the pride and kindness she had loved in the Tufarians, and longed to speak with her.

FURTHER READING

Look at a bunch of stories in an anthology or pull down a bunch of novels from your shelf (from as wide a span of time as possible) and identify the viewpoint character(s) and the point(s) of view of the narration. Notice if they change, and if so, how often.

CONSIDERATIONS ON CHANGING POINT OF VIEW

I'm going into all this detail because the narrative problem I have met most often in workshop stories (and often in published work) is in handling POV: inconsistency and frequent changes of POV.

It's a problem even in nonfiction, when the author starts telling the reader what Aunt Jane was thinking and why Uncle Fred swallowed the grommet. A memoirist doesn't have the right to do this without clearly indicating that Aunt Jane's thoughts and Uncle Fred's motives aren't known facts but the author's guesswork, opinion, or interpretation. Memoirists can't be omniscient, even for a moment.

In fiction, inconsistent POV is a very frequent problem. Unless handled with awareness and skill, frequent POV shifts jerk the reader around, bouncing in and out of incompatible identifications, confusing emotion, garbling the story.

Any shift from one of the five POVs outlined above to another is a dangerous one. It's a major change of voice to go from first to third person, or from involved author to observer-narrator. The shift will affect the whole tone and structure of your narrative.

Shifts within limited third person — from one character's mind to another's — call for equal awareness and care. A writer must be aware of, have a reason for, and be in control of all shifts of viewpoint character.

I feel like writing the last two paragraphs all over again, but that would be rude. Could I ask you to read them over again?

The POV exercises are intended to make you temporarily superconscious, and forever conscious, of what POV you're using and when and how you shift it.

Limited third is, at present, the person most fiction writers are most used to using. First person is, of course, the voice memoirists mostly use. I think it's a good idea for all of us to try all the other possibilities.

Fiction writers are used to writing in other people's voices, being other selves. But memoirists aren't. To use limited third person in factual narrative is to trespass, pretending you know what another real person thought and felt. But there's no problem with pretending you know what somebody you invented thinks and feels. So I recommend that, just for the exercise, memoirists invent a story, make up characters, in the shameless way fiction writers do.

EXERCISE SEVEN: Points of View

Think up a situation for a narrative sketch of 200–350 words. It can be anything you like but should involve *several people doing something.* (Several means more than two. More than three will be useful.) It doesn't have to be a big, important event, though it can be; but something should *happen,* even if only a cart tangle at the supermarket, a wrangle around the table concerning the family division of labor, or a minor street accident.

Please use little or no dialogue in these POV exercises. While the characters talk, their voices cover the POV, and so you're not exploring that voice, which is the point of the exercise.

Part One: Two Voices

First: Tell your little story from a single POV, that of a participant in the event – an old man, a child, a cat, whatever you like. Use limited third person.

Second: *Retell the story* from the POV of one of the other people involved in it. Again, use limited third person.

* * *

As we go on into the next parts of this exercise, if your little scene or situation or story runs dry, invent another one along the same lines. But if the original one seems to keep turning up new possibilities in different voices, just go on exploring them through it. That will be the most useful, informative way to do the exercise.

* * *

Part Two: Detached Narrator

Tell the same story using the detached author or "fly on the wall" POV.

Part Three: Observer-Narrator

If there wasn't a character in the original version who was there but was not a participant, only an onlooker,

add such a character now. Tell the same story in that character's voice, in first or third person.

Part Four: Involved Author

Tell the same or a new story using the involved-author POV.

Part Four may require you to expand the whole thing, up to two or three pages, 1000 words or so. You may find you need to give it a context, find out what led up to it, or follow it further. The detached author takes up as little room as possible, but the involved author needs a fair amount of time and space to move around in.

If your original story simply doesn't lend itself to this voice, find a story you want to tell that you can be emotionally and morally involved in. I don't mean by that that it has to be factually true (if it is, you may have trouble getting out of the autobiographical mode into the involved author's voice, which is a *fictional* mode). And I don't mean that you should use your story to preach. I do mean that the story should be about something that concerns you.

* * *

Note: Unspoken Thoughts

Many writers worry about how to present characters' unspoken thoughts. Editors are likely to put thoughts into italics if you don't stop them.

Thoughts are handled exactly like dialogue, if you present them directly:

> "Heavens," Aunt Jane thought, "he's eating that grommet!"

But in presenting characters' thoughts you don't have to use quotation marks, and using italics or any typographical device can overemphasize the material. Just make it clear that this bit is going on inside somebody's head. Ways of doing so are various:

> As soon as she heard Jim shout, Aunt Jane knew Fred had swallowed the grommet after all.
>
> I just know he's going to swallow that grommet again, Jane said to herself as she sorted buttons.
>
> Oh, Jane thought, I do wish the old fool would hurry up and swallow that grommet!

In critiquing these exercises in point of view, and in thinking and talking about them later, various strong preferences for certain voices and points of view may come out; it can be interesting to consider and discuss them.

Later on, you may want to return to some of these exercises, using the instructions on a different story, perhaps recombining the exercises. The choice of point(s) of view, the voice in which one narrates one's story, can make an immense difference to the tone, the effect, even the meaning of the story. Writers often find that a story they want to tell "sticks" and won't go right until

they find the right person to tell it—whether it's a choice between first and third person, or between the involved author and a limited third-person narrator, or between a character involved in the action and a bystander, or between one and several narrators. The following optional exercises might help bring out the wealth of choices and the necessity of choosing.

Optional Additions to EXERCISE SEVEN

Tell a different story, with both versions in the first person instead of limited third.

Or tell the story of an accident twice: once in the detached author mode, or in a journalistic, reportorial voice, then from the viewpoint of a character involved in the accident.

If there's a mode or voice you don't particularly like, that's probably the one you should try again, if only to find out why you dislike it. (I'm sure you'll like your tapioca if you'll just try it, dear.)

* * *

Because omniscience is out of fashion and some readers aren't used to a narrator who admits to knowing the whole story, I thought it might be useful to offer some examples of the involved authorial POV.

Two of them are Victorian, with all the excesses and all the vitality of the shamelessly engaged narrator. This paragraph from

Uncle Tom's Cabin describes the slave Eliza running away, having learned that her child is to be sold.

Example 11

Harriet Beecher Stowe: from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*

> The frosty ground creaked beneath her feet, and she trembled at the sound; every quaking leaf and fluttering shadow sent the blood backward to her heart, and quickened her footsteps. She wondered within herself at the strength that seemed to be come upon her; for she felt the weight of her boy as if it had been a feather, and every flutter of fear seemed to increase the supernatural power that bore her on, while from her pale lips burst forth, in frequent ejaculations, the prayer to a Friend above—"Lord, help! Lord, save me!"
>
> If it were *your* Harry, mother, or your Willie, that were going to be torn from you by a brutal trader, tomorrow morning,—if you had seen the man, and heard that the papers were signed and delivered, and you had only from twelve o'clock till morning to make good your escape,—how fast could *you* walk? How many miles could you make in those few brief hours, with the darling at your bosom,—the little sleepy head on your shoulder,—the small, soft arms trustingly holding on to your neck?

The power of such scenes is of course cumulative, but even in this fragment I find the author's sudden turn to the reader startling and moving—"How fast could you walk?"

Example 12 is the first pages of the first three chapters of

Dickens's *Bleak House*. The first two chapters are in the involved authorial voice, present tense; the third is in the first person, past tense, the narrator being the character Esther Summerson. The chapters alternate this way throughout the book—an unusual alternation, which I'll talk more about later.

Example 12

Charles Dickens: from *Bleak House*

CHAPTER I: IN CHANCERY

> LONDON. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foothold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.
>
> Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among

green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping, and the water-side pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.

Fog on the Essex marshes; fog on the Kentish heights. Fog creeping into the cabooses of collier-brigs; fog lying out on the yards, and hovering in the rigging of great ships; fog drooping on the gunwales of barges and small boats. Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of his shivering little 'prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds.

Gas looming through the fog in divers places in the streets, much as the sun may, from the spongy fields, be seen to loom by husbandman and ploughboy. Most of the shops lighted two hours before their time — as the gas seems to know, for it has a haggard and unwilling look.

The raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar. And hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln's Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery.

CHAPTER II: IN FASHION

My Lady Dedlock has returned to her house in town for a few days previous to her departure for Paris, where her ladyship intends to stay some weeks; after which her movements are uncertain. The fashionable intelligence says so, for the comfort of the Parisians, and it knows all fashionable things. To know things otherwise, were to be unfashionable. My Lady Dedlock has been down at what she calls, in familiar conversation, her "place" in Lincolnshire. The waters are out in Lincolnshire. An arch of the bridge in the park has been sapped and sopped away. The adjacent low-lying ground, for half a mile in breadth, is a stagnant river, with melancholy trees for islands in it, and a surface punctured all over, all day long, with falling rain. My Lady Dedlock's "place" has been extremely dreary. The weather, for many a day and night, has been so wet that the trees seem wet through, and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman's axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave quagmires, where they pass.

The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. The view from my Lady Dedlock's own windows is alternately a lead-colored view, and a view in Indian ink. The vases on the stone terrace in the foreground catch the rain all day; and the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost's Walk, all night. On Sundays, the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. My Lady Dedlock (who is childless), looking out in the early twilight from her boudoir at a keeper's lodge, and seeing the light of a fire upon the latticed panes, and smoke rising from the chimney, and a child, chased by a woman, running out into the rain to meet the shining figure of a wrapped-up man coming through the gate, has been put quite out of temper. My Lady Dedlock says she has been "bored to death."

Therefore my Lady Dedlock has come away from the place in Lincolnshire, and has left it to the rain, and the crows, and the rabbits, and the deer, and the partridges and pheasants. The pictures of the Dedlocks past and gone have seemed to vanish into the damp walls in mere lowness of spirits, as the housekeeper has passed along the old rooms, shutting up the shutters. And when they will next come forth again, the fashionable intelligence — which, like the fiend, is omniscient of the past and present, but not the future — cannot yet undertake to say.

Sir Leicester Dedlock is only a baronet, but there is no mightier baronet than he. His family is as old as the hills, and infinitely more respectable. He has a general opinion that the world might get on without hills, but would be done up without Dedlocks. He would on the whole admit Nature to be a good idea (a little low, perhaps, when not enclosed with a park-fence), but an idea dependent for its execution on your great county families. He is a gentleman of strict conscience, disdainful of all littleness and meanness, and ready, on the shortest notice, to die any death you may please to mention rather than give occasion for the least impeachment of his integrity. He is an honorable, obstinate, truthful, high-spirited, intensely prejudiced, perfectly unreasonable man.

CHAPTER III: A PROGRESS

I have a great deal of difficulty in beginning to write my portion of these pages, for I know I am not clever. I always knew that. I can remember, when I was a very little girl indeed, I used to say to my doll, when we were alone together, "Now Dolly, I am not clever, you know very well, and you must be patient with me, like a dear!" And so she used to sit propped up in a great arm-chair, with her beautiful complexion and rosy lips, staring at me — or not so much at me, I think, as at nothing — while I busily stitched away, and told her every one of my secrets.

My dear old doll! I was such a shy little thing that I seldom dared to open my lips, and never dared to open my heart, to anybody else. It almost makes me cry to think what a relief it used to be to me, when I came home from school of a day, to run up-stairs to my room, and say, "O you dear faithful Dolly, I knew you would be expecting me!" and then to sit down on the floor, leaning on the elbow of her great chair, and tell her all I had noticed since we parted. I had always rather a noticing way — not a quick way, O no! — a silent way of noticing what passed before me, and thinking I should like to understand it better. I have not by any means a quick understanding. When I love a person very tenderly indeed, it seems to brighten.

But even that may be my vanity.

I was brought up, from my earliest remembrance — like some of the princesses in the fairy stories, only I was not charming — by my godmother. At least I only knew her as such. She was a good, good woman! She went to church three times every Sunday, and to morning prayers on Wednesdays and Fridays, and to lectures whenever there were lectures; and never missed. She was handsome; and if she had ever smiled, would have been (I used to think) like an angel—but she never smiled. She was always grave and strict. She was so very good herself, I thought, that the badness of other people made her frown all her life. I felt so different from her, even making every allowance for the differences between a child and a woman; I felt so poor, so trifling, and so far off; that I never could be unrestrained with her—no, could never even love her as I wished. It made me very sorry to consider how good she was, and how unworthy of her I was; and I used ardently to hope that I might have a better heart; and I talked it over very often with the dear old doll; but I never loved my godmother as I ought to have loved her, and as I felt I must have loved her if I had been a better girl.

Example 13, a bit from *The Lord of the Rings,* gives a charming glimpse of the range open to the involved author, who can drop into the POV of a passing fox. The fox "never found out any more about it," and we never find out any more about the fox; but there he is, alert and alive, all in one moment, watching for us the obscure beginning of a great adventure.

Example 13

J.R.R. Tolkien: from *The Lord of the Rings*

"I am so sleepy," he said, "that soon I shall fall down on the road. Are you going to sleep on your legs? It is nearly midnight."

"I thought you liked walking in the dark," said Frodo. "But there is no great hurry. Merry expects us some time the day after tomorrow; but that leaves us nearly two days more. We'll halt at the first likely spot."

"The wind's in the West," said Sam. "If we get to the other side of this hill, we shall find a spot that is sheltered and snug enough, sir. There is a dry fir-wood just ahead, if I remember rightly." Sam knew the land well within twenty miles of Hobbiton, but that was the limit of his geography.

Just over the top of the hill they came on the patch of fir-wood. Leaving the road they went into the deep resin-scented darkness of the trees, and gathered dead sticks and cones to make a fire. Soon they had a merry crackle of flame at the foot of a large fir-tree and they sat round it for a while, until they began to nod. Then, each in an angle of the great tree's roots, they curled up in their cloaks and blankets, and were soon fast asleep. They set no watch; even Frodo feared no danger yet, for they were still in the heart of the Shire. A few creatures came and looked at them when the fire had died away. A fox passing through the wood on business of his own stopped several minutes and sniffed.

"Hobbits!" he thought. "Well, what next? I have heard of strange doings in this land, but I have seldom heard of a hobbit sleeping out of doors under a tree. Three of them! There's something mighty queer behind this." He was quite right, but he never found out any more about it.

If you go back to Example 8, from the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse,* you'll see the involved author moving in and out of her own perceptions and characters' points of view so swiftly and so easily that the points of view dissolve into one another and into a voice which is the "voice of the beauty of the world," but which is also the voice of the book itself, the story telling itself. This kind of quick, unsignaled shifting, discussed further below, is rare, and takes immense certainty and skill.

FURTHER READING

The involved author or "omniscient" author: I'm a little shy about telling anybody to go read Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* since it's quite an undertaking; but it is a wonderful book. And from the technical aspect, it's almost miraculous in the way it shifts imperceptibly from the author's voice to the point of view of a character, speaking with perfect simplicity in the inner voice of a man, a woman, even a hunting dog, and then back to the thoughts of the author . . . till by the end you feel you have lived many lives: which is perhaps the greatest gift a novel can give.

The detached narrator or "fly on the wall": Any of the writers who called themselves "minimalist," such as Raymond Carver, wrote stories that provide good examples of this technique.

The observer-narrator: Henry James and Willa Cather both used this device frequently. James used limited third person for his observer-narrators, which distances the whole story. Cather used a male witness-narrator in the first person, notably in *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady,* and it is interesting to speculate on why a woman writer might speak through a male mask.

The unreliable narrator: Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" is a classic example. We'd better not believe everything the governess tells us, and we must look through what she says for what she leaves out. Is she deceiving us or herself?

Point of view in genre fiction is interesting. One might expect most science fiction to be written without getting inside the characters, but if you read it, you'll find this is not true at all. Quite unpretentious series-novels, such as those that use the characters from *Star Trek,* may be highly sophisticated in their changes of POV.

Many mysteries are written "omnisciently," but the limitation and development of the narrator's knowledge is often the central device of a mystery, and many of the finest, like Tony Hillerman's Southwestern or Donna Leon's Venetian or Sara Paretsky's Chicago mysteries, are told from the viewpoint of the detective.

Romances are conventionally told in limited third person, through the perceptions of the heroine, but first-person, observer-narrator, and involved-author narration are equally suited to the genre.

A founding classic of the Western novel, Owen Wister's *The Virginian,* is mostly told in the first person by an Eastern greenhorn observer-narrator (and many later writers in the genre imitated this ploy). Wister switches, a little awkwardly, into authorial narration to tell us events that the observer-narrator couldn't have observed. Molly Gloss's beautiful Western novel *The Jump-Off Creek* moves back and forth between first person in diary entries and limited third person. An interesting example of personal memoir told in letters — and at one very painful point told in the third person, as if it were about someone other than the author — is Elinore Pruitt Stewart's *Letters of a Woman Homesteader.*

Changing the point of view, using various narrators, is an essential structural device of many modern stories and novels. Margaret Atwood does it wonderfully; look at The *Robber Bride,* or her short stories, or *Alias Grace* (a novel so well made and well written that it could serve as a model for almost any topic in this book). Did you ever read or see the film of *Rashomon?* It's the classic tale of four witnesses telling four utterly different versions of the same event. *Making History,* by Carolyn See, is told in the voices of a set of narrators whose differing voices are an essential part of the book's wit and power. In my novella "Hernes" in *Searoad,* four women tell the story of a small-town family through the whole twentieth century, their voices passing back and forth among the generations. Perhaps the masterpiece of this kind of "choral" narration is *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.

They sailed easily from the past to the present, but now they can't get back.

8. *changing point of view*

YOU CAN CHANGE POINT OF VIEW, OF course; it is your God-given right as an American fiction writer. All I'm saying is, you need to know that you're doing it; some American fiction writers don't. And you need to know when and how to do it, so that when you shift, you carry the reader effortlessly with you.

Shifting between first and third person is enormously difficult in a short piece. Even in a novel, like Example 12, this shift is uncommon, and may be, in the end, unwise. *Bleak House* is a powerful novel, and some of its dramatic power may come from this highly artificial alternation and contrast of voices. But the transition from Dickens to Esther is always a jolt. And the twenty-year-old girl sometimes begins to sound awfully like the middle-aged novelist, which is implausible (though rather a relief, because Esther is given to tiresome fits of self-deprecation, and Dickens isn't). Dickens was well aware of the dangers of his narrative strategy: the narrating author never overlaps with the observer-narrator, never enters Esther's mind, never even sees her. The two narratives remain separate. The plot unites them, but they never touch. It is an odd device.

So my general feeling is, if you try the first-to-third shift, have a really good reason for doing it, and do it with great care. Don't strip your gears.

You really can't shift between detached and involved authorial voice within one piece. I don't know why you'd want to.

And once again: the involved author can move from one viewpoint character to another at will; but if it happens very often, unless the writing is superbly controlled, readers will tire of being jerked from mind to mind, or will lose track of whose mind they're supposed to be in.

Particularly disturbing is the effect of being jerked into a different viewpoint *for a moment*. With care, the involved author can do this (Tolkien does it with the fox). But it *cannot* be done in limited third person. If you're writing the story from Della's point of view, you can say, "Della looked up into Rodney's adoring face," but you can't say, "Della raised her incredibly beautiful violet eyes to Rodney's adoring face." Though Della may be well aware that her eyes are violet and beautiful, she doesn't see them when she looks up. Rodney sees them. You've shifted out of her POV into his. (If Della is in fact thinking about the effect of her eyes on Rodney, you have to say so: "She raised her eyes, knowing the effect their violet beauty would have on him.")

One-word POV shifts like that are not uncommon, but always uncomfortable.

Authorial narration and limited third person have a wide overlap, since the involved author can and usually does use third-person narration freely, and may limit perception for some while to a single person. When the authorial voice is subtle, it can be hard to say for sure which mode a piece is written in.

So: you can shift from one viewpoint character to another any time you like, if you know why and how you're doing it, if you're cautious about doing it frequently, and if you never do it for a moment only.

EXERCISE EIGHT: Changing Voices

Part One: Quick Shifts in Limited Third: A short narrative, 300–600 words. You can use one of the sketches from Exercise 7 or make up a new scene of the same kind: several people involved in the same activity or event.

Tell the story *using several different viewpoint characters (narrators) in limited third person,* changing from one to another as the narrative proceeds.

Mark the changes with line breaks, with the narrator's name in parentheses at the head of that section, or with any device you like.

I keep saying that shifting POV frequently and without notice is risky, dangerous. So you want to do something dangerous.

Part Two: Thin Ice
In 300–1000 words, tell the same story or a new story of the same kind, deliberately shifting POV from character to character several times without any obvious signal to the reader that you're doing so.

You can of course do Part Two merely by removing the "signals" from Part One, but you won't learn much by doing so. "Thin Ice" calls for a different narrative technique, and possibly a different narrative. I think it is likely to end up being written by the involved author, even though you are apparently using only limited third-person viewpoint. This ice really is thin, and the waters are deep.

A model of this kind of POV shifting is Example 14, from *To the Lighthouse.*

Example 14

Virginia Woolf: from *To the Lighthouse*

What brought her to say that: "We are in the hands of the Lord?" she wondered. The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her. She returned to her knitting again. How could any Lord have made this world? she asked. With her mind she had always seized the fact that there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted; she knew that. She knitted with firm composure, slightly pursing her lips and, without being aware of it, so stiffened and composed the lines of her face in a habit of sternness that when her husband passed, though he was chuckling at the thought that Hume, the philosopher, grown enormously fat, had stuck in a bog, he could not help noting, as he passed, the sternness at the heart of her beauty. It saddened him, and her remoteness pained him, and he felt, as he passed, that he could not protect her, and, when he reached the hedge, he was sad. He could do nothing to help her. He must stand by and watch her. Indeed, the infernal truth was, he made things worse for her. He was irritable—he was touchy. He had lost his temper over the Lighthouse. He looked into the hedge, into its intricacy, its darkness.

Always, Mrs. Ramsay felt, one helped oneself out of solitude reluctantly by laying hold of some little odd or end, some sound, some sight. She listened, but it was all very still; cricket was over; the children were in their baths; there was only the sound of the sea. She stopped knitting; she held the long reddish-brown stocking dangling in her hands a moment. She saw the light again. With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one's relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her, which had her at its beck and call

> (she woke in the night and saw it bent across their bed, stroking the floor), but for all that she thought, watching it with fascination, hypnotised, as if it were stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight, she had known happiness, exquisite happiness, intense happiness, and it silvered the rough waves a little more brightly, as daylight faded, and the blue went out of the sea and it rolled in waves of pure lemon which curved and swelled and broke upon the beach and the ecstasy burst in her eyes and waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind and she felt, It is enough! It is enough!
>
> He turned and saw her. Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he resolved, no; he would not interrupt her. She was aloof from him now in her beauty, in her sadness. He would let her be, and he passed her without a word, though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her. And again he would have passed her without a word had she not, at that very moment, given him of her own free will what she knew he would never ask, and called to him and taken the green shawl off the picture frame, and gone to him. For he wished, she knew, to protect her.

Notice how Woolf makes the transitions effortlessly but perfectly clearly. From "What brought her to say that" to the second "she knew that," we are in Mrs. Ramsay's POV; then we slip out of it, the signal being that *we can see Mrs. Ramsay* slightly pursing her lips, composing her face "in a habit of sternness," which

Mr. Ramsay, passing, chuckling at the thought of a philosopher stuck in a bog, *sees from his POV;* and he grows sad, feeling that he cannot protect her. The paragraph indent is the signal for the switch back to Mrs. Ramsay. What are the next switches, and how are they signaled?

A REMINDER ABOUT IMITATION

A rational fear of plagiarizing and an individualistic valuation of originality have stopped many prose writers from using deliberate imitation as a learning tool. In poetry courses, students may be asked to write "in the manner of" so-and-so, or to use a stanza or a cadence from a published poet as a model, but teachers of prose writing seem to shun the very idea of imitating. I think conscious, deliberate imitation of a piece of prose one admires can be good training, a means toward finding one's own voice as a narrative writer. If you want to imitate any of the examples in this book, or anything else, do so. What is essential is the consciousness. When imitating, it's necessary to remember that the work, however successful, is practice, not an end in itself but a means toward the end of writing with skill and freedom in one's own voice.

In critiquing these exercises, you might talk about how well the shifts work, what's gained (or lost?) by them, how the piece might have differed if told from one POV only.

For a while afterward, when reading fiction, you might take a moment to consider what POV is being used, who the viewpoint character is, when the POV shifts, and so on. It's interesting to see how different writers do it, and you can learn a great deal from watching great artists of narrative technique such as Woolf and Atwood.

A: Lower the topgallants!
B: I will when I find them!

9. indirect narration, or what tells

THIS CHAPTER HAS TO DO WITH VARIOUS aspects of storytelling that don't seem to be storytelling in the obvious sense of recounting events.

Some people interpret story to mean plot. Some reduce story to action. Plot is so much discussed in literature and writing courses, and action is so highly valued, that I want to put in a counterweight opinion.

A story that has nothing but action and plot is a pretty poor affair; and some great stories have neither. To my mind, plot is merely one way of telling a story, by connecting the happenings tightly, usually through causal chains. Plot is a marvelous device. But it's not superior to story, and not even necessary to it. As for action, indeed a story must move, something must happen; but the action can be nothing more than a letter sent that doesn't arrive, a thought unspoken, the passage of a summer day. Unceasing violent action is usually a sign that in fact no story is being told.

In E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel,* which I've loved and argued with for years, is a famous illustration of story: "The king died and then the queen died." And plot: "The king died and then the queen died of grief."

My opinion is that those are both rudimentary stories, the first loose, the second slightly structured. Neither one has or is a plot. "When the king's brother murdered the king and married the queen, the crown prince was upset" – now there's a plot; one you may recognize, in fact.

There are a limited number of plots (some say seven, some say twelve, some say thirty). There is no limit to the number of stories. Everybody in the world has their story; every meeting of one person with another may begin a story. Somebody asked Willie Nelson where he got his songs, and he said, "The air's full of melodies, you just reach out." The world's full of stories, you just reach out.

I say this in an attempt to unhook people from the idea that they have to make an elaborate plan of a tight plot before they're allowed to write a story. If that's the way you like to write, write that way, of course. But if it isn't, if you aren't a planner or a plotter, don't worry. The world's full of stories . . . All you need may be a character or two, or a conversation, or a situation, or a place, and you'll find the story there. You think about it, you work it out at least partly before you start writing, so that you know in a general way where you're going, but the rest works itself out in the telling. I like my image of "steering the craft," but in fact the story boat is a magic one. It knows its course. The job of the person at the helm is to help it find its own way to wherever it's going.

In this chapter we're also dealing with how to provide information in a narrative.

This is a skill science fiction and fantasy writers are keenly aware of, because they often have a great deal of information to convey that the reader has no way of knowing unless told. If my story's set in Chicago in 2005, I can assume that my readers have some general idea of the time and place and how things were and can fill in the picture from the barest hints. But if my story's set on 4-Beta Draconis in 3205, my readers have no idea what to expect. The world of the story must be created and explained in the story. This is part of the particular interest and beauty of science fiction and fantasy: writer and reader collaborate in world-making. But it's a tricky business.

If the information is poured out as a lecture, barely concealed by some stupid device — "Oh, Captain, do tell me how the anti-matter dissimulator works!" and then he does, endlessly — we have what science fiction writers call an Expository Lump. Crafty writers (in any genre) don't allow Exposition to form Lumps. They break up the information, grind it fine, and make it into bricks to build the story with.

Almost all narrative carries some load of explaining and describing. This expository freight can be as much a problem in memoir as it is in science fiction. Making the information part of the story is a learnable skill. As always, a good part of the solution consists simply in being aware that there is a problem.

So in this chapter we're dealing with stories that tell us things without appearing to be telling us. We're practicing invisible exposition.

The first exercise is a stark and simple one.

EXERCISE NINE: Telling It Slant

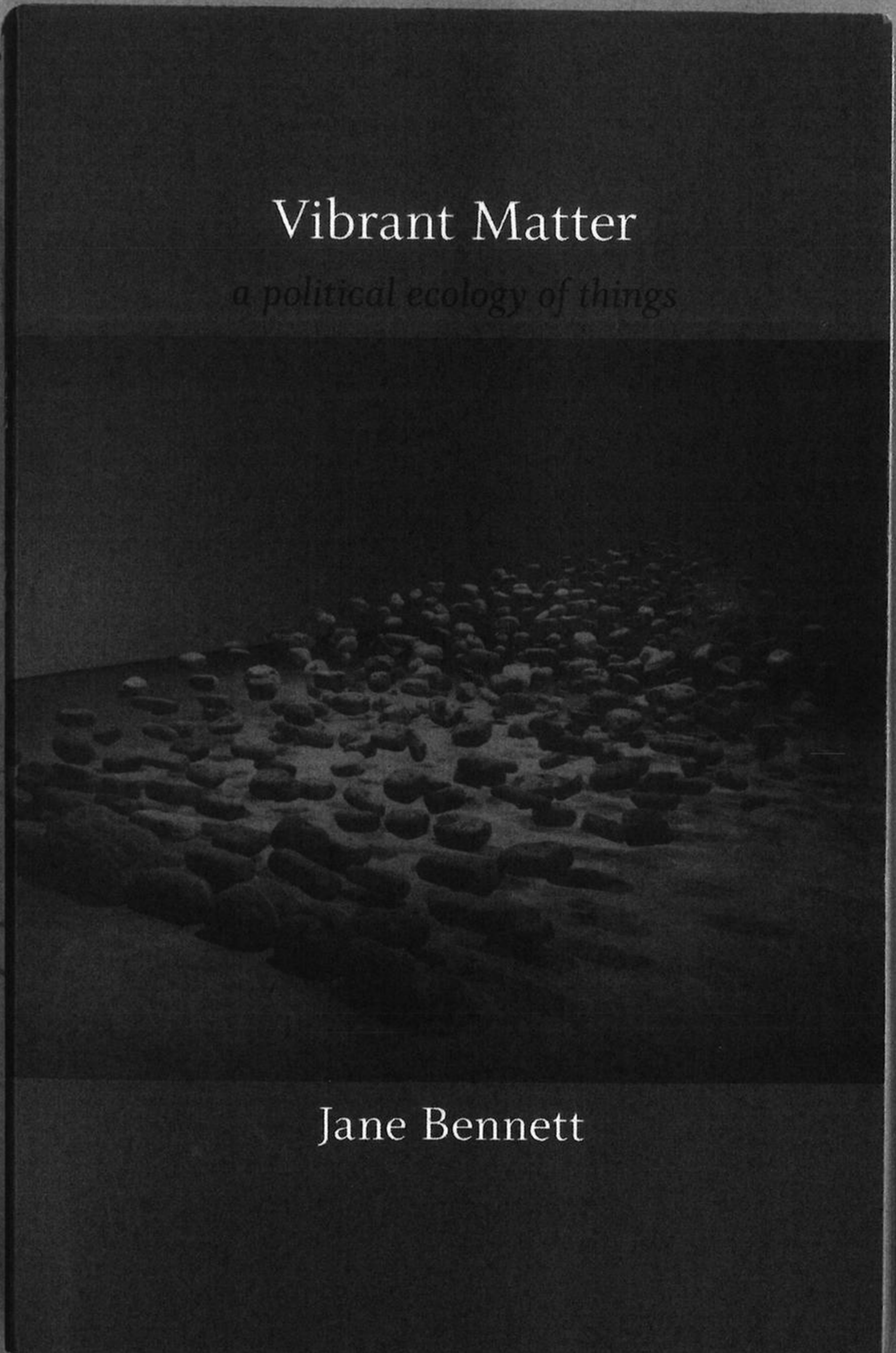
Part One: A & B

The goal of this exercise is to tell a story and present two characters through dialogue alone.

Write a page or two — word count would be misleading, as dialogue leaves a lot of unfilled lines — a page or two of pure dialogue.

Write it like a play, with A and B as the characters' names. No stage directions. No description of the characters. *Nothing* but what A says and what B says. Everything the reader knows about who they are, where they are, and what's going on comes through what they say.

If you want a suggestion for the topic, put two people into some kind of crisis situation: the car just ran out of gas; the spaceship is about to crash; the doctor has just realized that the old man she's treating for a heart attack is her father . . .



Vibrant Matter

a political ecology of things

Jane Bennett

I must let my senses wander as my thought,
my eyes see without looking. . . .
Go not to the object; let it come to you.
HENRY THOREAU,
The Journal of Henry David Thoreau

It is never we who affirm or deny something of a thing;
it is the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.
BARUCH SPINOZA, *Short Treatise II*

1

The Force of Things

In the wake of Michel Foucault's death in 1984, there was an explosion of scholarship on the body and its social construction, on the operations of biopower. These genealogical (in the Nietzschean sense) studies exposed the various micropolitical and macropolitical techniques through which the human body was disciplined, normalized, sped up and slowed down, gendered, sexed, nationalized, globalized, rendered disposable, or otherwise composed. The initial insight was to reveal how cultural practices produce what is experienced as the "natural," but many theorists also insisted on the *material recalcitrance* of such cultural productions.[1] Though gender, for example, was a congealed bodily effect of historical norms and repetitions, its status as artifact does *not* imply an easy susceptibility to human understanding, reform, or control. The point was that cultural forms are themselves powerful, material assemblages with *resistant force*.

In what follows, I, too, will feature the negative power or recalcitrance of things. But I will also seek to highlight a positive, productive power of their own. And, instead of focusing on collectives conceived primarily highlight the active role of *nonhuman* materials in public life. In short, I will try to give voice to a thing-power. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes, "objects are the way things appear to a subject—that is, with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template. . . . Things, on the other hand, . . . [signal] the moment when the object becomes the Other, when the sardine can looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls 'a metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge.'"[2]

Thing-Power, or the Out-Side

Spinoza ascribes to bodies a peculiar vitality: "Each thing [*res*], as far as it can by its own power, strives [*conatur*] to persevere in its own being."[3] *Conatus* names an "active impulsion" or trending tendency to persist.[4] Although Spinoza distinguishes the human body from other bodies by noting that its "virtue" consists in "nothing other than to live by the guidance of reason,"[5] every nonhuman body shares with every human body a conative nature (and thus a "virtue" appropriate to its material configuration). Conatus names a power present in *every* body: "Any thing whatsoever, whether it be more perfect or less perfect, will always be able to persist in existing with that same force whereby it begins to exist, so that in this respect all things are equal."[6] Even a falling stone, writes Spinoza, "is endeavoring, as far as in it lies, to continue in its motion."[7] As Nancy Levene notes, "Spinoza continually stresses this continuity between human and other beings," for "not only do human beings not form a separate imperium unto themselves; they do not even command the imperium, nature, of which they are a part."[8]

The idea of thing-power bears a family resemblance to Spinoza's conatus, as well as to what Henry David Thoreau called the Wild or that uncanny presence that met him in the Concord woods and atop Mount Ktaadn and also resided in/as that monster called the railroad and that alien called his Genius. Wildness was a not-quite-human force that addled and altered human and other bodies. It named an irreducibly

Hent de Vries, in the context of political theology, called "the absolute" or that "intangible and imponderable" recalcitrance.[9] Though the absolute is often equated with God, especially in theologies emphasizing divine omnipotence or radical alterity, de Vries defines it more open-endedly as "that which tends to loosen its ties to existing contexts."[10] This definition makes sense when we look at the etymology of *absolute*: *ab* (off) + *solver* (to loosen). The absolute is that which is *loosened off* and on the loose. When, for example, a Catholic priest performs the act of ab-solution, he is the vehicle of a divine agency that loosens sins from their attachment to a particular soul: sins now stand apart, displaced foreigners living a strange, impersonal life of their own. When de Vries speaks of the absolute, he thus tries to point to what no speaker could possibly see, that is, a some-thing that is not an object of knowledge, that is detached or radically free from representation, and thus no-thing at all. Nothing but the force or effectivity of the detachment, that is.

De Vries's notion of the absolute, like the thing-power I will seek to express, seeks to acknowledge that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge. But there is also a difference in emphasis. De Vries conceives this exteriority, this out-side, primarily as an epistemological limit: in the presence of the absolute, we cannot *know*. It is from human thinking that the absolute has detached; the absolute names the limits of *intelligibility*. De Vries's formulations thus give priority to humans as knowing bodies, while tending to overlook things and what *they* can do. The notion of thing-power aims instead to attend to the it as actant; I will try, impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power. I will shift from the language of epistemology to that of ontology, from a focus on an elusive recalcitrance hovering between immanence and transcendence (the absolute) to an active, earthy, not-quite-human capaciousness (vibrant matter). I will try to give voice to a vitality intrinsic to materiality, in the process absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism.[11]

The strangely vital things that will rise up to meet us in this chapter—a dead rat, a plastic cap, a spool of thread—are characters in a speculative onto-story. The tale hazards an account of materiality, even though it is both too alien and too close to see clearly and even though linguistic means prove inadequate to the task. The story will highlight the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap, the extent to which the us and the it slip-slide into each other. One moral of the story is that we are also nonhuman and that things, too, are vital players in the world. The hope is that the story will enhance receptivity to the impersonal life that surrounds and infuses us, will generate a more subtle awareness of the complicated web of dissonant connections between bodies, and will enable wiser interventions into that ecology.

Thing-Power I: Debris

On a sunny Tuesday morning on 4 June in the grate over the storm drain to the Chesapeake Bay in front of Sam's Bagels on Cold Spring Lane in Baltimore, there was:

one large men's black plastic work glove
one dense mat of oak pollen
one unblemished dead rat
one white plastic bottle cap
one smooth stick of wood

Glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick. As I encountered these items, they shimmied back and forth between debris and thing—between, on the one hand, stuff to ignore, except insofar as it betokened human activity (the workman's efforts, the litterer's toss, the rat-poisoner's success), and, on the other hand, stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits, or projects. In the second moment, stuff exhibited its thing-power: it issued a call, even if I did not quite understand what it was saying. At the very least, it provoked affects in me: I was repelled by the dead (or was it merely sleeping?) rat and dismayed by the litter, but I also felt something else: a nameless awareness of the impossible singularity of *that* rat, *that* configuration of pollen, *that* otherwise utterly banal, mass-produced plastic water-bottle cap.

I was struck by what Stephen Jay Gould called the "excruciating complexity and intractability" of nonhuman bodies,[12] but, in being *struck*, I realized that the capacity of these bodies was not restricted to a passive "intractability" but also included the ability to make things happen, to produce effects. When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the black glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. In this assemblage, *objects* appeared as *things*, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics. In my encounter with the gutter on Cold Spring Lane, I glimpsed a culture of things irreducible to the culture of objects.[13] I achieved, for a moment, what Thoreau had made his life's goal: to be able, as Thomas Dumm puts it, "to be surprised by what we see."[14]

This window onto an eccentric out-side was made possible by the fortuity of that particular assemblage, but also by a certain anticipatory readiness on my in-side, by a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power. For I came on the glove-pollen-rat-cap-stick with Thoreau in my head, who had encouraged me to practice "the discipline of looking always at what is to be seen"; with Spinoza's claim that all things are "animate, albeit in different degrees"; and with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* had disclosed for me "an immanent or incipient significance in the living body [which] extends, . . . to the whole sensible world" and which had shown me how "our gaze, prompted by the experience of our own body, will discover in all other 'objects' the miracle of expression."[15]

As I have already noted, the items on the ground that day were vibratory—at one moment disclosing themselves as dead stuff and at the next as live presence: junk, then claimant; inert matter, then live wire. It hit me then in a visceral way how American materialism, which requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles, is *anti*materiality.[16] The sheer volume of commodities, and the hyperconsumptive necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, conceals the vitality of matter. In *The Meadowlands*, a late twentieth-century, Thoreauian travelogue of the New Jersey garbage hills outside Manhattan, Robert Sullivan describes the vitality that persists even in trash:

> The . . . garbage hills are alive. . . . there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities. . . . After having ingested the tiniest portion of leftover New Jersey or New York, these cells then exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane, giant stillborn tropical winds that seep through the ground to feed the Meadlowlands' fires, or creep up into the atmosphere, where they eat away at the . . . ozone. . . . One afternoon I . . . walked along the edge of a garbage hill, a forty-foot drumlin of compacted trash that owed its topography to the waste of the city of Newark. . . . There had been rain the night before, so it wasn't long before I found a little leachate seep, a black ooze trickling down the slope of the hill, an espresso of refuse. In a few hours, this stream would find its way down into the . . . groundwater of the Meadowlands; it would mingle with toxic streams. . . . But in this moment, here at its birth, . . . this little seep was pure pollution, a pristine stew of oil and grease, of cyanide and arsenic, of cadmium, chromium, copper, lead, nickel, silver, mercury, and zinc. I touched this fluid—my fingertip was a bluish caramel color—and it was warm and fresh. A few yards away, where the stream collected into a benzene-scented pool, a mallard swam alone.[17]

Sullivan reminds us that a vital materiality can never really be thrown "away," for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity. For Sullivan that day, as for me on that June morning, thing-power rose from a pile of trash. Not Flower Power, or Black Power, or Girl Power, but *Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.

Thing-Power II: Odradek's Nonorganic Life

A dead rat, some oak pollen, and a stick of wood stopped me in my tracks. But so did the plastic glove and the bottle cap: thing-power arises from bodies inorganic as well as organic. In support of this contention, Manuel De Landa notes how even inorganic matter can "self-organize":

> Inorganic matter-energy has a wider range of alternatives for the generation of structure than just simple phase transitions. . . . In other words, even the humblest forms of matter and energy have the potential for *self-organization* beyond the relatively simple type involved in the creation of crystals. There are, for instance, those coherent waves called solitons which form in many different types of materials, ranging from ocean waters (where they are called tsunamis) to lasers. Then there are . . . stable states (or attractors), which can sustain coherent cyclic activity. . . . Finally, and unlike the previous examples of nonlinear self-organization where true innovation cannot occur, there [are] . . . the different combinations into which entities derived from the previous processes (crystals, coherent pulses, cyclic patterns) may enter. When put together, these forms of spontaneous structural generation suggest that inorganic matter is much more variable and creative than we ever imagined. And this insight into matter's inherent creativity needs to be fully incorporated into our new materialist philosophies.[18]

I will in chapter 4 try to wrestle philosophically with the idea of impersonal or nonorganic life, but here I would like to draw attention to a literary dramatization of this idea: to Odradek, the protagonist of Franz Kafka's short story "Cares of a Family Man." Odradek is a spool of thread who/that can run and laugh; this animate wood exercises an impersonal form of vitality. De Landa speaks of a "spontaneous structural generation" that happens, for example, when chemical systems at far-from-equilibrium states inexplicably choose one path of development rather than another. Like these systems, the material configuration that is Odradek straddles the line between inert matter and vital life.

For this reason Kafka's narrator has trouble assigning Odradek to an ontological category. Is Odradek a cultural artifact, a tool of some sort? Perhaps, but if so, its purpose is obscure: "It looks like a flat star-shaped spool of thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, these are only old, broken-off bits of thread, knotted and tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colors. . . . One is tempted to believe that the creature once had some sort of intelligible shape and is now only a broken-down remnant. Yet this does not seem to be the case; . . . nowhere is there an unfinished or unbroken surface to suggest anything of the kind: the whole thing looks senseless enough, but in its own way perfectly finished."[19]

Or perhaps Odradek is more a subject than an object—an organic creature, a little person? But if so, his/her/its embodiment seems rather unnatural: from the center of Odradek's star protrudes a small wooden crossbar, and "by means of this latter rod . . . and one of the points of the star . . . , the whole thing can stand upright as if on two legs."[20]

On the one hand, like an active organism, Odradek appears to move deliberately (he is "extraordinarily nimble") and to speak intelligibly: "He lurks by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies, the entrance hall. Often for months on end he is not to be seen; then he has presumably moved into other houses; but he always comes faithfully back to our house again. Many a time when you go out of the door and he happens just to be leaning directly beneath you against the banisters you feel inclined to speak to him. Of course, you put no difficult questions to him, you treat him—he is so diminutive that you cannot help it—rather like a child. 'Well, what's your name?' you ask him. 'Odradek,' he says. 'And where do you live?' 'No fixed abode,' he says and laughs." And yet, on the other hand, like an inanimate object, Odradek produced a so-called laughter that "has no lungs behind it" and "sounds rather like the rustling of fallen leaves. And that is usually the end of the conversation. Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time, as wooden as his appearance."[21]

Wooden yet lively, verbal yet vegetal, alive yet inert, Odradek is ontologically multiple. He/it is a vital materiality and exhibits what Gilles Deleuze has described as the persistent "hint of the animate in plants, and of the vegetable in animals."[22] The late-nineteenth-century Russian scientist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky, who also refused any sharp distinction between life and matter, defined organisms as "special, distributed forms of the common mineral, water. . . . Emphasizing the continuity of watery life and rocks, such as that evident in coal or fossil limestone reefs, Vernadsky noted how these apparently inert strata are 'traces of bygone biospheres.'"[23] Odradek exposes this continuity of watery life and rocks; he/it brings to the fore the becoming of things.

Thing-Power III: Legal Actants

I may have met a relative of Odradek while serving on a jury, again in Baltimore, for a man on trial for attempted homicide. It was a small glass vial with an adhesive-covered metal lid: the Gunpowder Residue

Sampler. This object/witness had been dabbed on the accused's hand hours after the shooting and now offered to the jury its microscopic evidence that the hand had either fired a gun or been within three feet of a gun firing. Expert witnesses showed the sampler to the jury several times, and with each appearance it exercised more force, until it became vital to the verdict. This composite of glass, skin cells, glue, words, laws, metals, and human emotions had become an actant. *Actant*, recall, is Bruno Latour's term for a source of action; an actant can be human or not, or, most likely, a combination of both. Latour defines it as "something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no special motivation of human individual actors, nor of humans in general."[24] An actant is neither an object nor a subject but an "intervener,"[25] akin to the Deleuzean "quasi-causal operator."[26] An operator is that which, by virtue of its particular location in an assemblage and the fortuity of being in the right place at the right time, makes the difference, makes things happen, becomes the decisive force catalyzing an event.

Actant and *operator* are substitute words for what in a more subject-centered vocabulary are called agents. Agentic capacity is now seen as differentially distributed across a wider range of ontological types. This idea is also expressed in the notion of "deodand," a figure of English law from about 1200 until it was abolished in 1846. In cases of accidental death or injury to a human, the nonhuman actant, for example, the carving knife that fell into human flesh or the carriage that trampled the leg of a pedestrian—became deodand (literally, "that which must be given to God"). In recognition of *its* peculiar efficacy (a power that is less masterful than agency but more active than recalcitrance), the deodand, a materiality "suspended between human and thing,"[27] was surrendered to the crown to be used (or sold) to compensate for the harm done. According to William Pietz, "any culture must establish some procedure of compensation, expiation, or punishment to settle the debt created by unintended human deaths whose direct cause is not a morally accountable person, but a nonhuman material object. This was the issue thematized in public discourse by . . . the law of deodand."[28]

There are of course differences between the knife that impales and the man impaled, between the technician who dabs the sampler and the sampler, between the array of items in the gutter of Cold Spring Lane and me, the narrator of their vitality. But I agree with John Frow that these differences need "to be flattened, read horizontally as a juxtaposition rather than vertically as a hierarchy of being. It's a feature of our world that we can and do distinguish . . . things from persons. But the sort of world we live in makes it constantly possible for these two sets of kinds to exchange properties."[29] And to note this fact explicitly, which is also to begin to *experience* the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally, is to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility.

from Dewey [illegible] see
too [illegible]

Thing-Power IV: Walking, Talking Minerals

Odradek, a gunpowder residue sampler, and some junk on the street can be fascinating to people and can thus seem to come alive. But is this evanescence a property of the stuff or of people? Was the thing-power of the debris I encountered but a function of the subjective and intersubjective connotations, memories, and affects that had accumulated around my ideas of these items? Was the real agent of my temporary immobilization on the street that day *humanity*, that is, the cultural meanings of "rat," "plastic," and "wood" in conjunction with my own idiosyncratic biography? It could be. But what if the swarming activity inside my head was *itself* an instance of the vital materiality that also constituted the trash?

I have been trying to raise the volume on the vitality of materiality per se, pursuing this task so far by focusing on nonhuman bodies, by, that is, depicting them as actants rather than as objects. But the case for matter as active needs also to readjust the status of human actants: not by denying humanity's awesome, awful powers, but by presenting these powers as evidence of our own constitution as vital materiality. In other words, human power is itself a kind of thing-power. At one level this claim is uncontroversial: it is easy to acknowledge that humans are composed of various material parts (the minerality of our bones, or the metal of our blood, or the electricity of our neurons). But it is more challenging to conceive of these materials as lively and self-organizing, rather than as passive or mechanical means under the direction of something nonmaterial, that is, an active soul or mind.

Perhaps the claim to a vitality intrinsic to matter itself becomes more plausible if one takes a long view of time. If one adopts the perspective

of evolutionary rather than biographical time, for example, a mineral efficacy becomes visible. Here is De Landa's account of the emergence of our bones: "Soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 5000 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden *mineralization*, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself."[30] Mineralization names the creative agency by which bone was produced, and bones then "made new forms of movement control possible among animals, freeing them from many constraints and literally setting them into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land."[31] In the long and slow time of evolution, then, mineral material appears as the mover and shaker, the active power, and the human beings, with their much-lauded capacity for self-directed action, appear as *its* product.[32] Vernadsky seconds this view in his description of humankind as a particularly potent mix of minerals: "What struck [Vernadsky] most was that the material of Earth's crust has been packaged into myriad moving beings whose reproduction and growth build and break down matter on a global scale. People, for example, redistribute and concentrate oxygen . . . and other elements of Earth's crust into two-legged, upright forms that have an amazing propensity to wander across, dig into and in countless other ways alter Earth's surface. *We are walking, talking minerals.*"[33]

Kafka, De Landa, and Vernadsky suggest that human individuals are themselves composed of vital materials, that our powers are thing-power. These vital materialists do not claim that there are no differences between humans and bones, only that there is no necessity to describe these differences in a way that places humans at the ontological center or hierarchical apex. Humanity can be distinguished, instead, as Jean-François Lyotard suggests, as a *particularly rich and complex* collection of materials: "Humankind is taken for a complex material system; consciousness, for an effect of language; and language for a highly complex material system."[34] Richard Rorty similarly defines humans as very complex animals, rather than as animals "with an extra added ingredient called 'intellect' or 'the rational soul.'"[35]

The fear is that in failing to affirm human uniqueness, such views authorize the treatment of people as mere things; in other words, that a strong distinction between subjects and objects is needed to prevent the instrumentalization of humans. Yes, such critics continue, objects possess a certain power of action (as when bacteria or pharmaceuticals enact hostile or symbiotic projects inside the human body), and yes, some subject-on-subject objectifications are permissible (as when persons consent to use and be used as a means to sexual pleasure), but the *ontological* divide between persons and things must remain lest one have no *moral* grounds for privileging man over germ or for condemning pernicious forms of human-on-human instrumentalization (as when powerful humans exploit illegal, poor, young, or otherwise weaker humans).

How can the vital materialist respond to this important concern? First, by acknowledging that the framework of subject versus object has indeed at times worked to prevent or ameliorate human suffering and to promote human happiness or well-being. Second, by noting that its successes come at the price of an instrumentalization of nonhuman nature that can itself be unethical and can itself undermine long-term human interests. Third, by pointing out that the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being: it is important to raise the question of its actual, historical efficacy in order to open up space for forms of ethical practice that do not rely upon the image of an intrinsically *hierarchical* order of things. Here the materialist speaks of promoting healthy and enabling instrumentalizations, rather than of treating people as ends-in-themselves, because to face up to the compound nature of the human self is to find it difficult even to make sense of the notion of a single end-in-itself. What instead appears is a swarm of competing ends being pursued simultaneously in each individual, some of which are healthy to the whole, some of which are not. Here the vital materialist, taking a cue from Nietzsche's and Spinoza's ethics, favors physiological over moral descriptors because she fears that moralism can itself become a source of unnecessary human suffering.[36]

We are now in a better position to name that other way to promote human health and happiness: *to raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed*. Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonder-

fully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood. The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression, but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may very well be to harm oneself. Such an enlightened or expanded notion of self-interest *is good for humans*. As I will argue further in chapter 8, a vital materialism does not reject self-interest as a motivation for ethical behavior, though it does seek to cultivate a broader definition of self and of interest.

Thing-Power V: Thing-Power and Adorno's Nonidentity

But perhaps the very idea of thing-power or vibrant matter claims too much: to know more than it is possible to know. Or, to put the criticism in Theodor Adorno's terms, does it exemplify the violent hubris of Western philosophy, a tradition that has consistently failed to mind the gap between concept and reality, object and thing? For Adorno this gap is ineradicable, and the most that can be said with confidence about the thing is that it eludes capture by the concept, that there is always a "nonidentity" between it and any representation. And yet, as I shall argue, even Adorno continues to seek a way to access—however darkly, crudely, or fleetingly—this out-side. One can detect a trace of this longing in the following quotation from *Negative Dialectics*: "What we may call the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand. He who wants to know it must think more, not less."[37] Adorno clearly rejects the possibility of any direct, sensuous apprehension ("the thing itself is not positively and immediately at hand"), but he does not reject all modes of encounter, for there is one mode, "thinking more, not less," that holds promise. In this section I will explore some of the affinities between Adorno's nonidentity and my thing-power and, more generally, between his "specific materialism" (ND, 203) and a vital materialism.

Nonidentity is the name Adorno gives to that which is not subject to knowledge but is instead "heterogeneous" to all concepts. This elusive force is not, however, wholly outside human experience, for Adorno describes nonidentity as a presence that acts upon us: we knowers are haunted, he says, by a painful, nagging feeling that something's being forgotten or left out. This discomfiting sense of the inadequacy of representation remains no matter how refined or analytically precise one's concepts become. "Negative dialectics" is the method Adorno designs to teach us how to *accentuate* this discomforting experience and how to give it a meaning. When practiced correctly, negative dialectics will render the static buzz of nonidentity into a powerful reminder that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder" and thus that life will always exceed our knowledge and control. The ethical project par excellence, as Adorno sees it, is to keep remembering this and to learn how to accept it. Only then can we stop raging against a world that refuses to offer us the "reconcilement" that we, according to Adorno, crave (ND, 5).[38]

For the vital materialist, however, the starting point of ethics is less the acceptance of the impossibility of "reconcilement" and more the recognition of human participation in a shared, vital materiality. We *are* vital materiality and we are surrounded by it, though we do not always see it that way. The ethical task at hand here is to cultivate the ability to discern nonhuman vitality, to become perceptually open to it. In a parallel manner, Adorno's "specific materialism" also recommends a set of practical techniques for training oneself to better detect and accept nonidentity. Negative dialectics is, in other words, the pedagogy inside Adorno's materialism.

This pedagogy includes intellectual as well as aesthetic exercises. The intellectual practice consists in the attempt to make the very process of conceptualization an explicit object of thought. The goal here is to become more cognizant that conceptualization automatically obscures the inadequacy of its concepts. Adorno believes that critical reflection can expose this cloaking mechanism and that the exposure will intensify the felt presence of nonidentity. The treatment is homeopathic: we must develop a *concept* of nonidentity to cure the hubris of conceptualization. The treatment can work because, however distorting, concepts still "refer to nonconceptualities." This is "because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation" (ND, 12). Concepts can never provide a clear view of things in themselves, but the "discriminating man," who "in the matter and its concept can distinguish even the infinitesimal, that which escapes the concept" (ND, 45), can do a better job of gesturing toward them. Note that the discriminating man (adept at negative dialectics) both subjects his conceptualizations to second-order reflection and pays close *aesthetic* attention to the object's "qualitative moments" (ND, 43), for these open a window onto nonidentity.

A second technique of the pedagogy is to exercise one's utopian imagination. The negative dialectician should imaginatively re-create what has been obscured by the distortion of conceptualization: "The means employed in negative dialectics for the penetration of its hardened objects is possibility—the possibility of which their reality has cheated the objects and which is nonetheless visible in each one" (ND, 52). Nonidentity resides in those denied possibilities, in the invisible field that surrounds and infuses the world of objects.

A third technique is to admit a "playful element" into one's thinking and to be willing to play the fool. The negative dialectician "knows how far he remains from" knowing nonidentity, "and yet he must always talk as if he had it entirely. This brings him to the point of clowning. He must not deny his clownish traits, least of all since they alone can give him hope for what is denied him" (ND, 14).

The self-criticism of conceptualization, a sensory attentiveness to the qualitative singularities of the object, the exercise of an unrealistic imagination, and the courage of a clown: by means of such practices one might replace the "rage" against nonidentity with a respect for it, a respect that chastens our will to mastery. That rage is for Adorno the driving force behind interhuman acts of cruelty and violence. Adorno goes even further to suggest that negative dialectics can transmute the anguish of nonidentity into a will to ameliorative political action: the thing thwarts our desire for conceptual and practical mastery and this refusal angers us; but it also offers us an ethical injunction, according to which "suffering ought not to be, . . . things should be different. Woe speaks: 'Go.' Hence the convergence of specific materialism with criticism, with social change in practice" (*ND*, 202–3).[39]

Adorno founds his ethics on an intellectual and aesthetic attentiveness that, though it will always fail to see its object clearly, nevertheless has salutory effects on the bodies straining to see. Adorno willingly plays the fool by questing after what I would call thing-power, but which he calls "the preponderance of the object" (*ND*, 183). Humans encounter a world in which nonhuman materialities have power, a power that the "bourgeois I," with its pretensions to autonomy, denies.[40] It is at this point that Adorno identifies negative dialectics as a materialism: it is only "by passing to the object's preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic" (*ND*, 192).

Adorno dares to affirm something like thing-power, but he does not want to play the fool for *too* long. He is quick—too quick from the point of view of the vital materialist—to remind the reader that objects are always "entwined" with human subjectivity and that he has no desire "to place the object on the orphaned royal throne once occupied by the subject. On that throne the object would be nothing but an idol" (*ND*, 181). Adorno is reluctant to say too much about nonhuman vitality, for the more said, the more it recedes from view. Nevertheless, Adorno does try to attend somehow to this reclusive reality, by means of a negative dialectics. Negative dialectics has an affinity with negative theology: negative dialectics honors nonidentity as one would honor an unknowable god; Adorno's "specific materialism" includes the possibility that there is divinity behind or within the reality that withdraws. Adorno rejects any naive picture of transcendence, such as that of a loving God who designed the world ("metaphysics cannot rise again" [*ND*, 404] after Auschwitz), but the desire for transcendence cannot, he believes, be eliminated: "Nothing could be experienced as truly alive if something that transcends life were not promised also. . . . The transcendent is, and it is not" (*ND*, 375).[41] Adorno honors nonidentity as an *absent* absolute, as a messianic promise.[42]

Adorno struggles to describe a force that is *material* in its resistance to human concepts but *spiritual* insofar as it might be a dark promise of an absolute-to-come. A vital materialism is more thoroughly nontheistic in presentation: the out-side has no messianic promise.[43] But a philosophy of nonidentity and a vital materialism nevertheless share an urge to cultivate a more careful attentiveness to the out-side.

The Naive Ambition of Vital Materialism

Adorno reminds us that humans can experience the out-side only indirectly, only through vague, aporetic, or unstable images and impressions. But when he says that even distorting concepts still "refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation" (*ND*, 12), Adorno also acknowledges that human experience nevertheless includes encounters with an out-side that is active, forceful, and (quasi)independent. This out-side can operate at a distance from our bodies or it can operate as a foreign power internal to them, as when we feel the discomfort of nonidentity, hear the naysaying voice of Socrates's demon, or are moved by what Lucretius described as that "something in our breast" capable of fighting and resisting.[44] There is a strong tendency among modern, secular, well-educated humans to refer such signs back to a human agency conceived as its ultimate source. This impulse toward cultural, linguistic, or historical constructivism, which interprets any expression of thing-power as an effect of culture and the play of human powers, politicizes moralistic and oppressive appeals to "nature." And that is a good thing. But the constructivist response to the world also tends to obscure from view whatever thing-power there may be. There is thus something to be said for moments of methodological naiveté, for the postponement of a genealogical critique of objects.[45] This delay might render manifest a subsistent world of nonhuman vitality. To "render manifest" is both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received. What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them.

Vital materialists will thus try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them. This sense of a strange and incomplete commonality with the out-side may induce vital materialists to treat nonhumans—animals, plants, earth, even artifacts and commodities—more carefully, more strategically, more ecologically. But how to develop this capacity for naiveté? One tactic might be to revisit and become temporarily infected by discredited philosophies of nature, risking "the taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes."[46] I will venture into vitalism in chapters 5 and 6, but let me here make a brief stop at the ancient atomism of Lucretius, the Roman devotee of Epicurus.

Lucretius tells of bodies falling in a void, bodies that are not lifeless stuff but matter on the go, entering and leaving assemblages, swerving into each other: "*At times quite undetermined and at undetermined spots they push a little from their path*: yet only just so much as you could call a change of trend. [For if they did not] . . . swerve, all things would fall downwards through the deep void like drops of rain, nor could collision come to be, nor a blow brought to pass for the primordia: so nature would never have brought anything into existence."[47] Louis Althusser described this as a "materialism of the encounter," according to which political events are born from chance meetings of atoms.[48] A primordial swerve says that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things, but it also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life, that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power.

The rhetoric of *De Rerum Natura* is realist, speaking in an authoritative voice, claiming to describe a nature that preexists and outlives us: here are the smallest constituent parts of being ("primordia") and here are the principles of association governing them.[49] It is easy to criticize this realism: Lucretius quests for the thing itself, but there is no there there—or, at least, no way for us to grasp or know it, for the thing is always already humanized; its object status arises at the very instant something comes into our awareness. Adorno levels this charge explicitly against Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, which Adorno interprets as a "realism" that "seeks to breach the walls which thought has built around itself, to pierce the interjected layer of subjective positions that have become a second nature." Heidegger's aim "to philosophize formlessly, so to speak, purely on the ground of things" (ND, 78)[50] is for Adorno futile, and it is productive of a violent "rage" against nonidentity.[51]

But Lucretius's poem—like Kafka's stories, Sullivan's travelogue, Vernadsky's speculations, and my account of the gutter of Cold Spring Lane—does offer this potential benefit: it can direct sensory, linguistic, and imaginative attention toward a material vitality. The advantage of such tales, with their ambitious naiveté, is that though they "disavow . . . the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality," they do so "in the name of *avowing* the force of questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word."[52]