

"Passion
of
Precision"

Calico-coated,
small-bodied,

with delicate legs and pink faces in which their mismatched eyes rolled ~~wild~~
and subdued,

→
they huddled,

gaudy, motionless and alert,

wild as deer,

deadly as rattlesnakes,

quiet as doves.

Those are the best horses--so far--in American writing: William Faulkner's herd of mustangs brought in from Texas for sale, there in the corral at Frenchman's Bend, while the Mississippi farmers who have spent all their lives slogging behind slow mules are standing looking longingly at these/quick, vivid apparitions from the West--the "Spotted Horses" of Faulkner's glorious story by that name. There they stand forever--wild, subdued/ motionless, alert/ adjectival, hyphenated, similed as a three-pound thesaurus--in that extravagant sentence, which kicks over some rule of writing at about every third word, yet in which the language itself is telling us, those horses were all these things at once! Godamighty, you should have seen those horses!

If novelists do have an advantage in getting at anybody's souls--equine or human--I believe it's there/in the million-element experiment called language. The process is far from automatic--a writer can't simply lens in on the people of Reno or Provo or Choteau like a frontier photographer and become an instantaneous soul-stealer; the money isn't that easy, I regret to report--because the alchemy of language carries with it the high probability of fizzle. Faulkner's own townspeople, after all, were being plenty clever with the language when they took a look at their squirely local author, concluded there was only a letter or two of difference between that and squirrely, and dubbed him/Count No Account. But the Mississippians' characterization of him has fizzled away, while his of them burns on and on. ~~in the same way as the~~

Faulkner and the rest of us in the cottage industry called fiction-writing can be accused of having fashioned ourselves a job where we claim to be trying to tell some truth by making things up. (Not so incidentally, with nine-tenths of the ink of this century now expended, modern American fiction in terms of originality and staying power still adds up to "Faulkner and the rest of us.") I know I wouldn't have spent the past decade concocting novels if I didn't think there are real fidelities in the writing of fiction, and I'll try to parse through a few of those in show-and-tell time here imminently. But I wonder first if there shouldn't be a brief interlude of philosophy, a little piped-in ditty from the literary keyboard which you as writers of history can decide to hum along with or not.

Nab BOCK UV

Thanks

the Russian emigre writer

after he had come to America

It's the story told about Vladimir Nabokov ~~when he~~ was teaching his course
 on the novel, at ^{Cornell} ~~Columbia~~ University. ^{in US} ~~You in the~~ profession of analyzing eras
 might be interested to know that ^{Back in those days,} ~~back there~~ in the Eisenhower years, that course
 of Nabokov's was nicknamed "dirty lit"--Anna Karenina! Madame Bovary!

Nabokov evidently was the Cyrillic equivalent of a ring-tailed wonder in
 the classroom, one minute confiding to the class in heavy Russian accent, "By
 the way, ^{James} Joyce made only one error in English usage in Ulysses, the use of the
 word 'supine' when it should have been 'prone'", and the next moment handing back,
 with evidently genuine horror, the test papers on which half the class blithely
 discussed somebody's "epidramatic" style when Nabokov all semester had actually
 been saying "epigrammatic."

And so comes the day when the author of *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* and *Speak, Memory* and ~~so many other magical~~ ~~other~~ books peers over the rims of his glasses and cries out his summary of the writing life: you must write with "the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."
dramatic!

Pausing as if he hasn't heard himself quite right, Nabokov says in a baffled tone: "But wait--have I made a mistake? Don't I mean 'the passion of the artist and the precision of the scientist'?" ~~With a little imagination, and forbearance~~ ~~for my graduate school Russian, you even can see him sorting back through from~~ ~~one language to another--~~

emphatic

Then like the verbal acrobat he was, he gleefully completes his act:

"No! I mean, you must write with the passion of the scientist and the precision of the artist."

That Nabokovian somersault back and forth through vice-versa was, typically, at once elfin and deadly serious. Passionate investigation may not seem the most likely motive for a person to write fiction. Passionate expression of yourself, writing as the intellectual equivalent of going downtown and getting yourself an artist's license, sure, you bet--that's practically epidemic among people wanting to be writers, who, to judge from the megabucks minibooks that publishers were pushing at the American Booksellers convention in Las Vegas, earlier this year, range from Donald Trump to Attila the Hun. The express-yourself-or-else epidemic aside, though, the prevailing literary climate in this country the past couple of decades has not exactly been a mad pash eyeballing of the American body civic.

There was a phase of our leading lights in fiction trying out self-conscious mannerisms, which tended to produce plots about a writer writing about what he was writing about. That hermetically experimental fiction, without connection to the workaday world, I think ended up nearsightedly eating its own tail. Maybe it was in reaction to that cleverness-for-its-own-sake that minimalist fiction then came slouching in--but in terms of investigating, say, roots of social class, this fiction that yawned condescension toward people who have to shop at K Mart instead of Banana Republic was at least as unpassionate on the page as the English Department mannerists had been ^{a generation earlier.} A thoughtful literary watchman, Charles Newman, a couple of years ago said of the minimalist trend:

"One cannot help seeing much contemporary fiction as a literary slide show, holding in common a purposive lack of scale and depth, an altogether predictable coloration and a transparency of surface, encoded by a narration that advertises in advance that it will not sustain itself, a voice-over esthetically and ethically neutral."

("What's Left Out of Literature," Charles Newman, NYTBR, July 12, '87)

The cultural implications of slide-show writing aren't particularly promising. As Newman points out, "This is hardly the healthy skepticism of a tolerant pluralism. (Instead) it has all the characteristics of overload of a culture that places so many modalities at the consumer's disposal that none of them /can have decisive value."

Faulkner's work exemplified the passion, sometimes runaway, that fiction can have for the world around it; Nabokov was exhorting us to keep at it with the quenchless glee of the scientists who sent a wisp of steel thistle~~down~~--
 called Voyager--sailing through the universe and saw the face of Neptune;
 Charles Newman ~~points~~^{maps} out the cultural flat earth that awaits when ~~nothing~~ counts.
 My own view is probably more prosaic, simply that novels are ways of telling stories we haven't figured out any other way to tell yet; that if a writer invests enough of himself, it is possible to create fiction with character as well as characters; and that if he's going to take the trouble at all to fill white space with the alphabet of imagination, he sadly limits himself by trying to stay "esthetically and ethically neutral." // Typing ain't writing.

Well, that's what passes for passion in a Scotchman, // and I'd better get to saying something about precisions of the artist, which include some literary cutlery you may or may not find apt for the party of history.

Eudora Welty beguilingly remembers in *One Writer's Beginnings* (p. 13) that as a small child she would plop herself down amid the grownups around her and instruct them, "Now talk."

That /delicious hunger of the ear/ is the impulse behind the art we're all in--storytelling. In my own arc into fiction I've probably been following the sound of voices. Something must account for this latest kind of example--a bit of dialogue in *Ride with Me*, Mariah Montana, overheard between two Oly drinkers in the Whoop-Up Bar in Shelby:

~~Activity picked up too at my ear nearest the beer par.~~ "Tell you, Ron, I don't know what you got going with Barbara Jo, but don't let her get you in front of no minister. This marriage stuff is really crappy. You take, Jeannie's mom is always on my back about why don't we come over more. But we go over there and the stuff she cooks, she never salts anything or anything, and I don't eat that crap without no salt on it. Last time she called up and asked Jeannie why we weren't coming over, I told Jeannie to tell her I had to lay down and rest. Then there's Jeannie's dad, he just got dried out down at Great Falls. Cranky old sonofabitch, I think they ought to let him have a few beers so he wouldn't be so much of a craphead, is what I think. And you know what else, Jeannie's brother and sister-in-law had a Fourth of July picnic and didn't even invite us. That's the kind of people they are. Jeannie and I been talking a lot lately. I told her, I about had it with her crappy family. Soon as the first of the year and I get enough money ahead to buy my big bike, I'm heading out to the coast and go to school somewhere."

"Yeah?" Ron responded. "What in?"

/// "Social work."

Where, you may well be asking in the spirit of investigation, does stuff like that come from? In this particular case, it's been about half overheard-- including, I swear on an oral history manual, that punchline--and half made up by me. The made-up half has in it the trace element that wasn't there for me as simply an eavesdropper, folklorist, oral historian, reporter, whatever-- the echo of exodus, /our incipient social worker's dream of "heading out to the coast."

This is part of the job description of the fiction writer, I think-- letting other voices speak the situation. Thus we get such accuracies as /the line in Wallace Stegner's story, "Carrion Spring"--the young ranchman who modernly might be described as suffering a lack of communication with the young wife he has brought to the prairies of Saskatchewan, but who when they meet up with the hard-used son of the local wolf hunter can say to the boy the perfect-pitch sentence, "How¹'ve you been doing on wolves?" (Wolf Willow, p. 229)

By the same token of small talk with a lot big behind it, from Mari Sandoz early in Old Jules we take in a lasting intimation when a ranch cook cracks to the young Swiss homesteader about his chosen Nebraska earth, "Great farmin' country. Never get your crops wet there." (p. 18) //

I said early on that fiction writers maybe have an advantage in language, in trying to get at or at least present reasonable facsimiles of the soul of our chosen part of the country. I suppose all I meant by that was that we can get away with a lot of jump cuts, montages, emotional riffs, tonal stresses, and downright nasty talk, with the reading public that you maybe can't with your professional peers and tenure committees. But--dialogue and other devices specifically characteristic of fiction aside--I think there are imaginative precisions of writing we're always glad to rent out to historians. At least I hope there isn't a guild rule that you must write, "When the tribal beliefs of the Hurons of the seventeenth century are considered, it is apparent that..." / when you could be writing, "Three centuries deep the Hurons lie," --

as Frank R. Kramer did in his study of folks beliefs in the Midwest, *Voices in the Valley*, cadencing in his lovely further Shakespearean nuance, "if their bones are not of coral made, at least there does emerge from the skeletal fragments of Huron folklore and folkways a tribal cosmos like the island-world built upon the turtle's back..." (p. 56)

The modern creed of American fiction has been show, don't tell. Susan Cheever in her biography of her father, the ultimate New Yorker short story writer of his time, John Cheever, summed this up exquisitely:

"My father's intense concentration on what you can see and hear and smell and touch was ~~at~~ the core of his gift as a writer. He focused on the surface and texture of life, not the emotions and motives underneath. In creative-writing classes, teachers always say that it is important to "show" and not "tell." My father's work describes the way people live, and the way he lived. It never tells."

quiet

Since, by job definition, you as historians are in the business of telling us the past, it looks like you're ineluctably on the short end of the stick of show-versus-tell. But it depends ^{where} you measure from on the stick, doesn't it-- /and I maintain that writers too often get so busy with showing they forget to ever say anything; to me, that "never-tell" quality of John Cheever's is exactly what was wrong with his work--the small woes of suburban living are not equal to life's real problems.

So, I'm in favor of some show-and-tell. Of letting the reader know once in a while how the story is adding up--as in one of the unbeatable lines Bill Kittredge has written ^{in his short story "Balancing the Water"} when he has a ranch hand say, "All you can own is what you do." (Michael Milken, Ivan Boesky, and many hundred savings-and-loan executives could have morally profited from reading that story of Bill's.)

Historians I think can do some show-and-tell with your end of the language too. (I should put in here that, in the compression chamber of panel-life, I'm including narrative structure within the term "language". Content is form, I believe; a book written with sentences like dry sticks adds up to a construction built of dry sticks.) Of course, in putting together show-and-tell you sometimes may want to resort to more of one, sometimes of the other, but that's what storytellers--and historians are society's official recitationists, right?-- that's what storytellers hone their art with, judgments of that sort. Let me read you a quick example of each--one swatch of fiction, and one of history-- ~~the one piece which shows, and the other that tells~~ ^{which} ~~which~~

one piece a show-er, and the other a tell-er:

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This first is a scene of people pulling up their roots from England in the early 19th century, and setting sail for Australia:

"Three cheers were given for the (Australia-bound) settlers; cheers from both sides continued as long as the figures could be distinguished on the Caroline's deck. A northeast wind bore her steadily away under a grey sky; they watched her round the Ore Lights: soon after, she was gone...

For many of the old people ^(on shore) ~~of Worthing and Tarring~~ it had been a day of final parting with their sons and daughters, truly terrible for those parents who could neither read nor write."

(The Hentys, Marnie Bassett, pp. 44-5)

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This second piece characterizes the situation of the Comanche Indians after their collision with the white culture on the Southwest plains:

" . . . The Comanches' ultimate destruction was rooted in the loss of the old disciplines. That/and smallpox and syphilis and whiskey. And Mackenzie's soldiers. All those things ran in an apocalyptic pack, like wolves in winter."

(The Last Running, John Graves, p. 22)

↑
Okay, it's the first of those--the showing one, with the ship Caroline
bearing those ^eimmigrants away around the point, into vanishment from ~~out of~~ their illiterate parents'
universe--it's that one that's the history: Marnie Bassett's book The Hentys, that
eloquently
X details the transplanting of a Sussex farm family to the vastness of Australia.
And it's the second one that's fiction--John Graves' short story, The Last Running;
I'm not an expert on the Comanche past, certainly, but it seems to me John Graves
sends quite a lot of history pounding through the brain in those thirty-five words
of telling.

So far, then, the score is that there's an angle of language where I do feel fiction writers enjoy an advantage--in the voice that can be ventriloquized onto the page--but the strategies and slynesses of show-and-tell are pretty much available to the West's historians of today as well as its novelists of today.

pause

Then there's the crocodile factor.

Like so much else that has to do with the heart and soul of the American West, ~~we~~ ^{we} owe this final bit of writerly psyche to Richard Hugo. (As I savvy it, it was Dick Hugo--through the medium of Bill Kittredge--who has given us the new emblematic phrase, The Last Best Place.) ~~As an anecdotal instruction in poetry,~~ Hugo used to advise: "When in doubt, throw in a crocodile." This adjuration to the imagination is said many ways, probably in all forms of art--when the great carver Bill Reed was asked why his tribe, the Haidas, were the pre-eminent artists of the Northwest coastal tribes, he said the Haidas simply out-crazied everybody else. But I've alw ays liked Hugo's crocodile prescription, and think it covers a lot of otherwise/unexplainable wonders of fiction--the ^{go-for-broke} elements that come right up off the page and get you.

William Faulkner's crocodile/was simply that haunting fever-dream prose of his in which, as a critic (Anatole Broyard) has said, the sentences advance like armies. We know that James Joyce/→ carried punning and other back-and-forth intricacies of language--its vice-versas--to genius level in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, but I'm convinced he's giving us a little crocodile grin even in the famous epiphany of his short story, "The Dead"^{most famous}--that there in the last lines when "snow was general all over Ireland," he's telling us it was not only generalized, "falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen," but that it was indeed/in command, even "farther westward, softly falling into the dark/mutinous/Shannon waves."

The late John Gardner was one of most industrious and eminent American novelists, but I never liked anything else of his nearly as much as when he retold the Beowulf legend from the monster's point of view in ^{Nis novel} Grendel. There may be no more wonderfully crocodilean ^{than one} sentence ^{Grendel's narrative has} after ~~he~~ rampaged through a meadhall: "I silently sack up my dead." (p. 7)

[Here closer to home,] writers about the American West have done some inspired engineering on the crocodile factor. Louise Erdrich's kaleidoscopic shifts of points of view--and points of time--in her stories--which--add--up--to--novels are Faulknerianly brilliant. James Welch made perhaps the greatest leap any of us of this writing generation ~~is~~ out here are going to make toward the soul of a people when he had the nonhuman creatures of their cosmos speaking to his Blackfeet characters in Fools Crow. James Crumley unforgettably tossed us a crocodile in canine guise in the sweetheart opening sentence of *The Last Good Kiss*: "When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon." Craig Lesley in *Winterkill* presented us with a character with the not particularly promising name of Ass-Out Jones, and proceeded to make him the cathartic figure in that affecting novel.

For my part, to close this out with somebody whose motives I'm supposed to know something about, among the things I've been trying to do within the Two Medicine trilogy is to run a little typographical crocodile farm.

~~For my part, to close this out with somebody whose motives I'm supposed~~
~~to know something about, I've been trying to run a typographical crocodile farm~~
~~within the Two Medicine trilogy.~~ In Dancing at the Rascal Fair, there not only
 was an illustration showing how the 36 sections of a township are numbered--
 perhaps the only modern novel to be able to make that claim--but also the handwritten
 word that my hero's object of affection had put on her schoolroom blackboard as
 the day's spelling lesson: Angus McCaskill cherished that word, even though it was
"chilblain." In English Creek, over the almost-dead body of my publisher's
 production chief, I managed to get onto the page moments of white space amid
 the Gros Ventre rodeo announcer's spiel, so that it would sound as ^{sappily} blurry to
 the reading eye as it did coming out of the old glory-horn speaking apparatus of
 1939. ~~And this finale novel probably not coincidentally opens with the word~~
~~click, of an unwelcome camera snapping, and has another chapter that begins~~
~~with the ringing of a phone, brrik brrik~~

And this finale novel has in it the designs sewn on a Montana town's centennial flag last year--quite possible the only modern novel able to make that claim either.

There's also possibly a summarizing moment-of-the-crocodile in the book. One of my characters is a writer, somewhat reluctantly incarcerated in a newspaper job, and when the book's entourage pulls into Miles City in a Winnebago, he pops his head out during ~~the~~ a service station stop and sees beyond the gas pumps the usual sign, AIR AND WATER. Before he can stop himself, he's out of the motorhome and over at that sign--and in the ancient passionate compulsion to expand the story, he adds beneath in precise lettering: EARTH AND FIRE.

passionate