

Achaian ships have been sighted, and when she flies out, terrified, to look, she sees that they are all filled with armed women who look exactly like herself. The possibilities in this are perhaps interesting and might encourage the writer to work back from the climax to fill in the logical necessities of this different conclusion; but here we encounter the second large problem in presenting the story of Helen as a tale.

Though it's partly a matter of the individual writer's intuition and taste, it may seem that the new ending clashes too noticeably with the Greek story as we know it. Indeed, the whole tone of the tale genre clashes rather fiercely with our feelings about Greece and Troy. Though the war between the two took place long ago and in a far-away country, it does not feel to us remote in time and space. One might conceivably write a tale in which Queen Elizabeth and King Henry (any King Henry) have parts as minor characters; one might possibly write a tale about Napoleon and Josephine; or one might write a tale including Charlemagne—as Calvino does in *The Nonexistent Knight* (not a pure tale but a generic hybrid). But Greek tradition seems somehow too full of sunlight and sharp imagery, too charged with Homeric immediacy, to accommodate the mood of a tale. The only possible solution, perhaps, would be to change the locale and all the characters' names, placing the arrival of the mysterious ships off the coast of, say, ancient Norway.

How the story would work set as a yarn we need not elaborate. We see at once that a yarn-spinner would have to be introduced; and some implied reason for his spinning of the yarn; and justification would have to be found for telling so serious a story comically. Such adaptations are not impossible, though the project may seem unpromising. The yarn-spinner might be, for once, an old woman, and her purpose in telling the story might be subtly feminist. Making Helen her heroine, a shrewd woman who at every turn comically outwits her male "superiors," she escapes to freedom. Here, if not sooner, the yarn

might go dark, becoming a generic hybrid (yarn crossed with realistic story): Helen's ultimate failure, tonally conflicting with all that went before, might give, however subtly, an angry, revolutionary tone to the conclusion. The reader's indignation at the unhappy ending might be made to release the meaning—or, in this case, implied message—that women, however they may struggle and whatever their brilliance, are always beaten in the end by male chauvinism, a condition that ought not to prevail. If all this were done in too obvious a fashion, the story would of course be boring; but for the writer with sufficient lightness of touch and a gift for authentic humor, the yarn hybrid might have a good deal of subtlety and interest, every detail serving its feminist theme, the relative power of men and women.

Finally, the story might be told more or less realistically, as Gide treats Greek legend in his novella "Theseus." The story's supernatural elements, if not suppressed entirely, would in this case be carefully played down, treated as givens and quickly left behind for the story's main action, already realistic in nature. Since the plot we've worked out is inherently one suitable for realistic presentation, we need say no more.

The last major element that may modify the fictional thought is style. In true yarn and tale presentation, style is a given. If the story is presented in the form of a realistic novel, novella, or short story, or in some hybrid cross of realism and something else, the writer's choice of style becomes a serious consideration. We need not spell out all the various possibilities of stylistic choice (to do so would be impossible in any case); it will be enough simply to suggest that each choice has implications. The writer must decide what point of view he will use, what diction level, what "voice," what psychic-distance range. If he has Helen tell the story in the first person, he has the problem, at once, of establishing the information Helen herself misses (the nature of the Achaians and the Trojans). In any long fiction, Henry James remarked, use of the first-person point of view is barbaric. James may go too far, but his point is worth

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

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

We have looked enough at the fictional process to see how the conventional writer's choices, from such large choices as subject, plot, character, setting, and theme to choices about the smallest detail of style, can all help him discover what it is he wants to say. We have seen that the process is at every stage both intuitive and intellectual: The writer chooses his subject because it appeals to him—a matter of feeling—but in developing it, first in his plan, then in his writing, he continually depends both on intellectual faculties, such as critical abstraction and musing speculation, and on intuition—his general sense of how the world works, his impulses and feelings. Having come this far, we can get better perspective on our original questions about aesthetic interest and truth in conventional fiction.

Both for the writer and for the careful reader after him, everything that happens in a well-constructed story, from major events to the most trifling turn of phrase, is a matter of aesthetic interest. Since the writer has chosen every element with care, and has revised and repeatedly re-revised in an attempt to reach something like aesthetic perfection, every element we encounter is worth savoring. Every character is sufficiently vivid and interesting for his function; every scene is just long enough, just rich enough; every metaphor is polished; no symbol stands out crudely from its matrix of events, yet no resonance goes completely unheard, too slyly muffled by the literal. Though we

shadows and phantoms produced by his delirium tremens. His sense of responsibility, his courage, his nobility of heart, his native chivalry, all these were as keen as ever; but his eye for mundane truth was not what it might have been. And so, believing he saw something, and thinking himself called upon for heroic action, he threw down the bottle, snatched out his revolver, ran into the house where the girl had just gone, and once again proved himself a fool.

Voice, once a writer masters it, can be a delightful thing, but no smart writer depends on voice alone to sail him past all evils. Compare another version of the scene with the drunken detective, this time dramatized, not explained:

Where the snake came from he did not see. A roar filled his mind, the sky flashed white, and as if the doorway to the underworld had opened, there lay the snake, a foot across, maybe thirty feet long, greenish-golden. It moved quickly, gracefully across the street in front of him and over the curb toward the porch where a moment ago Elaine Glass had stood. It had large black eyes; in its scales, glints of violet and vermillion. Hatchet-head raised, tongue flicking, it moved with the assurance of a familiar visitor up the sidewalk toward the steps.

With a yelp, without thinking, Craine threw down the bottle, pushed open the door of his side, half-jumped, half-fell from the truck, and ran around the front. He drew his pistol as he ran. The students on the porch snatched their things from the steps and porch-floor and jumped back. The tail of the enormous snake was disappearing through the door. Now it was gone. He ran after it, waving the pistol, running so fast he could hardly keep from falling.

Though we run across exceptions, philosophical novels where explanation holds interest, the temptation to explain is one that

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

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

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

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

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

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

because his mind is focused on something else—gets events out of sequence, forcing the reader to go back and straighten them out; or, to put it another way, where the writer momentarily suspends meaning in his sentence (almost always a bad idea), forcing the reader to run on faith for several words, hoping that out of seeming chaos some sense will emerge. Two examples. First: "Turning, dribbling low as he went in for his shot, he was suddenly knocked flat by one of the cheerleaders, who had rushed onto the court in her excitement and so had gotten in his way." A sentence like this one can be fobbed off on the reader occasionally—though the sharp reader will notice and object—but if such things happen often the authority of the writer is seriously undermined and, more to the point, the dream loses power and coherence. If we are to see a perfectly focused dream image, we must be given the signals one by one, in order, so that everything happens with smooth logicity, perfect inevitability. The only exception (and even here the writer should be sure his exception is justified) is the scene in which the character's disorientation—and the reader's—is meant to be an important part of the effect. Bad writers use this exception as an excuse to introduce voices out of nowhere, as when we have a young man walking down the road, whistling happily, no one in sight, and then we encounter the words (new paragraph): "Watch yourself, Boon!" Followed by (new paragraph): "Boon turned in alarm, looking all around in panic." This kind of thing is common in fiction, of course, and my disapproval will not do much to discourage writers from continuing to use it. Nevertheless, if the theory of fiction as a dream in the reader's mind is correct, the surprise break into the calm of things ("Watch yourself") is a mistake, or anyway a lapse from absolute, perfectly focused clarity. Compare: "Suddenly, from somewhere, a voice shouted, 'Watch yourself, Boon!'" But these are delicate matters, and every writer will have his own opinion on just how far he ought to go in pursuit of the ideal of clarity. As far as I'm concerned, if the writer has at least seriously *thought* about the problem and