

How Fiction Works

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June 8-9, 2013

How does fiction really work? There is a contradiction in terms, because fiction, at least in its classical conception, which is the tacit understanding assumed in the book as almost a matter of course, tries to combine both truth and falsehood. It is both made up and forced. It both strives to be 'realistic' and to be imaginary. One talks about verisimilitude and mimesis, concepts which are classically applied to the visual arts. Drawing is a skill that to some extent can be learned and mastered, does not the same apply to the writing of fiction as well? This is the point of departure for the author, referring to the work of Ruskin introducing the general reader to the art of drawing, a didactic exercise whose ultimate aim is not to impart the skill but to heighten the readers powers of observation by closely looking at the way the masters solve the problem of representation, in particular the problem of mimesis.

In the visual arts there is a very direct correspondence between what is being drawn and the drawing itself¹. True, the world we see is three-dimensional, and our brain are to some extent able to make that fact palpable, which creates confusion when trying to put it down on a two-dimensional canvas. However, there are rather simple solutions to that. Just keep still and close one eye! The mathematical idea of projection solves the problem in principle. The eye is represented by a point, and the lines emanating from it are like rays that continue until they meet their first obstacle. This is the principle of occlusion. Now intersect the rays with a given plane and you get the desired 1-1 correspondence. In this simple construction all the laws of perspective are easily derived, just to be plucked like ripe plumbs from a tree. In retrospect it is amazing that those simple laws took so long to be recognized, the explanation of which is not only historical but, I suspect, constrained by human psychology in the sense of visual cognition. The mathematical principle can easily be implemented. It is known as 'camera obscura'. Make a pinhole in a box, and let the image be projected on a transparent wall. Here it is, only to be mechanically copied. The device was supposedly used by many a painter in the past, admittedly more as an aide than as a mechanical method of production. The principle is even older, it is the principle on which the eye works. The photographic revolution consisted not in the camera, but in making the image fixed, thus in effect making a fully automatic translation of the image to a canvas. In classical setting, one achieved a 1-1- correspondence between projected reality with that of silver-compounds, with modern digital techniques, which dispense of silver altogether, we have the familiar representation by pixels. The surface area is divided into small squares, each having an appropriate hue. In this way every picture can be encoded by a huge number. This encoding does of course have no direct relation to the picture, confronted with one, we are unable to make the picture pop up, nevertheless it does in a definite manner solve the problem of pictorial representation once and for all.

¹ This is the foundation of the phenomenon of 'trompe l'oeil'.

But a draughtsman does not think in terms of pixels. He thinks in terms of structure. To draw is to see, really see. One cannot draw something unless one 'understands' what it is one draws. Drawing becomes a means of exploring and understanding, as epitomized by Da Vinci, for whom drawing was foremost a means of scientific discovery. Thus for instructional purposes a drawing is often superior to a photograph, the latter records everything, the drawing brings forth the essential. Thus the pleasure of drawing is both sensual and intellectual. Then of course drawing can degenerate into mannerism, a formal technique of making an effect, typically commercially exploited. This can be taught and is so indeed, and books of instructions for the amateur abound in tricks on how to achieve this and that effect. One may deplore it, yet for painters of the past, who had to live by their wits, it was essential knowledge, and only in that way can we understand why even the greatest of them taught themselves useful skills by simply copying masterpieces of their predecessors. But I am straying, let me return.

As a small child I was fascinated by the inanity of being. 'Thingness' as the author refers to it as. Say a small patch of ground, a few square feet by the roadside. The gravel, the stray grass the wilted flower, the jettisoned cigarette-butt and crinkled candy wrapper, the crawling ant, and if you are lucky, the splendid butterfly. I longed for some reason to recreate such a fragment of reality and understood that it would be very difficult. You sometimes see actual efforts but they always fall short, they seem too clean, there is simply not enough extraneous detail, it is too simplified, it does not entail the 'fractal' nature of reality, of existing at the many levels of scale. It is an artifice. Like a simple cartoon instead of the real thing². Of course one can take a picture of it, and in this way represent its image at least. This is what gives photographs their special mystery, because they are mechanical recordings untouched by human selection. They seem to give you a slice of reality, frozen in time, thus preserving the ephemeral moment for posterity. The connection of photographs with death, is another fascinated topic, but irrelevant to this review. What fascinate us about photographs is to a large extent the irrelevant detail, it is for us to discover, it has not been discovered for us by the selection of the photographer, it comes to us unmediated by any other consciousness³.

Can something similar be done for literature? Is there any analogue to the pixel method. As a child I imagined a literary description of the events of the day, proceeding with the objectivity of a camera, recording one moment after the other, the high with the low, the relevant along with the irrelevant, in other words to recreate a small patch of the real world. I was at the time disenchanted by the schematic presentations of childrens stories and intrigued by the richer texture to be found in those intended for adults, especially

² This is particularly apparent when they try in a movie to create another time epoch, it does not have to be too distant in time, in fact the failure becomes even more noticeable when it is not. The effect is somehow too anti-septic, there is too little of it, and everything that has been placed has been done so by deliberation. The fractal fuzz is simply not there. On the other hand if you make a movie taking place contemporarily you do not have to worry about such things as anachronisms, anything by definition belongs. Thus a movie filmed in the 60's seem to give a far more authentic rendering of that decade, than one self-consciously made a few decades later.

³ This ties up with the documentary character of a photo, which however by modern digitalization has been severely compromised to the extent that a photo no longer needs to represent objective truth.

those with a historical setting. Later in my teens I came across Proust, whose introductory chapter on sleeping and slumbering and waking up delighted me, and still later on I was led to expect that my ambition would actually be achieved by James Joyce in his 'Ulysses' only to become disappointed. Maybe only then did I fully understand that my ambition was simply impossible. There is no way of representing reality pixel by pixel. Ultimately reality can only be evoked never faithfully represented, it requires more of a collaboration of the reader, drawing on his powers of imagination, than the merely visual input⁴.

As we already noted, pictures can be encoded in linear strings of symbols. Such an encoding has many uses but is worthless for human reconstruction. A more direct encoding is of music in its standard notation. By the accomplished that can actually be read although never replace the direct sensual interpretation using instruments in an actual performance. The written word is also a linear representation and it is remarkable that it can convey with such vividness a complex phenomenon such as a story with all its trappings. When we read a text we are not aware of the individual letters, nor the words per se, only the meanings they carry through conventions instructing our imagination⁵.

In order to properly understand fiction, its strengths and weaknesses, one needs to compare it with its rivals the film and the theatre. The film is of course the most direct continuation of the visual image. Even the one visual image can tell a story, as testified by Dutch genre painting, but the creation of the illusion of movement had for technical reasons to wait until the end of the 19th century. Although snatches of movements were produced long before, the sustained film effort had to wait for the perfection of the fixation of the projected image until one were able to produce it at a rate of twenty-four a second⁶. Thus film, that in a sense most closely mimics our episodic memory, by necessity appeared very late in the history of mankind, thus it is not surprising that many of its techniques were established long before it made its advent, and thus many old novels lend themselves beautifully to filmatization, being already conceived as a succession of visual shots. Why is that? Because our memories and dreams work that way? The theatre on the other hand appeared very early, and was an accomplished art form already by the Greek. The theatre is predominantly oral, and works almost as well, if not even better, as a purely audial medium⁷. It is of course nice to see it enacted on the stage, with props and people dressed up, but such things, although an aide to the imagination, also act as a distraction. It is presented literally through direct speech orally delivered. Thus, although encoded in written form it is basically one of speech. The written play is another art-form, occasionally

⁴ This is partly the motivation for the saying that a picture says more than a thousand words, or why we insist that children's books should be lavishly illustrated, and maybe why films tend to edge out literature in conveying stories to the general population.

⁵ The remarkability of the feat becomes even more palpable when we consider a text made up of Chinese characters. How can anyone from those seemingly meaningless assemblages of strokes conjure up anything at all?

⁶ That figure does not have to be exact, but it is an interesting fact of human visual cognition that you need so many images to create the illusion of continuous movement, and that you do not need much more, in the latter case the production of film would have had to wait several more decades.

⁷ Something which was not exploited until the advent of the radio, an excellent medium whose reign was prematurely cut short by the advent of the TV.

performable but not necessarily so. The performed play is not the creation of a single person, but a communal effort that not only takes place but also takes form on the stage⁸. The drama is carried forward purely by conversation, be it occasionally degenerated into mere soliloquy. There is of course great freedom in spoken lines, they can extend to mini-stories, bringing into the action events far from the stage, which is carried to the extreme in the dialogues of Plato, which for that reason neither are meant to nor are suitable for the stage⁹. Still, the medium of the theatre carries with it some trivial shortcomings which require rather awkward solutions, something it has also in common with the film¹⁰. We know the material world mostly through our sight, this is the way it presents itself to us, while the human world, or the spiritual one, if you prefer, is conveyed to us by the human voice through hearing. Thus even if blindness may seem to us as the most cruel of sensory deprivation, deafness actually tends to isolate a person, and thus ultimately cause far more misery. In the modern sound-movie those two worlds are attempted to unite, the immediate success of which has shown itself to be very powerful, for one thing it works as well for people who can neither write nor read. The classical novel seems at a disadvantage, and maybe its heyday would never have occurred, had not the advent of the sound-movie for technical reasons been so delayed.

The novel is much more abstract than the film and also compared to the execution of a play. It works mostly by evocation, not by direct showing, and as such, as already noted, it demands much more of the reader, not only literacy (i.e. the ease of automatic encoding of strings of letters), but also of his powers of imagination. This abstractness is of course a disadvantage, but ultimately a great advantage. The source of the novel is the story. The story was originally a purely oral tradition. It could be quite long, a story depends on time unfolding, and transcends the mere anecdote. It is a sequence of episodes logically connected to each other. A long story needs for mnemonic reasons to be rather structured adhering to some formal, stereotyped rules. The logic of a story is easy to recall, but in order to have a closer faithfulness in each retelling, there has to be a logic of language as well. Thus prose and poetry meld together. The classical story is also for that reason clean, nothing that does not really carry the plot forward tends to be discarded. This you see in the fairy-tale giving to it a sense of universality that makes it as effective regardless of epoch. The same concentration on the plot is to be found in the modern comic-story. The *Odyssey* and the *Illiad* would also work as comic books¹¹. This should not be surprising. They were no doubt rapturously listened to by the kind of people who nowadays would read comics. With the advent of writing the necessary mnemonic devices could be discarded, but still for a long time, the novel tended to have a rather stilted form, in fact well into the 18th century. At that time the epistolary novel was popular, and

⁸ The perennial question whether Shakespeare wrote his plays or not, is not a very relevant one. Why should it bother us if Shakespeare could be thought of a short-hand for a theatre-company, in which the actors took as great a part in forming the lines as the playwrights?

⁹ I mean more specifically that in the dialogues of Plato it is common to embed the actual story within many layers of presentation, i.e. as one parenthesis within the other.

¹⁰ Wood brings up the case of Lady Macbeth whispering to her husband during a dinner party. How to present that realistically on the stage?

¹¹ This was what struck me when I read the *Odyssey* for the first time in middle-age

this makes perfect sense. The most usual way of writing a story was by letter, and thus it could be thought of as a dialogue carried on by other means, namely by the quill. It would of course be folly to make a clear line of demarcation between the pre-modern novel and its modern counterpart. Elements of modernity can be traced almost arbitrarily far back, but nevertheless it can be useful, as does the author, to highlight Flaubert, if for no other reasons than no one before him had so well articulated the problems of the writing of fiction and how to solve them, or at least how to address them. From the point of the Anglo-Saxon reader, French and Russian literature of the late 19th century figured as the great sources of inspiration. French from the formal point of view, Flaubert dreamed of writing the perfect novel, which would be about nothing - the ultimate triumph of form over matter¹². The Russian from the point of view of contents, not the form, but the soul.

Wood identifies some basic problems. The point of view, i.e. first or third person perspective; the evocation of realism; the creation of independent 'round' characters as opposed to flat ones, a problem that much concerned E.M.Forster in his 'Aspects of the Novel' written in the 20's; and finally language. As to the first, the third person perspective, i.e. that of the so often ridiculed omniscient author, has much to commend itself in terms of freedom and flexibility. The first person narrative is a tempting shortcut, making an immediate identification with the reader. For some reason Wood does not dwell on this possibility but assumes the second (i.e. third person) as default. This leads to the problem of speech and dialogue (as well as interior monologue), should those be presented directly, i.e. more or less verbatim, or in some transcribed and indirect way? The first is the way of the play and it leads to the (realist) problem of separating the author from his character. The author is expected to be far more articulate and sophisticated than his characters, thus in particular direct reported speech is supposed to be rather crude. This is less of a problem in a play, because lines are spoken, on the page in written form formal shortcomings are far more glaring. This is why sustained efforts of conveying dialect tends to be tiresome. The second way is far more flexible. The author is then expected to interpret and evoke the words of his characters which allows far more freedom, in particular when it comes to conveying thoughts which are usually never fully articulated. Still the problem of separation remains, what in the reported speech or thought belongs to the character and what is the provenance of the author? The problem is not insurmountable although even many distinguished authors (Wood gives the example of Updike) tend to stumble on it.

As noted a literary text cannot present a scene pixel by pixel, it has to evoke it. This is also true of our visual perception, it always involves a high degree of interpretation, this is why we only observe a tiny part of what reaches our retina. We have to combine our visual stimuli into structures, as well as combine basic elemental structures into larger structures, and so on. Not *ad infinitum* maybe only four to five levels, or some such number¹³. In our

¹² Certain post-modernist writers come close to this, by writing not a novel, but simply about writing it. A rather tedious play on self-referentiality

¹³ This is akin to the mathematician contemplating sets. It is not enough to know all the elements of a set, we also need to form relevant subsets, which in their turn provide subsets of sets of subsets and so on. Incidentally it is the nominalist's view that only the elements exist, not the tower of sets of sets of sets, which is part of the Platonist persuasion.

minds eyes we are able to envision very vivid visual scenes, but really what do we 'see'? It is more like seeing the smile, then the face that makes up the smile. Once we try to pinpoint our interior vision it dissolves, what we have is the abstraction of one, which is devoid of details (elements of the set) only containing the relations between the details¹⁴. This is the secret of the descriptive challenge for a writer, the realistic setting of a scene. This is the luxury of rich texture, which became a possibility once a story can be encoded in written form. How much detail to bring in to create the illusion? Obviously one cannot catalogue everything in sight, such an ambition is not only impossible to complete, even a partial success invariably becomes tedious. When we recall a scene in memory we do not recall all the details, in fact it is not even clear whether we recall any details whatsoever, the point of the recollection is not to reproduce, but to use the same word over and over again, to evoke. To create the illusion of fullness. The writer proceeds in the same way, by giving cues and thereby stimulating the imagination of the reader. But he or she does more, they also instruct the imagination. They use cues that might never have occurred to the reader, and thus they may provoke a recollection that is more vivid than the reader might have made on her own left to her own devices. Wood points out the greater power of observation of a writer, of making us see what we would not have seen before (just as a great painter).

So far we have only dwelled on the static side. The so called word-painting of setting a scene and creating a sense of presence, the more palpable the better. But language is more supple and abstract than visual presentation, it can also introduce dynamic processes, describe not only a scene as it presents itself to the eye, but also indicate how it changes with time. Furthermore, settings are never (unless in the case of experimental fiction) ends in themselves, but are supposed to interact with the characters and their fates. And this is what fiction ultimately is about. People and their experiences. This brings us to the next issue, the forming of character.

I recall how in my early school-years we were taught the difference between bad or trivial literature (which we were obviously taught to avoid) and good. In the former there were no rounded characters, just flat one, as cut out of cardboard, just like those dolls you clothe with similarly cut out clothes, while in the latter we encounter people just as we do in real life. Anybody can cut out a character from cardboard, but to create a real rounded character takes not only skill but inspiration. Commendable as such an attitude maybe, it has shortcomings, as Wood points out. Is it really that necessary, or is that really the criterion on which we should judge a work of fiction? In fact most people we encounter are just like that. Flat characters, of which we know almost nothing. In fact in our celebrity culture many of the people whom we encounter and learn to 'know' do not differ from fictional characters, as we have no possibility of interacting with them. Princess Diane was clearly a fictional character to most of the mourners that amassed outside Buckingham Palace. This is why the grief was so sweet, it provided all the sentimentality of mourning without the pain of actual loss. Psychologically this outpour of grief was no different than

¹⁴ Incidentally our recall of audial perceptions tends to be more literal, even if most of it has the same shadowy character. It is possible to retain in your mind an utterance without initially understanding it and then being able to replay it in your mind and get its sense. It seems to me that a similar feat of visual memory is impossible, although there is much talk about photographic memory.

that which supposedly was provoked by the death of Nellie in Dicken's 'The Old Curiosity Shop'. Of course a novel in which we do not engage in any of the characters, and hence feel no interest in what happens to them, is in many ways a failed novel, although one should as always in art, be careful of making such categorical statements, exceptions can always be constructed. What provides the compelling force in a delineation of a character is the sympathy it is able to engender. Sympathy should never be confused with approval, it is independent of it, but relates to our ability and willingness to identify and put ourselves in the shoes of others. We can feel sympathy for an unsympathetic character, we may not want to, that is why we refer to the character as unsympathetic, but we cannot help ourselves. They exert a pull. A character is said to be interesting if it manages to pull us in. Often it is the villain who may attract us, and it is symptomatic that if an actor has the choice between a bland and a good (or at least unobjectionable) character, and a bad and interesting, he or she opts for the latter¹⁵. If there ever is a case for usefulness or even moral in the reading of fiction, Wood reminds us, it is in its ability to extend our sympathies, i.e. to satisfy our curiosity as to different points of view, of simply extending our egos, by exploring a larger swatch of humankind.

Finally there is the question of language. A good writer should not only have the skills listed above in addition he should be able to present them in a pleasing way. He should be good with his words. But what does that really mean, and can one really separate the skilled use of words from the art of writing? What constitutes good prose? That it is grammatically correct and not misspelled? This is something that surely can be learned, and if deficient easily be remedied by a competent editor. Such abuses tend to be distracting and should of course be excised. More subtle is the rhythm of the prose its musical cadence. One should avoid repetitions, but that is only true as far as it concerns unintentional ones, when intended repetitions can be very effective. One should write simple and avoid complicated sentence structures. Sometimes thoughts are very complex and require complicated ways. Do not use fancy words! Sometimes they are very appropriate, and besides one of the benefits of reading is to extend your vocabulary. And then of course, never use hackneyed phrases and stale metaphors, invent new ones, the more startling the better. But sometimes the cliché is the best one to use. In short it its very difficult to set up rules as to style and other skills of writing.

But how do you learn to write? By reading a lot and relying on osmosis? Or by actually paying close attention to texts, like a critic, not just to read and enjoy, but to read and get instructed, just as the old painters learned by copying the old Masters. The author obviously does not expect anyone who reads this book to learn all the tricks of the trade as well as learn how to avoid all the pitfalls and become an expert writer of fiction. Not even the author himself is one, even if he would be much more knowledgable of the craft of fiction than most of the writers he brings up. But some writers have learned the tricks and employ them with great aplomb and are often commercially successful. Wood takes as examples John Le Carre and Graham Greene. They are master craftsmen and

¹⁵ This is amoral of course. Why do we feel a tinge of sympathy for the death of Saddam Hussein, while being indifferent to his many victims? Simply because the latter are totally anonymous, while the former is a piece of fiction we have lived with for many years and hence began to think of a human being, no matter how inhuman, and thus able to identify with him as he faces his extinction.

reading their works their skills become very apparent. They are experts in the telling detail, carefully never missing an opportunity to insert it. Skill is not so much a pervading style as mannerism. They certainly would be excellent models in any writing course. Here you see what happens when you learned your lessons perfectly. Yet, as Wood ruefully acknowledges, real writers are more exciting. I find Greene (after initial remonstrances) a pleasure to read, yet I also find him tired and unengaged. He does not write from the heart. The truth is probably that the real story-tellers are completely unaware of their techniques. They come for free. They do not write with their quills but with their hearts. In the end what matters is the authority of the author. The force with which he makes the reader sign the contract. Wood refers to Aristotle, who said that what matters in fiction is not plausibility but the force of conviction. Such things you do not learn, they well up inside you.

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