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The Dark Art of Description

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I was coming down the last lap of my most recent book, a memoir about my mother and father, and I was painfully aware of just how specific every bit of writing is, full of choices and chances, not theoretical at all, not the business of sweeping statements or smart ideas about “form” or “genre” or anything remotely theoretical. Just subject-verb-object and the hope of meaning.

Two nights away from the finish of my book, I was working late. I looked away from the computer screen for a moment and there was my dog staring at me intently. She was on the verge of speech. I could see it. *Come to bed*. Her eyes said this clearly. It was almost 2 a.m. and for the past four hours I'd been changing commas to dashes and then back again to commas with the obsessive focus only a fanatic can sustain.

You've become a crazy person again, I said right out loud. The dog padded away.

The great short story writer J.F. Powers was once stopped by a colleague in the corridor at their university. The man asked him how things were going. Powers allowed that it had been a tough day—“I spent the morning trying to decide whether to have my character call his friend *pal* or *chum*,” he said.

That's where I often find myself—thinking how important the choice of *pal* or *chum* is, how whatever truth writing lays claim to resides in a passion for just such quite mad distinctions. This monomania is what a friend of mine calls the 600-pound gorilla of a book. Once the 600-pound gorilla gets hold of you, you're his (or hers). “Those last weeks of finishing a book are a world in themselves,” she said. “I think that gorilla is the reason most of us write—it's a real high, but it's also a subconscious agreement not to be available or even normal for as long as it takes.”

But as soon as you—or I, anyway—break away from the gorilla's embrace of a particular book, those big, rangy theoretical questions

begin to make their approach again. Maybe this is especially true of memoir, the odd enterprise of “writing a life” that has captivated our literary life for the last two decades or so. We tend to think of the novel as the classic narrative form—ever evolving, but familiar, its stately provenance long the preserve of academic interest and the center of trade publishing. Whereas the memoir seems new or somehow “modern,” a rather suspect literary upstart. And therefore a form that invites interrogation.

But strictly speaking, autobiography is a genre far older than the novel and is hard-wired into Western literary history. Perhaps from that first injunction of the oracle at Delphi—*Know thyself*—Western culture has been devoted to the exploration of individual consciousness and the unspooling of individual life.

That commandment to *know thyself* was central to antiquity. Plato uttered a version of it; Cicero used it in a tract on the development of social concord. It was such a pillar of cultural, even spiritual value that in the early Christian period Clement of Alexandria felt compelled to claim that the saying had been borrowed by the Greeks from scripture, thus binding the two developing spiritualities—pagan and monotheistic—together in a seamless endeavor.

Closer to modernity, Goethe is supposed to have said with a shudder, “Know thyself? If I knew myself, I’d run away.” And Andre Gide probably expressed this revulsion best: “Know thyself! A maxim as pernicious as it is ugly. Whoever observes himself arrests his own development. A caterpillar who wanted to know itself well would never become a butterfly.”

But the strongest indictment of the form I have ever encountered came from a student in Indiana who had been conscripted by his Freshman Comp teacher to attend a reading I gave some years ago. He sprawled in his chair with his baseball cap on backwards, his eloquent body language making it clear he was far, far away. Can’t win them all, I decided, and carried on, my eye straying back to him like a tongue drawn to the absence of a just-pulled tooth.

During the Q&A I fielded the decorous questions the students posed. And then, suddenly, apparently in response to something I’d said, my anti-hero sat bolt-upright and was waving his hand urgently, his face alight with interest. Ah—a convert. I called on him, smiling.

“I get it,” he said. “Nothin’s ever happened to you—and you write books about it.”

He was right, of course. And in pronouncing this acute literary critical remark, he touched on the most peculiar aspect of the rise of the memoir in our times—namely, that fundamentally it isn't about having a more interesting life than someone else. True, there is a strand of autobiographical writing that relies on the documentation of extraordinary circumstances, lives lived in extremity, often at great peril. But such memoirs have always been part of literary history. What characterizes the rise of memoir in recent times is precisely the opposite condition—not a gripping “narrative arc,” but the quality of voice, the story of perception rather than action.

The self is not the subject of memoir, in this kind of book, but its instrument. And the work of the self is not to “narrate” but to describe. There is something fundamentally photographic about memoir, photographic rather than cinematic. Not a story, but a series of tableaux we are given to consider. No memoirist is surprised by the absences and blanks in action, for another unavoidable quality of autobiography as I am thinking of it—as lyrical quest literature—is that it is as much about reticence as it is about revelation.

It is often remarked that the advent of the movies and the ever faster pace of modern life have conspired to make description a less essential part of prose narrative in our own times. We don't need to be told what things look like—we are inundated with images, pictures, moving or static. In this view, we need the opposite of the photographic quality so beloved of nineteenth century descriptive writing in which the landscape is rolled out, sentence after sentence, the interior of a room and the interior of the character's mind meticulously presented.

We require writing, instead, that subsumes description, leaps right over it to frame episode and to create the much sought-after “narrative arc.” The motto—even the mantra—of this narrative model is of course the commandment of introductory fiction writing workshops: *Show, don't tell.*

But as recent memoir writing shows, descriptive writing abounds. And it proves, finally, not to be about the object described. Or not only. Description in memoir is where the consciousness of the writer and the material of the story are established in harmony, where the self is lost in the material, in a sense. In fiction of the show-don't-tell variety narrative scenes that “show” and dutifully do not “tell,” are advanced by volleys of dialogue in which the

author's presence is successfully obscured by the dramatic action of the dialogue of his characters. But in description we hear and feel the absorption of the author in the material. We sense the presence of the creator of the scene.

This personal absorption is what we mean by "style." It is strange that we would choose so oddly surfacey a word—style—for this most soulful aspect of writing. We could, perhaps more exactly, call this relation between consciousness and its subject "integrity." What else is the articulation of perception?

Style is a word usually claimed by fashion and the most passing aesthetic values. But maybe that's as it should be because style in writing is terribly perishable. It can rot—that is what we mean when we recognize writing to be "precious," for example. But at its best and most essential, style is the register between a writer's consciousness and the material he is committed to wrestling to the page. It is the real authority of a writer, more substantial than plot, less ego-dependent than voice.

In 1951, Alfred Kazin published his memoir of his boyhood in Brooklyn, *A Walker in the City*, the book that establishes modern American memoir. The critic Leslie Fiedler admired the book but was also frustrated by it. It "perversely refuses to be a novel," he said with some annoyance, as if Kazin's book, deeply dependent on descriptive writing, were refusing to behave. And it was. It was refusing to obey the commandment to "Show, Don't Tell."

When you read "The Block and Beyond," a much-anthologized chapter from Kazin's memoir, it is impossible to discuss the main characters and certainly not its plot or even its narrative structure. It is a rhapsodic evocation of a place and time. And once read, it is impossible to forget, as indelible and inevitable as a poem.

What Kazin was able to do—what every memoirist can attempt—in liberating himself from the demands of show-don't-tell narrative was to enter into reflection, into speculation, into interpretation, and to use the fragment, the image, the vignette, rather than narratively linked scenes to form his world and his book. He was able to show *and* tell. To write a story and write an essay—all in the same tale, braided and twined together. The root of this double power lies in description.

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I was one of those enthralled teenage readers of long nineteenth-century English novels. I toiled my way through dense descriptions of gloomy heaths and bogs to get to the airy volleys of dialogue that lofted back and forth down the page to give me what I wanted—would Jane and Mr. Rochester...or would they not? Would Dorothea Brooke awaken—would Mr. Lydgate? I didn't relish the descriptive passages. I endured them. Just as Jane and Dorothea endured their parched lives, as if these endless descriptive passages were the desert to be crossed before the paradise of dialogue and the love story could be entered.

Yet all this description was, after all, the *world* of the book—not simply because it gave the book “a sense of place” as the old literary cliché puts it. It wasn't a “sense of place” I cared about in these passages, but the meeting place of perception with story—the place where someone *claimed* the story, where I could glimpse the individual consciousness, the creator of the scene. The person pulling the wires and making Jane and Dorothea move. I was looking, I suppose, for a sign of intimacy with the invisible author. That “dear reader” moment so familiar in nineteenth century novels—think of Thackeray pausing to have a chat with the reader—with you!—about how to live on nothing a year. Think of George Eliot breaking off to describe the furnishings of Dorothea's ardent mind.

Henry James is probably the crown prince of nineteenth century describers, a *flâneur* of the sentence, a lounge lizard of the paragraph, taking his own sweet time to unfurl an observation, smoking the cheroot of his thought in the contemplative after-dinner puffery of a man who knows how to draw out the pleasure of his rare tobacco. Or—because James himself never hesitates to pile up opposing figures of speech until he has sliced his thought to the refracted transparency he adores—maybe I'll just switch metaphors and say that James sits mildly at his torture apparatus, turning the crank in meticulously calibrated movements as the reader lies helplessly strained upon the rack of his ever-expanding sentences, the exquisite pain of the lengthening description almost breaking the bones of attention. In short (as James often says after gassing on for a nice fat paragraph or two on the quality of a Venetian sunset or the knowing lift of a European eyebrow glimpsed across a table by an artless American ingénue), in short, he loves to carry on.

Carrying on, I was discovering, is what it is to describe. A lot. At length. To trust description above plot, past character development, and even theme. To understand that to describe is both humbler and more essential than to think of compositional imponderables such as “voice” or to strain toward superstructures like “narrative arc.” To trust that the act of description will *find* voice and out of its streaming attention will take hold of narration.

By the time I was considering all of this, I had passed from being a reader and had become that more desperate literary type—a writer trying to figure out how to do it myself. I had no idea how to “sustain a narrative” and didn’t even understand at the time (the late 1970s) that I was writing something called “a memoir.” Yet when I read *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov and later read his command—*Caress the detail, the divine detail*—I knew I had found the motto I could live by, the one that prevailed over “Show, Don’t Tell.”

Perhaps only someone as thoroughly divested of his paradise as Nabokov had been of his boyhood Russia and his family, his native language and all his beloved associations and privileged expectations, could enshrine the detail, the fragment, as the divinity of his literary religion, could trust the truths to be found in the DNA of detail, attentively rendered in ardent description. The dutiful observation that is the yeoman’s work of description finally ascended, Nabokov demonstrated, to the transcendent reality of literature, to metaphor itself.

Nabokov was asked in an interview if his characters ever “took over.” He replied icily that *his* characters were his galley slaves.

Yet when it was a matter of locating the godhead of literary endeavor, even a writer as unabashedly imperious as Nabokov did not point to himself and his intentions but to the lowly detail. *Caress the detail, the divine detail*. Next to grand conceptions like plot, which is the legitimate government of most stories, or character, which is the crowned sovereign, the detail looks like a ragged peasant with a half-baked idea of revolution and a crazy, sure glint in its eye. But here, according to Nabokov, resides divinity.

Henry James put his faith in something at least as insubstantial. “If one was to undertake to...report with truth on the human scene,” he wrote, “it could but be because notes had been from the cradle the ineluctable consequence of one’s greatest inward energy...to take them was as natural as to look, to think, to feel,

to recognize, to remember. “ He considered his habit the basis of literature and called it “the rich principle of the Note.”

Such “notes” are of course details, observations. Description. In attending to these details, in the act of description, the more dynamic aspects of narrative have a chance to reveal themselves—not as “action” or “conflict” or any of the theoretical and technical terms we persist in thinking of as the sources of form. Rather, description gives the authorial mind a place to be in relation with the reality of the world.

It was surely this desire for the world—that is for the world’s memoir, which is history—that drew me to memoir, that seemingly personal form. And it was to description I tended, not to narrative, not to story. Maybe the root of the desire to write is always lost—properly lost—in the non-literary earth of our real lives. And craft, as we think of it, is just the jargon we give to that darker, earthier medium.

I know it was my mother who was the storyteller in our house. I was her audience. Her dear reader, in a way. I dimly—and sometimes bitterly—understood that nothing much was happening in our modest Midwestern lives, yet I clung to the drama with which she infused every vignette, every encounter at the grocery store.

And when I sought to make sense of the world that kept slipping away to the past, to loss and forgetfulness, when I protested inwardly at that disappearance, it was to description I instinctively turned. Coming from a background in poetry and therefore being a literalist, it didn’t occur to me to copy other prose writers. If I wanted to learn to write descriptively, I needed—what else?—pictures.

I took myself off to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and plunked myself down in front of a Bonnard. I wrote the painting. Described it. I went home and looked at a teacup on my table—I wrote that too. Still life descriptions that ran on for several pages. I wrote and wrote, describing my way through art galleries and the inadvertent still lives of my house and my memory, my grandmother’s garden, her Sunday dinners.

To my growing astonishment, these long descriptive passages, sometimes running two, three pages or longer, had a way of sheering off into narrative after all. The teacup I was describing had been given to me by my mother. And once I thought of the fact that she had bought these cups, made in Czechoslovakia, as a bride

just before the Second World War, I was writing about that war, about my mother and her later disappointments which somehow were—and were not—part of this fragile cup. Description—which had seemed like background in novels, static and inert as a butterfly pinned to the page of my notebook, proved to be a dynamic engine that stoked voice and even more propelled the occasional narrative arc. Description, written from the personal voice of my own perception, proved even to be the link with the world's story, with history itself. Here was my mother's teacup, made in Czechoslovakia before the War, and here, therefore, was not only my mother's heartbreak but Europe's. The detail was surely divine, offering up miracle after miracle of connections out of the faithful consideration of the fragments before me.

We sense this historical power at the heart of autobiographical writing in the testaments from the Holocaust, from the Gulag, from every marginal and abused life that has found the courage to speak its truth which is often its horror, to preserve its demonic details—and in so doing has seen them become divine. Nadezhda Mandelstam, Anne Frank, Primo Levi—to name only a very few. In time we will, surely, see such documents from Guantanamo and the unknown places of extreme rendition.

The history of whole countries, of an entire era and even lost populations depends sometimes on a little girl faithfully keeping her diary. The great contract of literature consists in this: you tell me your story and somehow I get my story. If we are looking for another reason to explain the strangely powerful grip of the first-person voice on contemporary writing perhaps we need look no farther than the power of Anne Frank's equation—that to write one's life enables the world to preserve its history.

But what of lives lived in the flyover? Lives that don't have that powerful, if terrible, historical resonance of radical suffering. Ordinary lives, in a word. Alfred Kazin's life—or yours. And certainly mine in middling Minnesota in the middle of the twentieth century. Why bother to describe it? Because of course, all details are divine, not just Nabokov's. In fact, perhaps the poorer the supposed value, the more the detail requires description to assure its divinity.

Which brings me to—if not a story, at least a fragment, a vignette. Early in my teaching life, I went (foolishly) through a killer snowstorm in Minneapolis to get to my University office because I had

student conferences scheduled. By the time I arrived, the University had closed and the campus was empty, whipped by white shrouds of blizzard snow, the wind whistling down the Mall. I sat in my office in the empty building, cursing my ruinous work ethic, wondering if the buses would keep running so I could get home.

Then a rap on my office door. I opened it and there, like an extra out of *Doctor Zhivago*, stood my 11 a.m. appointment, a quiet sophomore named Tommy.

He looked anxious. He was really glad I was there, he said, because he had a big problem with the assignment. I had asked the students to write short autobiographies. "I just can't write anything about my life," he said miserably, his head down, his overshoes puddling on the floor.

I waited for the disclosure. What would it be—child abuse, incest, what murder or mayhem could this boy not divulge? What had brought him trooping through the blizzard to get help with his life story? How would I get him to Student Counseling?

"See, I come from Fridley," he said, naming one of the nowhere-suburbs sprawling drearily beyond the freeway north of Minneapolis.

I stared at him. I didn't, for a moment, comprehend that this was the dark disclosure, this the occasion of his misery: being from Fridley meant, surely, that he had nothing worth writing about.

There it was again—nothin' had ever happened to him and I was asking him to write about it.

"I have good news for you, Tommy," I said. "The field's wide open—nobody has told what it's like to grow up in Fridley yet. It's all yours."

All he needed to do was sit down and describe. And because the detail is divine, if you caress it into life, you find the world you have lost or ignored, the world ruined or devalued. The world you alone can bring into being, bit by broken bit. And so you create your own integrity, which is to say your voice, your style.