

The Roar and the Silence: Reflections on Character

(a talk I gave at the Sun Valley Writers' Conference, 2002)

I'd like to begin with a story. Because stories are how we make sense of the world. Because stories – good ones, at least – have a way, at once mysterious and illuminating, of making us feel engaged and alive, while also inevitably suggesting the vast regions of our inexperience. Because stories are both how we discover ideas about the world, and the most natural medium through which those ideas get expressed.

Actually, I'm already cheating: what follows isn't really a story. Let's just call them a couple of fragments.

I was 21 and trying to write my first piece of serious fiction. That I was doing so under an imposed deadline, to satisfy the East Asian Studies Department of my college, didn't help. It was March, my thesis was due in April, and I was stuck. The story involved a young American in Tokyo. Not exactly brain surgery, as one of my roommates was quick to point out. After all, I'd been a young American in Tokyo myself the previous summer. And didn't I have a pretty good memory, along with a case of special Brazilian pills that the local healthfood store had euphemistically described as a "natural herbal lift"? How difficult could it be? Well, not so difficult, it seemed. Until you got stuck. And here's where I got stuck: there came a point where I wanted my young American to leave the teeming metropolis and take a visit to the countryside. The problem was that I had never been to the rural north of Japan, where I wanted my young American to go on his journey. And having never seen that particular terrain with my own eyes, I found myself temporarily unable to imagine it. The result was my first case of writer's block, followed quickly by my first case of writer's panic. The special Brazilian pills only made the condition worse.

What saved me in the end was something very simple. Something you can find in any bookstore: a travel guide. Opening it, I leafed my way through its pages into the rural north. And there I found a tiny village whose name I liked, and beneath it, in the most innocuous writing imaginable, a very basic description of the surrounding

countryside. Cherry trees, I read. Rice paddies. The cultivation of grapes (a surprise). Fishing. Narrow valleys. A small railway station.

With the book's crude maps, I planned the route my young American would take. Three hours north from Tokyo on the bullet train, then a switch onto one of the rural lines. Cherry trees, I read again. Rice paddies. I was on the slow train now, with him. I dozed when he did, and woke when he did, with the lurching of the train. Everything was new. The window through which he stared in dazed wonder was mine, too. Deep in the country, the train passed over a narrow bridge, and there were men with long bamboo poles fishing from the riverbank. There were rice paddies farther on, and cherry trees, and small, steep hills. The few houses, built low, seemed to disappear into the landscape, as though they had sprung from it.

You write it line by line. You start with nothing but the human need to see what's passing outside the window in an unknown country – which is the human need to tell a story about experience. And then, bit by bit, you write it down as it comes. You see it as he sees it; or she; or they; and then you write what you see. It doesn't matter where you actually are. You could be in Anchorage or New York or Tokyo or Ketchum. You write it as truly and clearly as you can, knowing that your only obligation is to perceive this world through the eyes and ears and touch of another person, your fellow traveler (a person who has never before existed), at the very moment of perception – which is also, in its way, a moment of *con*-ception. Because a tree, or a man fishing by a river, at any particular time, in any particular place, will mean different things to different people.

Second fragment:

Several years and untold numbers of special Brazilian pills later, I began another novel. It would be a dark and difficult story to write (though I didn't yet know how difficult): a story about the accidental hit-and-run death of a young boy and its after-effects on the lives of two families living in neighboring towns in northwestern Connecticut. The book begins with the terrible event itself: the death, accident, crime as experienced by three separate people – the parents of the boy who is killed, and the man who accidentally kills him and then, for his own poorly considered reasons, drives away. Three short chapters, each in a different voice. Each a different living perception of a tragic, particular moment.

Then, somewhere around page 20, the actual event is over and done with. And the real subject of the novel begins.

I vividly remember sitting at my desk almost ten years ago as it dawned on me that simply describing the accident that begins *Reservation Road* was not enough: I had to follow my characters home. I couldn't just skip ahead 6 months, the way you might leap over a ditch filled with muddy water. No, much as I dreaded it and felt myself unequal to the task, I had to go home with them, and into their separate rooms, as they each, in their own way, tried to reckon, or avoid reckoning, with what had happened.

It was a particular kind of torture for a young, inexperienced writer – I wouldn't want to write that book again. But I also wouldn't trade in that writing experience for another, easier one. I recall entire months when it felt as if I were shadowing my characters as they trudged through the underworld murk of their grief, and smoldering with them in the slow, useless fire of their rage. A kind of living hell – for the writer as well as the characters. The stakes suddenly felt much too high. Because the novelist must be a kind of field officer in a battle constantly being pitched. The rule is you don't send your people into harm's way unless you're ready to go in with them, to experience what they experience, to see the world through their eyes. That was my first big lesson with that book, and it almost stopped me in my tracks.

But the real power of the young is their resilience, which is first cousin to that more romantic force, hope. After a lot of complaining, I finally picked up my lantern and headed down the mineshaft with my characters, our better and worse selves all in attendance.

I'd wager that every writer of serious intent sooner or later faces a similar kind of self-encounter: the invisible watershed, unrecorded by literary history, when all confidence and ambition wither in the face of what appears to be the impossible – namely, a true inhabiting of another soul.

Keats famously called the world "The vale of soul-making." I'd say the same about the novel. That the soul in a story is but a creation – "an imaginary self" as Milan

Kundera has said – doesn't lighten the writer's load. After all, as Kundera also remarked, the novel's genuine purview is not reality but existence. Not just what has occurred in the lives of people, but who those people might be under a given set of circumstances. And if a good novel is indeed a map of existence, as I think it is, then the circumstances it offers up are the highways and byways by which the journey gets made. There is no other way of getting there.

Instinctively, as human beings, we know this. You and I, with our daily routine of the mundane and monotonous now and then broken up by moments of tumult and joy and madness, recognize this pattern as being at one with our lives. It's like the night sky, the sky of deep space I'm talking about, fathomless and black, yet lit with stars of unquantifiable brightness. The irony is that it's often the apparently lightless space between stars, rather than the shining stars themselves, that proves the most illuminating. But how to traverse that dull, blank space without losing the reader – and the characters?

“If we had a keen vision of all that is ordinary in human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow or the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which is the other side of silence,” George Eliot wrote in *Middlemarch* 130 years ago.

How to give a sense, equally and truthfully, of the roar *and* the silence? That is the novelist's lifelong challenge, his dream and his nightmare.

In her autobiographical essay “A Sketch of the Past,” Virginia Woolf describes a state of unconscious living – the nothing hours that make up so much of our days – that is really, in her words, a state of “non-being.” In which everything, even goodness, seems buried in “a kind of nondescript cotton-wool.” On the other side are moments of the extraordinary, sudden shocks. What she finds baffling is the hold that the ordinary and unexceptional have over her memory – and thus, over her imagination:

“Why have I forgotten so many things that must have been, one would have thought, more memorable than what I do remember? Why remember the hum of bees in the garden going down to the beach, and forget completely being thrown naked by Father into the sea? (Mrs. Swanwick says she saw it happen.)”

Cotton-wool everywhere. And what is its true value in the big scheme of things? Woolf would seem to be asking. And what is its true relationship to those rare moments when the cotton-wool inexplicably parts and the air turns crystalline? When suddenly, for a stunning minute, we can see everything, including ourselves. A real novelist, Woolf goes on to declare, should be able to convey both kinds of being. Because both kinds of being are what we really mean when we think of being alive at all.

I couldn't agree more. But here's the rub: if you're a novelist, conveying both kinds of being – the ordinary and the extraordinary; the silence and the roar; the blackness and the stars – can be confounding. In fact, just surviving both kinds of being, whether you're a writer or a computer salesman or a pizza maker, can be confounding. What could it possibly mean, for instance, to spend a morning arguing on the phone with your health insurance company – they won't pay for that knee operation after all – and then with the dry cleaners – they still haven't found your favorite shirt – and then, late that afternoon, to discover that your best friend has cancer? Or, for that matter, to sit at breakfast moaning over your coffee because you were out at a restaurant until midnight, poor you, and then, 5 minutes later, you learn that two airplanes have just hit the World Trade Center.

This is not a case of the mere juxtaposition of extreme states. There's no name or theory for what this is. The world, as Wallace Stevens wrote, is a force, not a presence. We know our individual versions of this truth simply as life, but that's not very revealing. The heart refuses to be circumscribed by an equation. X hours of cotton-wool plus Y hours of terrible shock do not, and never will, result in a Z that equals the untold complexity of the human condition. Neither fact nor reason alone can describe, in any meaningful way, the movement between varied and overlapping states of mind and heart that is living. This is what Eliot meant, I believe, by the silence and the roar; and it's what I meant just now by the blackness and the stars. It's what a fiction writer must contend with as he attempts to journey with his characters between the ordinary (say, a young American on a train in Japan), and the extraordinary (say, parents in the immediate aftermath of the death of their 10-year-old son). Any authentic rendering of the inner world of a human being (or, for that matter, of a non-human being) demands that the writer connect empathetically with his characters, and attend to them from within rather than from without. Within is the realm of emotion, and it is where the writer must place himself if he is to have

any real authority. And by emotion I mean it in the novelistic, rather than the scientific, sense: as the gathered sediment of sensation, thought, and idea that is the ground on which we inevitably walk as long as we are alive.

We are not technical creatures, made up of machine parts or silicon chips. Nor are we creatures of pure sensation, able to float through life on the winds of one overwhelming emotion after another. Life is not an opera comprised solely of extravagant arias.

We are something in between, and beautiful: biologically complex organisms whose capacity for feeling most often far exceeds our capacity for emotional expression. In this sense, though we may pass through the light, we spend much of our days in a kind of darkness. That black space between the stars; a terminal in-between state. And in between the more obvious points of the compass of our existence – the grand events and big ideas by which outsiders most readily define us – there often seems to be no compass at all. This, in the most basic sense, is what it feels like deep inside the box of the individual on an ordinary day. And if the novel is to live up to its promise as a map of existence and a vale of soul-making, then I believe it must fully and honestly engage with that murky state, in which the individual is forced, day after day, to make his own dogged, blind way in a world that appears to know, and to care, nothing of who he really is. How each character ends up expressing, through word and deed, the feeling of this condition is his particular story. And the telling of particular stories is – must be – the novelist’s occupation. Truth depends on it.

Give me a literature brave enough and true enough to show the experience of living in two worlds that are in fact one. To find original expression for the reverberations of shock, but also for the ripples of intimacy. To be quiet as well as loud, gritty as well as philosophical, humble as well as arrogant. To lie down in darkness as well as in light. To follow our imaginary selves home from the party or the scene of the crime, off the front page and into the private empty rooms, on nights when there are no fireworks, and there’s nothing on TV. Give me a literature based above all else on character, in which reader and writer alike may recognize in the quiet searching through darkness of a fully realized fictive person the pale but shimmering reflections of our own solitary travels between the stars. Allow me to hear the roar of their silence, so that I might better understand my own.

It is the nature of memory that every experience in our lives ultimately gets suspended, like a fly trapped in amber, in the complex patterns of our individual perception. And it is the nature of reading that our recognition of those perceptions, if they are rendered truly, is what lastingly binds us to the characters in a work of fiction.

E.L. Doctorow once remarked that writing is like driving at night: you can see no farther than the headlight beams, but you can make the whole trip that way. I'd say much the same, more specifically, about the development of character in fiction. It's not the driver's appearance that matters, or what type of car he's driving, or even how brilliant his ideas. It's his powers of observation and imagination, and the tenor of his empathy for the life unfolding, mile by long mile, ahead of him. This is slow, humbling, ultimately mysterious work. Much of it takes place in the dark. It's a kind of alchemy by which silence and shadow are mixed with watching and listening and a strange temporary state of selflessness to create something that stands outside philosophy or simple ego. We read and honor Tolstoy today not because of his grand, highly questionable ideas about the Russian serfs and Christianity and History (with an uppercase H), but because he created some of the most vivid, unforgettable characters who have ever been written.

Mentioning Tolstoy makes me think of Chekhov, who, though his writing was as different from Tolstoy's as it could be, nonetheless revered the old master. And whenever I think of Chekhov, I think of the advice he gave in a letter to a woman named Tatiana Shchepkin-Kupernik: "Love your characters – but not aloud!"

More than anything else, it's a novelist's relationship with his characters that determines to what degree emotional experience is truly captured on the page – and to what degree the reader recognizes that truth. Love your characters too little, and the tendency will be to manipulate them in the service of your own philosophical agenda: a cloud of calculation will inevitably hang over the enterprise, creating a subtle but insurmountable gap between its avowed truth and what we recognize as true. But love your characters too much – or, in Chekhov's wonderful phrase, too loudly – and we will be overwhelmed by noise, that cheap love song of the insincere. The result is almost always some form of sentimentality. And sentimentality, as Wallace Stevens rightly observed, is a failure of feeling.

Calculatedness and sentimentality, as different as they might seem on the page, share a similar undesirable effect in fiction: both are fatal to a sense of the mysterious in human drama. Both the calculating writer and the sentimental writer assume an unfounded certainty about the motives of their characters: the calculating writer because he feels himself intellectually superior to, and more important than, his creations; the sentimental writer because he over-estimates his capacity for empathy, and misunderstands its effects.

In his notebooks Chekhov liked to write down bits and pieces of odd-ball newspaper accounts – the sort of random descriptions of banal or amusing human doings that nowadays you usually find in a tiny paragraph at the bottom of page 17 of the *New York Times*. The newspapers, he was fond of saying, assume that they've explained a story when all they've done is told one; they mistake a question for an answer. As a writer, Chekhov himself never made that mistake. He showed little reverence for answers as a rule; despite or because of his training as a physician, he didn't really believe in them when it came to human motive. He once said that his work whispered a quiet "I don't know" to every problem. His innate respect for ambiguity, both spiritual and emotional, led him to a quietly revolutionary style of writing in which, in the words of the critic James Wood, he "sees the world not as writer might see it but as one of his characters might." This is much more than ventriloquism; it's a kind of empathy encountered among only the greatest writers, and then never before or since in just Chekhov's way; and it shines through all of his stories and plays.

Keats, in a letter to his brothers in 1817, wrote:

"At once it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *negative capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Nearly two centuries later, we see clearly how uncannily perceptive Keats was. Uncertainties, mysteries, doubts – this is the shadowy realm of consciousness that we instinctively recognize as existing between the more obvious, and less meaningful, elements of our existence. A literature strung together on the simple reporting of facts or on exuberant or lyrical wordplay alone is not much of a literature; just as a

life based solely on literal meanings or on empty style is not, in the end, much of a life. Human beings are never just one thing or another; often we find ourselves shifting helplessly between ambiguous states of feeling and reaction, states which have no names but those we struggle inarticulately to give them. This is what we have, and why literature matters.

Here is Turgenev in his masterpiece, *Fathers and Sons*:

“That vague, crepuscular time, the time of regrets that resemble hopes, of hopes that resemble regrets, when youth has passed, but old age has not yet arrived.”

Turgenev’s good friend was Flaubert, that exquisite, contradictory writer whose style became his god, but whose relationship with his most famous character was so intimate that he once felt compelled to declare: “Emma Bovary, is me.”

While he was writing *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert made much in his letters of his arduous struggle to create a vivid, detailed prose with a cool surface; a rigorously unsentimental prose that seeks to trace Emma’s tragic emotional journey largely through visual depiction. He wanted neither to coddle nor judge his characters, nor to give answers, but, like Chekhov, to write fiction that implicitly asks the questions he felt mattered most. What is perhaps most astonishing about that novel – truly one of those great books that should be re-read every ten years of a reader’s lifetime – is not the shimmering purity of the prose, which is to be expected; it’s the seeping tide of feeling, a tragic tenderness, that seems to lift Flaubert, that priest of the perfectly unsentimental sentence, over the last part of the novel, as if the author has been overtaken by the emotional truth of his own creation. There are moments in the last third of *Madame Bovary*, as James Wood has suggested, when feeling will no longer be contained by rational experience, and we – and the author too, one suspects – are given an unforgettable portrait of a soul in the very process of being forged.

Here is Flaubert’s description of Emma, after her former lover Rodolphe has rejected her desperate plea for money:

“She walked out. The walls were shaking, the ceiling was crushing her; and she went back down the long avenue, stumbling in the piles of old leaves that were being

demolished by the wind. She finally reached the boundary ditch and the gate; she tore her fingernails on the latch, she was in such a hurry to open it. A hundred steps further on, out of breath, almost falling over, she stopped. Turning her head, she looked once more upon the impassive château, with the park, the garden, the three courtyards, and the windows along the façade.

“She stood there bewildered, quite oblivious, but for the sound of the blood pounding along her arteries, which she thought she could hear seeping out of her, like a trumpet-call echoing everywhere. The earth beneath her feet was undulating gently, and the furrows looked like enormous brown waves, pounding the beach. Everything in her head, all her reminiscences, all her ideas, poured out at once, in a single spasm, like a thousand fireworks exploding. She saw her father, Lheureux in his office, their room in town, a different landscape. Terrified, she felt the touch of madness, and managed to take hold of herself again, in some confusion, even so; because she had no memory of the cause of her terrible condition, that is to say the problem of money. She was suffering, purely for love, and in remembering him she felt her soul slip from her, just as injured men, in their agony, feel life seeping away, through their bleeding wounds.”

When, shortly thereafter, Emma poisons herself, so intimate are we with the tortured state of her mind, it's as though we had created her ourselves. Flaubert gives us a knowledge riddled with questions and ambiguity; a true knowledge that is the antithesis of the easy certainty that passes for wisdom in most novels, not to mention life. Above anything else, that is the sign of his greatness as an artist.

Like Flaubert, the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee is a writer of both steel and tenderness. In his novels we often encounter men whose passions and intellect collide in grimly tragic ways that seem to symbolize the torn and contradictory history of the author's homeland. Coetzee's spare, taut prose is resolutely crafted to avoid sentimentality at all costs. His protagonists tend to be ruthlessly analytical – that is, until they are scarred by events only partially of their own making, and forced to see things differently. What makes Coetzee at his best one of our essential novelists is the quiet gravity with which he's able to render that change in perspective in emotional as well as political and intellectual terms. His empathy is by turns cool and fierce, but always, however disguised, intensely felt by the reader.

His most recent – and, to my mind, most evolved and humane – novel, is *Disgrace*. David Lurie, a divorced, middle-aged English professor, has an affair with a student, is forced from his college and his life, and retreats to his daughter's small farm on the racial and literal frontier of the new South Africa. There, in a scene of indelible horror, the two of them are brutally assaulted. In the slow process of physical and emotional healing that follows, they must somehow find a way of coming to terms with each other and with their violent, unknowable country. One of the ways David does this is by volunteering at a local animal clinic, where he and a woman named Bev Shaw spend most of their hours not healing animals, but rather putting them down.

Coetzee's extraordinary achievement in this novel is to locate himself within the cerebral, often prickly character of David with such authority that we feel compelled to see the world as David does; his intense contradictions, his increasingly tenuous hold on certainty, his own groping towards tenderness and compassion become ours too, until nothing any longer looks or feels the same.

Here's the last page and a half of *Disgrace*:

“Sunday has come again. He and Bev Shaw are engaged in one of their sessions of *Lösung*. One by one he brings in the cats, then the dogs: the old, the blind, the halt, the crippled, the maimed, but also the young, the sound – all those whose term has come. One by one Bev touches them, speaks to them, comforts them, and puts them away, then stands back and watches while he seals up the remains in a black plastic shroud.

He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has difficulty in calling by its proper name: love.

He ties the last bag and takes it to the door. Twenty-three. There is only the young dog left, the one who likes music, the one who, given half a chance, would already have lolloped after his comrades into the clinic building, into the theatre with its zinc-topped table where the rich, mixed smells still linger, including one he will not yet have met with in his life: the smell of expiration, the soft, short smell of the released soul.

What the dog will not be able to work out (*not in a month of Sundays!* he thinks), what his nose will not tell him, is how one can enter what seems to be an

ordinary room and never come out again. Something happens in this room, something unmentionable: here the soul is yanked out of the body; briefly it hangs about in the air, twisting and contorting; then it is sucked away and is gone. It will be beyond him, this room that is not a room but a hole where one leaks out of existence.

It gets harder all the time, Bev Shaw once said. Harder, yet easier too. One gets used to things getting harder; one ceases to be surprised that what used to be as hard as hard can be grows harder yet. He can save the young dog, if he wishes, for another week. But a time must come, it cannot be evaded, when he will have to bring him to Bev Shaw in her operating room (perhaps he will carry him in his arms, perhaps he will do that for him) and caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag, and the next day wheel the bag into the flames and see that it is burnt, burnt up. He will do all that for him when his time comes. It will be little enough, less than little: nothing.

He crosses the surgery. 'Was that the last?' asks Bev Shaw.

'One more.'

He opens the cage door. 'Come,' he says, bends, opens his arms. The dog wags its crippled rear, sniffs his face, licks his cheeks, his lips, his ears. He does nothing to stop it. 'Come.'

Bearing him in his arms like a lamb, he re-enters the surgery. 'I thought you would save him for another week,' says Bev Shaw. 'Are you giving him up?'

'Yes, I am giving him up.'

I look – yearn for – the same things as both a writer and a reader: an organic originality based on character and achieved through empathy; an abiding respect for ambiguity and uncertainty in human experience; an honoring of truth over calculatedness, sentiment over sentimentality, resonant silence over empty noise; a capacity for emotion, where emotion is not a mere reflex of easy feeling but rather a complex, honest, living accumulation of sensation, thought, and idea, all of it hard-won. I believe that without these qualities, any novel, however assured and assuring of its own philosophic or stylistic brilliance, will eventually be consigned to that gargantuan landfill of forgotten curiosities. And for good reason: because the authors have failed to treat their characters as they themselves would be, and in fact are, treated by life.

But show me a writer who will make that long night journey with his characters, rarely able to see more than an arm's length ahead, and I will show you a quiet hero who understands the value of character, in every sense of that word. Such writers are needed now more than ever: to call forth our essential powers of recognition; to shed a little light as in darkness we wade alone between the stars; to show us how silence can roar.

John Burnham Schwartz

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