

## WRITING EXERCISES FOR BEGINNING WRITERS

The point of these exercises is to make you aware of possibilities you may not be aware of as fledgling writers. In particular, to make you aware of the importance of point of view in narrative structure. A good writer will experiment with different styles but will probably hone in on one point of view for most of his or her writing life.

Undertake these assignments in the right spirit and try to learn from them. By all means, use writing that you have already started or finished that fits or can be made to fit a particular assignment.

Each assignment should be 1-2 typed, double-spaced pages and may be from the beginning, middle, or end of some larger, still incomplete work.

The descriptive terms used throughout are my own.

### FIRST PERSON “PEDESTAL” NARRATIVE

Compose a section of what I call first person pedestal narrative--one that involves the narrator in the life of another, usually “superlative” human being. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *THE GREAT GATSBY* and Joseph Conrad’s *HEART OF DARKNESS* are paradigmatic examples.

Usually, in this kind of narrative, the narrator--who is usually the author disguised--is more or less invisible. The emphasis is on the person described not the person doing the describing; the person on the pedestal, in other words. This kind of narrative is exploratory and adulatory by nature. It looks up to the character even though the character may be of dubious moral worth, like Kurtz in *HEART OF DARKNESS*. Great effects can be achieved by such an upward looking or idolatrous vantage point, often involving heightened expectation and muted or outright suspense on the part of the reader.

An extraordinary energy can be released by such leverage, energy

that helps shape the story as a whole; energy, I suspect, which has to do with the fact that the reader's attention is focussed on this exceptional being from the start--that is, away from the narrator himself or herself.

#### FIRST PERSON EXPOSITORY NARRATIVE

This is a variation of the above and one of the most popular types of narrative in our age of self-centredness. Here, again, a character is placed on a pedestal but now the narrator has a voice in the story as well. He is more than just a narrative tool but plays an important part in the other life and in the drama itself. The focus is thus as much on the narrator as this other being. The narrator has the chance to interpret, organize, and shape the materials of his story as he or she sees fit and to do so for maximum effect.

Ford Maddox Ford's *THE GOOD SOLDIER*, Saul Bellow's *HUMBOLDT'S GIFT*, William Styron's *SOPHIE'S CHOICE*, Philip Roth's *THE GHOST WRITER* are good examples of this kind of narrative.

Other good examples can be found in your Geddes' anthology by Mavis Gallant, Nadine Gordimer, Amy Hempel, Margaret Laurence, and Bharti Mukherjee.

#### FIRST PERSON LYRICAL NARRATIVE

This is a very different kind of narrative wherein the narrator is the sun and the other characters planets circling that sun. The writer reprises his life and experiences in language that is usually charged and highly poetical. Often the focus is on the writing itself. The writing celebrates the "I"--"the egotistical sublime"--the writer's own personality, temperament, perceptions. Others may be and often are involved but the piece invariably returns to the narrator or narrators, as in Virginia Woolf's *THE WAVES*. Other examples: Salinger's *CATCHER IN THE RYE*, Leonard Cohen's *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS*--all works note that belong to an age of great

egotism and ego worship (Woolf excepted).

Here, language and style are as important as narrative thrust. An actual story may or may not play a part in such narrative, which is actually a single ego expounding upon itself--hopefully not to the disgust of the reader. Focus is on the here and now of experience rendered powerfully in language rather than on narrative end or narrative disclosure involving other individuals.

This is one of the most difficult and treacherous types of narrative because it involves so much ego. A plethora of ego will quickly disengage the sensitive reader.

Many major writers never attempted such a perspective so don't be too disappointed if your attempts here don't succeed.

Malcolm Lowry's novella "Forest Path to the Spring" is a superb example of this type of celebratory first person lyricism.

Typically, the *Bildungsroman* or novel of education belongs here.

### THIRD PERSON LIMITED CONSCIOUSNESS

Here we move to a third person narrative, where the perspective is situated within a particular character and sustained there throughout the entire work.

This narrative drops the reader instantly into the mind of the central character--invariably and almost necessarily a character of worth. This finely detailed focussing allows us to observe the character's world through his or her perceptions and thoughts, the person's consciousness so called.

Henry James--the Godfather of such a technique--considered this the most perfect and difficult of all narrative "voices" and the richest for the writer and reader alike; a form capable of the most marvellous, diverse, and varied epiphanies and disclosures. James' late novel *THE AMBASSADORS* is a consummate example of such a novel. It is the most difficult model to sustain and the most difficult method to master.

James was a purist and counselled that nothing should be extraneous to the consciousness at hand; nothing delivered that the character couldn't

this instant observe or feel or think for himself.

The great Modernists for the most part agreed with him and this method became the one of choice for writers like Joyce, Mann, Wharton, Cather, Faulkner, Lowry, and in our own time, Bellow, Malamud, Lessing, Updike, Gallant, Brookner, though the great Mann's understanding of this technique is somewhat flawed in *DEATH IN VENICE* and *THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN*.

Only Woolf was a dissenting voice, believing as she did in a floating narrative, whereby consciousness could switch spontaneously from character to character, even within the same paragraph (*MRS DALLOWAY, TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*). The method is still as viable today, however, as it was in their time, perhaps because solidly based on our idea of consciousness, which hasn't changed all that much in the last hundred years.

Joyce's *A PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A YOUNG MAN* is one of the best examples of such a method. The narrative follows Joyce's alter ego, Stephen Dedalus, from age six through age twenty (earlier, if you consider the opening "proem"), rendering Stephen's perceptions and thoughts at significant stages of his life--the "epiphanic" stages of his life, as Joyce considers them.

Nothing in the novel--a novel of education or *Bildungsroman* in German --is extraneous to Stephen's perceptions, thoughts, philosophizing. Others characters are realized through Stephen's encounters with them and through their speech as they engage with Stephen.

While such a method might seem limiting in that it deals with only a single point of view, the opposite is actually the case. The reader falls immediately and comfortably into the mind of the character and experiences his life and world through his thoughts and perceptions. Nothing is lost from the reader's point of view and everything is gained.

The reader never falters. He always knows where he or she is vis a vis the narrative and thus can enter the story at any point. The novel's richness depends entirely on the mind and sensibility and really imagination of the protagonist--often the writer's alter ego. The great Modernists achieved their best and often most autobiographical work using this method.

Good examples of this narrative structure: Edith Wharton's *ETHAN FROME* and *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*; also, Malcolm Lowry's *UNDER THE VOLCANO*; Bellow's *HERZOG*; Malamud's *DUBIN'S LIVES*; Brookner's *HOTEL DU LAC*; McEwen's *ATONEMENT*; Toibin's *THE MASTER*. These all show deft handling of this device. Bellow often pulls the camera back a little from his protagonist and provides a kind of "over the shoulder view"--which can be very effective.

Style is of the utmost here. A style commensurate with the character's perceptions and intellect must be achieved and sustained at peak performance throughout the narrative, with no lapses of voice, tone, imagery, complexity, etc.

In *PORTRAIT*, Joyce alters the style to accommodate Stephen at different stages of the young man's intellectual and emotional development. Thus at ages 6, 11, 15, 18, and 20 the style--sentence length and complexity, cadence, metaphors, diction, etc.--reflects Stephen's level of maturity. It is a consummate achievement on Joyce's part not only for its brilliance as lyrical writing but for its emotional and psychological accuracy and acuity, preceding the great Piaget on childhood development by two decades.

"Stream of consciousness"--a technique and style popular earlier in the last century is really a sub category of this perspective. Here the emphasis is on the imagistic and musical qualities of the protagonist's thoughts or really unconscious--narrative texture, in effect.. Character is achieved through specific imagery, syntax, cadence, repetition, and the actual "voice" of consciousness replicated thereby. Molly Bloom's lusty soliloquy at the end of Joyce's *ULYSSES* is a good example; likewise sections of Faulkner's *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*.

## OMNISCIENT AUTHOR NARRATIVE

The novel began as a first person narrative but novelists soon began to experiment with the wider perspective or "omniscient" point of view; one in which the author could reach beyond his or her *dramatis personae*

and manipulate characters and events.

One character may be significant but others receive their due as well; and the feeling is that the author has created these characters and their worlds and knows everything or almost everything about them. No restrictions of vision apply. The writer, as Flaubert says, moves like a God among his creation.

The technique served the novel all the way into the nineteenth century with authors like Flaubert, Balzac, Tolstoy, and Hardy, and was only disavowed as a technique towards the end of the nineteenth century, when the age started to view itself psychologically; when psychology, in effect, became a social science. The great modernists, beginning with James, shunned such a technique on psychological grounds and it hasn't been used much as a device since then.

James provides us with the philosophic justification for the limited and sustained as opposed to the omniscient point of view in his famous Prefaces; as did his disciples Percy Lubbock (in his masterful analysis of the novel, *THE CRAFT OF FICTION*, 1921) and Edith Wharton (in her insightful writings on the novel). Only Woolf, as pointed out earlier, stayed with the old wandering point of view in her novels--*MRS. DALLOWAY* and *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE* especially--much to the consternation of her critics.

The good contemporary novelist rarely employs such an antiquated methodology--though there are exceptions. Doris Lessing's "To Room 19" uses the technique with great inventiveness. Lessing's narrative voice sounds like that of a friend of the characters who is relating their story in retrospect; but in fact her knowledge and understanding of the characters would seem to go beyond the possibility of mere personal acquaintance or friendship--thus the narrative's omniscient flavour. The narrator herself is invisible. We know nothing about him or her, except that he or she is psychologically acute in his or her perceptions.

Lampedusa's *THE LEOPARD* might also be considered an aberrant exception in its omniscient handling of characters and story.

Some contemporary writing lapses back to this earlier mode of discourse but not very effectively or convincingly to our way of thinking. I suspect this is because it requires less skill and concentration in the actual

writing than the other, more artful and demanding technique.

Henry James' point is that the reader feels more at home when he or she is situated within the actual mind of the main character and isn't made to feel the presence of the author pulling the puppet strings of his characters. He views the omniscient technique as belonging to a pre-psychological age--thus a technique not conducive to the rendering of modern life in all its psychological complexities. Our modern sense of truth in fiction isn't satisfied by such "hokey" manipulation. James is right, I think, in his assessment. The narrative is richer and deeper if positioned within a single central intelligence.

Percy Lubbock's study *THE CRAFT OF FICTION*--inspired by James' Prefaces to his own novels, collected and published under the title *THE ART OF FICTION*--provides a masterful dissection of the merits of Third Person Limited Consciousness over Omniscient Narration. It should be required reading for any serious student of prose fiction.

Professor Norman Friedman's "Point of View in Fiction" (1955) is a useful summary of the issues involved in this debate.

OTHER experiments that the student might wish to undertake.

. Compose a page of dialogue involving one or more characters. The piece can be rooted in a third person limited consciousness or be left open as to narrative structure. If possible, alternate the dialogue with some purely "narrative" (non-dialogue) elements--what in play and film scripts are the staging directions.

. Compose a natural setting, a "spirit of place" (*Spiritus Loci*) that would fit a particular consciousness or action. Many writers have little or no talent for this kind of writing (Joyce, Woolf, Munro); others rely on it significantly and achieve outstanding results (Melville, Hardy, Tolstoy, Conrad, Wharton, Cather, Lawrence, Mann, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Lowry, Lampedusa, Durrell, Updike). This is writing that is very much of

the senses as opposed to aural or acoustic or cerebral writing. It is often called “atmospheric” writing. It takes a special seeing to bring such description off; a poetic sensibility in effect, which is why so many of its practitioners were also poets. Ideally, spirit of place comes from and through the protagonist’s perceptions; thus takes on a personalized life of its own. Description should never be superfluous to character (the character’s perceptions); never be superimposed upon it but linked dramatically and emotionally to it.

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#### SOME SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS:

The good writer won’t be restricted to one perspective, one voice, one mode of delivery. Does a great actor possess only one voice and perform only one role? Or the great painter paint only one picture?

Undoubtedly, narrative structures exist other than those defined above. Can you think of others? These are general descriptive categories and not meant to be absolute or to circumscribe ALL writing, especially first person writing, which has always displayed and will continue to display near infinite imaginative possibilities.

The criterion should be: “Does the piece work?” “Does it work for the discerning, sensitive reader who KNOWS something about good writing?” No other criterion should apply. The above are fairly proven categories and useful as beginning exercises.

Remember: There is a metaphysical difference between first and third person deliveries, as anyone who has tried to transpose one into the other will discover. One is capable of things not available to the other. You limit yourself if you haven’t tried both.

Good narrative structures are learned forms. They require diligence and hard work. Perception. Experimentation. One isn’t born a great writer, one becomes a great writer. Talent, of course, helps but isn’t everything. Examination of the early works of the great Modernists shows this. The early work of Joyce, for example, is awkward, groping, plain bad. It took Joyce twelve years (age 20-32) to position his own life-story (A



PORTRAIT) comfortably in the Third Person Limited Consciousness.

A congenial and appropriate structure will release one's creative energies in unexpected ways--leading to discoveries unimagined or impossible otherwise. What Mark Schorer calls "technique as discovery"--an intuition all the great Modernists share.

Many writers commit egregious mistakes in structuring their stories and many otherwise fine writers never master the art of perspective at all (Flaubert, Tolstoy) and their work suffers accordingly.

The school for any serious contemporary novelist or short story writer should be the great Modernists themselves, not one's own contemporaries. The great narrative techniques were discovered and perfected by them and are as viable today as they were a century ago.

Remember: good writing is an art like any other and requires, in addition to talent, perception, intelligence, good taste, an education, a sense of vocation, a knowledge of what has been possible until now in the art of writing, infinite trial and error, a panoply of real and dead mentors (spurring one on), long apprenticeship, infinite patience, and lots and lots of hard work.

You owe it to yourself and your talent to learn as much about writing and the history of writing as possible, so that you can position yourself as a writer in your own time. Ignorance in this instance is never bliss.

## CORRIGAN'S ELEMENTS OF CRITIQUE

"On whose authority is the story told?"--James' mantra. James considers this the first step in all good writing. On a wise choice of perspective everything depends; the train does or doesn't leave the station, the engine does or doesn't stay on the track.

Is perspective viable, consistent, convincing? If Third Limited Consciousness is it properly, consistently, and believably sustained? Should perspective be changed altogether? Many great works were begun in one perspective but revised in another. Alice Munro's "Dulse" appeared in THE NEW YORKER in an awkward and "shallow" first person point of view but later appeared in her book THE MOONS OF JUPITER in a deeper, much more appealing and interesting Third Person Limited Consciousness, a change that enabled Munro to add many more layers to her female protagonist.

Significant subject? Even if working well how important is the subject for the reader? Good writing is writing for the ages--not for one's own age, peers merely. Why else bother to write?

Character(s): Does the piece possess full, meaningful, rich, and believable character(s)? Is character consistently rendered? Psychologically credible? Interesting? Treated condescendingly? Beginning writers have a tendency to look down on their characters; to create characters that are below them in worth and integrity; cartoons of the real thing.

Language: Is the language adequate? Is it too full or too thin? Consistent? Rhythmically fine? Does it avoid clichés? Are the sentences too short? Diction (Flaubert's dictum of mot juste)? Does the language transcend itself--create an extraordinary world for the reader? Does it have or could it use some poetic elements? Is the lyricism controlled? Is the writer's vocabulary sufficient? If the writer doesn't work to keep language alive who will?

Story (if a story): is it credible? Interesting? Dramatically and psychologically well shaped? Paced well? Does it have a climax? If a short story: are details properly proportioned (too few or too many details)?

Novel vs short story? Which is it? Is the writer more one kind of

writer than the other? Many novelists were poor short story writers or wrote no stories at all. Many short story writers wrote no novels. Determine where your own strengths lie. If a novelist you will take longer to develop your skills and complete your first work.

Epiphany--Joyce's "epiphany." Woolf's "moments of being." Does the writing contain moments of genuine illumination? Great writing is full of such epiphanies.

Does the writing teach us things? Show us things unseen before? The Homeric epics, in addition to being great literary works, are also encyclopaedias of their age, compendiums of knowledge not otherwise available or recorded.

Significant, memorable details? Images that are memorable. Conrad: "Above all to make the reader see!" Charles Olson: "One perception should lead immediately and necessarily to another."

Re Novels. Is the larger dramatic, psychological structure effective? Is the pacing fine? Do events unfold naturally? Are the chapters more or less even in weight? Are the characters well developed? Is there a sense of character growth over the length of the action? Moral considerations?

*Spiritus Loci* (spirit of place). Does it convey such? Have setting and character been effectively annealed? Could the piece benefit from such effects?

Other matters of technique? Voice? Tone?

Mysterious factors? The charisma of good writing? Those elements of composition that aren't definable and that all that great writing possesses.

## ON WORKSHOP ETIQUETTE

Try to be objective not personal in your workshop critiques. Never begin: "I like this piece. . . ." We are not here to like each other's work but to help each other as writers. Whether the piece works or not is all that matters. There are principles that apply to good writing, taking into account the mysterious element of all good writing. These principles can be enunciated and learned. They consist of all that is embodied in, and can be found in, the great writing of past centuries. Writing, as with the other arts, doesn't exist in a vacuum. Each piece we write is in a tradition larger than itself. It behoves us as writers to understand this tradition and our own place within it. See Eliot's essay: "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

The best way to learn as a beginning writer is to find mentors--writers who have something special to teach us about our own talent, preferably writers from the previous generation or age--NOT our contemporaries or our own generation. We cannot take chances ourselves or grow as writers without such mentors.

The truly great critic is a rare phenomenon--and only writers can criticize other writers meaningfully, in a way that helps them learn their craft. Pound's ABC OF READING is a masterful little book on the art of writing, written solely for writers.

Read other writers on the art of writing. There is a rich trove of work out there. Would you become a brain surgeon, physicist, composer, without studying the discipline and its previous accomplishments--everything you could possibly get your hands on that might help?

Criticism won't be too painful if objective and if it tells the truth. If you have nothing to say remain silent. Bad, insensitive, or misplaced criticism is of no value to the writer and can even be destructive.

Speak to the issue of strengths and weaknesses in the piece. Still, criticism is *never* pleasant and one must possess a strong heart and be a bit of a masochist to undertake these writing workshops.

### SOME GENERAL PRINCIPLES . . .

1. Everything depends upon and devolves upon technique--technique plus subject matter.

2. Know and master technique. You hone your technique by studying and restudying the writers of the past who have struggled a lifetime at their craft and left us masterpieces that have passed the test of time.

3. Seek and never stop seeking significant mentors from among the great writers of the past. Let them guide you. They have succeeded where you wish to succeed. If you copy writers who are mediocre you will be mediocre or less than mediocre yourself.

4. Find the significant subjects in your own life or in the world about you, significant to others and to your own best self; subjects larger than your own life and experiences. Many writers fail because they cannot find the right subject.

5. Write for someone of your worth in some distant land and in some far away time.

Andre Gide's remark, on rereading his favourite author Stendhal: "to affect someone of my worth and sensibility as deeply as I have been affected this evening by reading Stendhal . . . that is all I could ever desire as a writer." The supreme but necessary egotism of the writer can be felt in those words.

6. Good writing is an art form. Not all writers are artists. Art is

different from and transcendent upon self expression. Remember the axiom: “writing is rewriting.”

7. First and even second novels or story collections usually are trial efforts, so don't expect too much of them. They are your apprenticeship as writers. Gain the courage to set inferior work aside and to move on.

8. Be wary of false praise. Few people know what constitutes truly good writing. Most literary critics know little about writing from the inside --i.e., how writing really works; how it evolves from the writer's life, etc. This is true also of most publishers.

9. Be wary of your age and what it thinks it knows about itself and the past--not to mention its tastes in writing. Tastes in our age are particularly abysmal in all of the arts. It is as though we have learned nothing from the past. Instead of building on the past we tear off in our own direction. We live in an age of Emperors and Empresses without any clothes--fakes and poseurs of all kinds. Learn to see through your age and find what is genuinely true and valid in it.

Flaubert's advice to the young writer: “Detach yourself from your age; stand apart from or above your age and treat it with suspicion and small contempt.” If as a good writer your work appeals to your age, fine, consider yourself lucky and exceptional, but don't actively seek such praise.

10. Good narrative fiction is the hardest and most demanding of all the arts and the last to arrive on the cultural scene. It requires, as one critic put it: “all of the right and left hemispheres of the brain and the pituitary gland in between.” That pretty much says it. The critic was thinking of *MOBY DICK*, when he made that remark. This is why, relatively speaking, so few great novelists exist within an age. The Renaissance produced hundreds of great painters but only a handful of great writers. The novel is, arguably, the highest, most

consummate achievement of the human brain.

11. Conrad's dictum still holds today: "Above all to make the reader see!"

12. Language should be clear but it can also be beautiful. If the writer doesn't work to preserve the beauty of language who will? Clarity and truth are wonderful but they aren't the sum of language's virtues. Beauty and musical phrase are others.

13. Ignorance of tradition, ego, and parochialism are the writer's worst enemies.

Finally, keep in mind: . . .

An age has two kinds of serious artist, writer, thinker: those who work with and through their age, who provide their age with the image of itself that the age wants or thinks it wants. The best among such artists are the age's "great" artists, its success stories. This is as it should be. Their work belongs to the age of which they are a living part and serves that age in turn. Shakespeare in his age, Goethe in his, would be examples. Their work is important to their age or so the age decrees and will likely be important to any future assessment of that age.

But there is in almost every age and most clearly since the late eighteenth century another kind of great artist and thinker, one who cannot work comfortably within his age; who cultivates a private vision around and through the age, often working against the age. They are what Nietzsche calls "posthumous lives." Such artists and thinkers belongs to their age by default but still belong. In their work they wrestle with popular influences of every kind--styles and fashions in particular--though their stance is usually one of opposition. Usually, as a result, they aren't "popular" or even recognized by their age. They cannot, almost by definition, be

“popular.” Occasionally, like Vincent van Gogh, they appeal to almost no one in their age; selling, like van Gogh, only a single painting in his lifetime. Such artists exist for the future. They gain their reputation over time and in another time. They become for a subsequent age a necessary image of that past, which has long since faded from view.

A writer like Melville typifies this kind of artist, playing little or no part in his own age but becoming for a subsequent one--our own age, say--as important a spokesman of mid-nineteenth-century American life as any we have. Stendhal, Kierkegaard, Turner, Manet, Nietzsche, Munch, Bruckner, Mahler, Kafka, Woolf, Lowry, Olson are other examples of such “posthumous lives.” History, as it reshuffles its deck of cards, finds significances, patterns, links that an age could never have seen itself; in short, understands and interprets the past differently from the way the past could ever understand and interpret itself.

This is fairly self-evident. What is not so evident is how this knowledge can be put to use in the present; how it can inform our judgments of the present. In fact, it would seem that it cannot. For matters of taste and fashion are deeply fixed in our unconscious and cannot easily be dislodged from the prejudices that are also built into our psyches. This is how history works, whether we like it or not. In the end, we have very little control over how such determinations are made.

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