Writing Fiction: Freedom through Constraint: Going beyond "You Don't Need to Know Anything"

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Writing Fiction

Freedom through Constraint:

Going beyond "You Don't Need To Know Anything"

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Before the first session of *Writing Fiction*, a dark-haired, round-eyed young woman paused at my desk to speak to me. "It's really a treat," she said, "to take a class in this kind of writing. You don't need to know anything and it's *so* releasing."

I have found in teaching fiction writing that the write-anything-you-please approach on the part of the instructor soon leads to an it-sounds-blah response from the student. He or she rightly feels the lack of forward movement. Nothing is being learned. To learn is to change in some fashion, even though it may at times be painful. The change requires some midwifery on the part of the instructor.

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"Hmm," I thought. "You are in for some surprises." I know what she thinks we are going to do. We are going to be *creative.* Beautiful, self-fulfilling words will flow, shaped by the touch of my marking pen, my magic wand.

In a sense, perhaps. Self-fulfilling, maybe. And I surely hope she feels she knows a little something at the end. But there is no magic wand. Indeed, the process may feel more akin to being fitted with a straitjacket. And not all will work through to release.

Dissatisfaction with the finished product leads the apprentice writer to grope for new modes of expression. One avenue of relief from frustration lies through developing competence in a broader range of technical devices. Technical proficiency can be the steppingstone to form, a narrative element of which the novice writer has little or no sense. (For developmental reasons the ability to handle the abstract idea of form comes slowly. It is part of Piaget's gradual decentering process.) The ultimate aim for the story writer is, of course, the *unconscious* integration of form and substance in the service of theme. In a beginning fiction writing course, the instructor does well if she sees some rudimentary at-

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tempts at *conscious* integration by the end of the term. When such is attempted, written material may emerge at a level of maturity that represents a quantum jump and is a joyful occasion for both teacher and student. Such an outcome, however, is serendipitous. The focus of the course is on the acquisition of skills.

Beginning fiction writers tend to rely heavily on the technical area in which they are most proficient (for example, description or simple characterization) and neglect completely areas in which they lack confidence. (With undergraduates these tend to include plot and point of view.) Further, and this is the point that I would like to make in this paper, the technical areas which a student shies away from are often related to the student's level of cognitive development and, ultimately, to personality. The way a person chooses to tell a story reflects the way he or she perceives the world.

The objective of the course, therefore, is to increase students' control of narrative writing and, in so doing, to give them some insight into the relationship between concrete experience and abstract form. Although only a very few will explore this synthesis in ways that are not specifically assigned, all will, to some extent, practice the molding of experience to achieve a desired effect. Additionally, since the material that students work with is experience from their own lives, they are forced to examine personal experiences from new perspectives. Such an examination often causes a temporary disequilibrium which, in the best instance, may resolve itself a few steps further along the royal road to maturity.

Towards these ends, a course which requires students to shape simple concrete experience with abstract formal story elements of increasing complexity has proven effective. In the first stage the student is challenged with a variety of technical exercises. The constraints and tensions produced by these exercises unsettle too-familiar modes. It is after we are a few weeks into these assignments that problems relating to personality or maturity may arise. Time and assistance are needed to work them through; the middle weeks of the course are intentionally less stressful. During these weeks the technical equipment is mastered so that students may make use of it in a fully developed story during the final weeks of the term. This paper will describe the dynamics of the technical hurdle approach and the discomforts and achievement which ensue as they might develop in a typical undergraduate class.

The technical exercises produce constraints and tensions which unsettle too-familiar modes.

We begin with a couple of "write whatever you want to" assignments. These produce much anecdotal material, a personal essay or two, a poem, and a certain ennui. After careful reading and discussion, there is a vaguely expressed observation that no one is really learning anything. Right. Each is doing over and over what he or she does best. The class is stuck.

In their frustration students may ask for technical "how to" books of the Writing-Stories-for-Fun-and-Profit variety. No. At this stage in their learning these books are anathema. Students can't truly absorb advanced technical instruction until they have written and written and written. We need to isolate certain key technical aspects for immediate study and deal with others as they come up. As it is, too much technique is pushed on them, perforce, too fast. They will be supersaturated by the end of the semester.

Nevertheless, their asking signals that it is time to begin short exercises which help to achieve control of particular story elements. These elements include: emotional effect, characterization (with point of view and identification), and the plot unit, the scene which moves through conflict to climax and resolution.

First comes the task of evoking a single specific emotion. The raw material is feeling; we start with the concrete. Make the reader *experience* the feeling. Students find this assignment difficult and complain, "But this is *hard* for me." More than a few back away from the close examination of feeling.

As a steppingstone between emotional effect and the fully developed scene, we deal with emotional conflict

between two characters. Two people are at odds and must resolve their differences. In this exercise lie the seeds of plot. Diaglogue comes naturally into this assignment; we observe how it creates immediacy, heightens effect (and affect). Other uses of dialogue (to characterize, for example) become a link with the next assignment.

Class sessions, during these first weeks, are devoted to reading and criticizing written work. As I introduce each new exercise, I present excerpts from fictional works which highlight the technical aspect under discussion. How does the writer achieve the effect? One of the hidden agendas of the course is to improve their analytic reading. And sure enough, as analytic skills increase, they mention new insights into old favorites.

During the next set of exercises, on characterization, a number of students get balky. These exercises explore point of view. Most students are not sensitive to this narrative element, yet it is the single most important decision that a writer makes with regard to story material. We will aim beyond the "mere muffled majesty of irresponsible authorship" (1) that Henry James deplores. To the initiated a flaw in point of view is as egregious as a lapse in grammar. Students come to hear it too.

We are accustomed to viewing the world through a single pair of eyes, with access to the thoughts in one head. We start using this point of view, as the reader (and the student) finds it most comfortable. Nevertheless there may be technical reasons for other vantage points. In a second point of view exercise, students are asked to invent an incident in which two characters are in conflict and to write it first from the point of view of one of the characters, then from the point of view of the other. They are amazed. Bas-relief becomes character in the round. A number of students become excited when they grasp the possibilities inherent in the use of point of view and identification. But there are a few (always) who literally find it impossible to adopt the second point of view. They are wholly centered in themselves; they are not yet ready to see through any eyes, adopt any perspective, other than their own. The attempt to do so makes them uneasy; the exercise has touched a nerve.

We move further into character. Students are asked to write an extended character sketch. As the characters emerge concretely, I push towards molding the writing (the formal element) by asking the following plot-related questions: What is the character's single, most important, dominating trait? Consistent with that trait, what does the character want more than anything in the world? And, finally, what particular situation or obstacle might prevent the character from getting what he or she wants? I tell them, then, to realize this situation in space and time. This assignment leads some students directly into a story. They take off. Others handle the assignment piecemeal and pedantically. They have trouble shaping the character sketch with the questions. They can deal with stereotypes, but they do not feel comfortable asking these questions of their own inventions (who are, necessarily, splinters of themselves). The resulting disequilibrium causes many to block on this seemingly simple assignment. A few of the unhappy ones slug it through: "Ahh"—they say, when they see how it works.

Technical exercises should not be practiced too long in isolation—they should be orchestrated into a story.

We are ready for plot now. Indeed, we have begun—with the character whose desires are opposed, the individual in conflict. We need to integrate conflict with the cause and effect aspect of plotting. " 'The king died and then the queen died,' " says E.M. Forster, "is a story. 'The king died and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot." (2) Within the single scene unit, the sequence of cause and effect is patterned to channel the reader's emotions through an initial conflict, its intensification, climax, and resolution. Here is the effective vehicle for causing the reader to experience anger, fear, suspense, desire.

This exercise provides, for many students, a major insight into the nature of narrative writing and the

reason for its form. There is surprisingly little objection to the notion of formal plotting (as there would have been at the beginning of the course). The students are increasingly ready to deal with the abstractions of form in relation to the specifics of the experiences that they are trying to communicate. They have the beginnings of a sense of freedom (release?) within the constraint.

Suffice to say that we find we must discuss: the fact that the reader expects a chronological sequence; the unchronological arrangement of material to produce emotional intensification (that again!); the use of flash-forward to produce irony; the use of flashback to introduce antecedent material; retardation in the climax to produce suspense; the most economical use of time

As long as students feel they must write totally "from life," they are like the swimmer who keeps one foot on the bottom for security.

With this exercise we have finished the first section of the course. All the major elements are in place.

For most students, at least one of the exercises has produced some resistance and confusion and discomfort; however there are enough exercises so that everyone has a sense of achievement in some areas. It is hard to be really discouraged. As a bonus, since form interacts with substance in mysterious ways, some of these exercises have given students access to material that they were not previously able to handle in writing.

Although the core aspects of narrative writing have been addressed and practiced, there remain many undiscussed technicalities. Secondary elements find their way into the classroom. This middle stage of the course seems deceptively tranquil. The earlier sense of unease has disappeared. "It's getting easier," say some. It is a time of regrouping and assimilation. We are favored with a blue and gold Indian Summer day at precisely the right time to introduce the uses of setting and description and mood. It is warm enough to hold the class out of doors. Goldenrod, purple asters against lichened rocks, damp earth smells, and the chill that comes suddenly as the autumn sun sinks, all make their way into stories. More importantly, characters begin to move in finite space.

Time, as well as space, must be reckoned with. Time can present formidable problems in extended narrative. Some have an instinct for dealing with it; others don't. The handling of time is another area of discomfort for some students and may relate to real life difficulties. span; transitions between time periods; the interpolation of intervening material; and so on. I hear sighs of relief around the classroom as seemingly insurmountable problems are surmounted and forward motion again becomes possible. We are no longer timebound. And, we note that we are now well into some fairly advanced technique.

But enough time has passed. As students get beyond the first ladder of technical proficiency, have practiced their "school figures," and have begun to achieve a modicum of control of their medium, we must move on to the final stage of the course. With the ability to communicate the single emotional effect in a carefully crafted scene unit using sound characterization and a consciously chosen and consistent point of view, students are prepared to launch themselves into a fully developed story. Technical exercises should not be practiced too long in isolation. Orchestrating them into a story is as much more demanding as is the students' Saturday night basketball game than the studied practice of dribbling, passing, and drop shots.

A twelve to fifteen page story is the next assignment. I suggest that they use three scene units in this story. Why three? This number seems arcane. Ok, if not three, then an odd number. They question this edict also. I tell them that an even number is suited to antithesis, opposition, a hung balance. I know that they will be struggling for the satisfaction of resolution, completion. Here I am beyond all but one or two very perceptive students.

Under the stress of coping with story material and

struggling to shape it, a new round of limitations and strengths consistent with student-writers' personalities and maturity levels may emerge. Many patterns present themselves; particular types recur and may be used as examples.

Certain students are afraid to cut loose and imagine or tamper with "real life" material. Although the experiences that they are drawing on are, to them, unique, exciting, highly emotional, and are good story material, the stories themselves are out of hand and unsatisfying. When I suggest changes, they protest, "But that's the way it happened." Ah, yes. But real life is diffuse.

Fiction, like any art, is focused to a purpose by the artist. What is the emotional effect they wish the story to have on the reader? They don't know. They aren't in control. I tell them that as long as they must write totally from life, they are like the swimmer who keeps one foot on the bottom for security. The swimmer does not experience freedom and self-direction in the new medium until she entrusts herself to it wholly. What these students cannot confront is that it is not the real life character and situation *only* that the writer communicates, that writing is not photography. They are dimly and uneasily aware that the kind of person the writer *is* emerges through what the writer has to say *and* how it is said, that the message transcends content and works through form. But they cannot let go and allow themselves to hatch. They cling with grim desperation to the "real." They rarely break through. There is no use hassling them.

A second group that I often see is made up of students who cannot be weaned from a close first person presentation. All the conflict is internal. These students may not be drawing on actual events; they may cast their narrators in a variety of roles, but they cannot get away from internal monologue. Nor are they willing to distance themselves sufficiently from their products to examine them objectively. They cannot break out of the tight boundaries which they have created for themselves. They get panicky about the lengths of their pieces—which are short, as there is not that much to say. I make suggestions, but if they are not taken, I try to reassure these students and get them to set lower standards for themselves. I do not care to meddle too far. A few more years may make the difference. What these (and all) students do least well is, of course, what is hardest for them. It is enough to push a little.

I stress that self-discipline can be learned.

Another kind of student is unwilling, even afraid, to do any planning and outlining ahead. Many do have faith and try plotting three scene units. Others say they cannot write this way; they have to jump right in. It's the old "It's not spontaneous" argument. Poets, in particular, have trouble plotting. They can evoke feeling, but have trouble with logical framework. Try it any way you want to, I tell them. However, I know that an unplotted story of 3000 words is very likely to sag in the middle and have a "so what" ending. Sure enough, many do. We shore them up in conference, after the material has been set to paper. I'm not sure they've learned much. It's particularly difficult to get this type of student to change approach.

As we proceed through the term, there are a few loose ends. While students wrestle with story material (and the demons that it evokes), we deal with minor matters in class. We study pace. (Try reading it out loud to yourself. If you are bored, so will your reader be.) Narrative hook. ("My God," said the Duchess, "take your hand off my knee.") Revision. (Put it away until summer and then look at it fresh.) Style. (Be yourself.) How to prepare a manuscript. In conference I hear many troubles and begin to see some triumphs.

Discipline is a concern frequently mentioned. Almost all students feel themselves short on self-discipline. We discuss the fact that the creative process involves that

initial intuitive flash, but also its rational, studied, time-bound implementation. One student observes that disciplined concentration produces new flashes of insight as one gets deeper into the material; the seemingly unproductive sessions may lead to a new flow of realized material. (That one is on her way!) For many, success contributes to further discipline by creating the self-confidence to push through the difficult times. I stress that self-discipline can be learned. (In fact, it is another bit of hidden agenda for the course.)

A number of students have an unduly low opinion of their writing. This dissatisfaction can come from an acquaintance with the best of literature and is an occupational hazard with English majors. More often than not, though, it is the more open and perceptive and mature writers who are able to accept and acknowledge how short their product falls. Often the response of the class to their reading heartens them. Better yet, these students, in their honest acceptance of their deficiencies, and their earnest attempts to correct them, may make substantial and discernable progress—the most heartening medicine of all.

A few students find at this time that they have come in touch with material that is too close and painful to handle. "It really hurts to write about this," they say. They know that they are dealing with their best story material, a bit of their living selves. It should not be allowed to hurt too much. I try to help them distance it somewhat, but I worry about them. The technical apparatus provides a powerful therapeutic tool (as every writer knows). It can cut deeply and needs watching. Several students courageously face and work through problems and conflicts that they have set for their protagonists to resolve. They are rewarded with some sterling writing, of which they (and I) are justifiably proud. They have pushed through a personal frontier. Most, though, avoid the confrontation with self by writing fantasy, sci fi, cops and robbers, childhood scenarios, and animal stories. Writing seriously about adult interpersonal relationships is still too threatening.

As the stories are completed (or not completed), many students are feeling their increased control of the medium. The temporary discomfort and loss of fluency that was engendered by a close attention to technique has disappeared. They have paid some dues and they know it. A few students (not many) have not done the work and are embarrassed and are avoiding me. Only for them is this period of revision stressful.

At the next to last class each student presents me with a folder containing all writing. Before the final meeting, I immerse myself in this material. Rereading the total opus is like reading a story. I see some dead ends, some places where we could have done better, but also the growth and realization of many separate capabilities within the context of the whole.

"You don't need to *know* anything." That was how they had come to class—thinking you just bring a pencil and paper and . . . yourself.

Each takes away, in addition to the manila folder of revised and neatly typed pieces, a degree of mastery over unanticipated and unexpectedly intricate devices which the fiction writer uses to shape and interpret experience. In addition, a few, though they may be unaware, have worked through a reorganization of experience, a shift and expansion of perspective, which confers on them some small release from the bondage of unexamined attitudes and perceptions.

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