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The Limits We Put on Our Writing, and Ourselves

Jack Grapes · Wednesday, June 25th, 2014

What saddens me are the limits we put on our writing, on the “form” we think it must take in order to be approved by those judges we’ve internalized along the way, whether the form is a “novel” or a “memoir” or “non-fiction” or “creative non-fiction” or an “autobiographical novel” or “fictional autobiography” or (as said of Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*) “autobiography disguised as a novel” or the “novel disguised as autobiography”). If it’s a novel, well, it can’t do this, and if it’s a memoir, we can’t do that, and if it’s a work of non-fiction, well, God forbid the chapters should be mixed up (you mean like Julio Cortazar’s novel *Hopscotch?*). See, don’t get me started — it’s not as if you’d be doing something that’s never been done before. That’s the irony. There’s not a form that has not been subverted by some other writer somewhere. And if you cobble together some form that hasn’t been done before, and *the writing is compelling*, trust me, the critics will declare a “new” category, like the “entwined fictional autobiographical imaginary memoir” or the “factual made-up imagined truth novella” or the “non-sequential narrative planetary gossip tale” or the “epic based on a true story having nothing to do with reality memoir.” Trust me: write it, and if it’s compelling, it will be given the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. And then of course, now that it’s a sanctioned form, someone will subvert and extend that, until that form, too, is retroactively admitted into the Academy of Post-Modern Existential Baroque Art Deco Conceptual Art.

I do not dismiss conventional forms, but those forms can be re-imagined. Do not mistrust your inclination to experiment or second-guess your creative impulses. Honor the shape and form your work is moving toward. Listen to it. Hear its breathing. Otherwise, you may find yourself trying to ramrod something fresh or unusual into some pre-ordained and blessed form, like trying to stuff a grizzly bear into a coffin meant for a rabbit.

What also saddens me is how we insist on this distinction between what “really” happened and what was invented or imagined. Frankly, I don’t get it. This notion that there is a difference between what “really happened” and what you invent prevents you from making the most of that artistic treasure trove that resides in your imagination. Where “actually” is that fishing trip you took with your father when you were sixteen, or that night your lover left you. It really happened, but where is it now, the images and emotions? It’s not in front of you, it’s not happening to you; it’s gone, past, floating on the movie screen of your imagination, alongside anything and everything you make up from whole cloth. It’s as if you’ve just walked out of a movie and now your job is to tell that movie to the reader. Instead of making a movie from the book, you’re making the book from the movie, the movie that is in your mind, the movie that is no longer real or imaginary. It’s all one. Both the real and the imagined are nothing more than movies in your mind,

and now you have to translate that movie back into words, paragraphs, images, feelings, ideas, dialogue, story. Convention would have us believe that we have to keep the real and the fictional separate, but what you've experienced and what you make up are the same. When you go swimming in that churning pool of art, the rules are posted clearly so you can see them: NO SCULPTING METAPHORS WHILE WET, BATHING CAPS MUST BE WORN AT ALL TIMES, and NO MIXING FACT & FICTION. Fudge the truth as a writer and the next thing you know, Oprah will be slapping your wrist and dragging you over the coals. No wonder Plato — Plato, mind you, Plato who wrote chapter after chapter on the life of Socrates! — Plato himself banned all writers from his ideal Republic because “they lie.”

I will spare you my two-hour lecture on why you might want to disabuse yourself of this limiting concept. My lecture would involve Aristotle's theory of art, medieval dialectical philosophy, the function of the brain, and quantum mechanics. So I'll spare you. But don't think that I'm making a distinction between different “versions” of what really happened. That's not the point. I once had a conversation with my younger brother about an incident that happened when we were young, and he said, “That's not the way it happened.” That's not what I'm talking about. What I am talking about is the actual writing about it, as if, because it “really” happened, it writes itself. As if, because it really happened, the sentences are pre-ordained. As if, if it really happened, the sequence of the details, the inner voice, the commentary, the sensibility of the writer, all those just happen inevitably because something “really” happened. Like at a reading by Robert Creeley thirty years ago, a little girl in the audience went up to him and asked, “Are those real poems, or did you just write them?” It's not uncommon to suppose that if something “actually” happened, anyone can write about it, as if the sentences, the words you use to describe the event, the texture and tone of your writing, all of the skill and atmosphere you create as a writer has nothing to do with the reader's experience, when in fact, that's really ALL that the reader experiences, the WRITING. It's not about your “version” of what happened, or the story you are making up. It's about the structure of each and every sentence, the choice of words, the sequence of words, the WORLD you create with those words. Except for the usual “names changed to protect the innocent,” most readers assume that Proust's novel is mainly autobiographical. Yet, toward the end of the novel, the Narrator steps out of the way and Proust the author steps in and says something unlike anything else he's written in the entire six volumes. He writes:

In this book, in which every fact is fictional and in which not a single character is based on a living person, in which everything has been invented by me according to the needs of my demonstration, I must state to the credit of my country that only Françoise's millionaire relatives, who interrupted their retirement in order to help their needy niece, are real people, existing in the world.

I could make a case that even here, Proust is not telling the truth. But Proust is saying that his novel is not a mirror of the world, but was born from it. The movie in his head that shows real memories and the movie in his head that he is directing, acting in, is all made up. But it's still a movie on the screen of his mind. Whether you are writing from real experience, or from crafted scenes you project onto the movie screen of your mind, you still have to make it come alive in the reader's mind. The event that you've experienced has been removed from the sensorial category and is now repositioned as a movie in your mind, the same as any movie you made up. It's not about how you handle the experience or the movie, but how you handle the words, and that's why so many people confuse the idea of something that “really happened” with something made up. It's all the same.

If anyone were to ask you what really happened, your answer should be: *the words*. That's what happened, the words you chose and put down on paper or flung into cyberspace.

Like Plato's shadows on the wall of the cave, whether those shadows are cast by living objects or the objects of your imagination, they're still shadows, and you, the writer, have to emerge from that cave and recast them in the reader's imagination. You're the director, the actor, the lighting designer, the one rendering a musical score in the very tone and rhythm of your sentences that no one else but you can duplicate. As a matter of fact, to quote Proust again, your "book is the product of a different self from the one you display in your daily life." You – the narrator of your story – are a product of the literary work itself. You are created anew in the act of creating your story. And so, with that in mind, are you going to be limited by the petty-bourgeois conventions of art?

There's an old Yiddish story. A crow and a canary argue about whose song is sweeter, and when a pig comes trotting by, they ask the pig to be the judge, so they each sing a bit, and the pig renders his judgment: The crow has a sweeter song. The moral of the story: Don't ask a pig to judge the song of a canary. So remember: you're the canary; don't try to sing like a crow because the pig tells you to.

I recently attended an interview with Karl Ove Knausgaard (*My Struggle*) at the Hammer. In answer to a question posed by the moderator, Mona Simpson, he said that his real struggle was "to find a language." He wasn't talking about a struggle to organize the plot of his Proustian novel (there's no more of a plot in his story than in Proust's six-volume work!). I assumed that what he meant by that was that his struggle, after writing two previous novels, was to find his voice, to find a way of writing that was not studied or clever or "well-written." He was trying—he explained—to get past being literary, he was trying to find the right sentences, to write without pretense or pose. As Louis Simpson, the poet, once said: "Do not to write well; write truly." Knausgaard's writing seems effortless, and yet he talked about how he struggled to find his language, his voice. With two highly-praised novels under his belt, he was still struggling to find his voice, to find, as he put it, a language, still struggling to write authentic sentences. The story, the plot, he said, was immaterial.

And as I'm always saying to my students, "Your story is boring; plots are a dime a dozen."* (See footnote.)

Writing like you talk is not as easy as it sounds. It's the core, the root of everything that follows from it, and if you think you can do this in a week or month or a year, you're mistaken. Knausgaard's struggle to find a language was real. It wasn't about the plot, it was about writing a sentence that was "true", and by true, he meant what Hemingway meant when he said he tried to write one "true" sentence at a time — not a sentence that was *factually* true, but true as a carpenter would use that term when trying to make a beam level, it had to be "true."

In an interview this week in Brooklyn where Knausgaard was speaking with Nicole Krauss (*The History of Love*), they both responded to a question thusly: Ms. Krauss said she was "sick of plot and characters and dialogue and scenes and climax and resolution" in traditional novels, and that Mr. Knausgaard had "reinvented and surpassed the form of the novel" through "radical attentiveness." Knausgaard said he shared her fatigue with more conventional stories. "Form is, in a way, death," he said. "A novelist's obligation," he continued, "is to break free from the form, even though he knows that this will also be seen as artificial and distanced from life."

Allow me to return to Proust's great six-volume novel. It actually began as a critical essay on Saint-Beuve, who had written an autobiographical novel himself as well as literary criticism. Slowly Proust's essay morphed into autobiography, and eventually emerged, as some critics have called it, "autobiography disguised as a novel" or "a novel disguised as autobiography." But any attempt to pin his book down to one form in particular will only be met with frustration, because like those little holographic tags we put on key chains, tilt it one way and the face is frowning, tilt it another, and the face is smiling. Proust didn't discover his form overnight. It was a process both of his imagination and of the numerous pieces he had already written that lay scattered in notebooks and manuscripts for other novels or essays that he had abandoned at one time or another. Someone had given him five little journals, which he filled with scenes of childhood memories and other autobiographical elements, along with lists of topics and themes and names of characters that he might use someday, as well as paragraphs focusing on various sensations he was beginning to explore: odours of rooms, bed sheets, grass, perfume, soap, food, anything capable of reviving the past. He was beginning to explore this idea that those sensations could involuntarily evoke a particular moment in the past, and that particular moment in the past could grow to encompass an entire summer. There are also journal entries in which he expressed self-doubt that he could ever write anything worth reading. He judged himself lazy and impotent, with no real certainty over the form his writing would take. He was stymied by the same challenges regarding plot, genre, and structure that had led to his abandonment of a previous novel. "Is it a novel, a philosophical treatise, an essay?" he asked himself. Where was the form that would allow him to utilize the jumble of journal entries and notes and observations and critical commentaries? If you were to read through those journals and in the book of essays on Saint-Beuve, you'd see the transition he was making from essayist to novelist in which Proust is himself and not himself, as the Narrator of his novel. Although highly autobiographical, *Remembrance of Things Past* (or as it is now being translated, *In Search of Lost Time*) is a true novel, containing one of the richest narrative voices in literature, a voice that speaks both as a child and as a man, as actor and as subject, and that weaves effortlessly between past, present, and future. How did Proust finally reshape all those entries into a chronological narrative? He didn't. He looked at what he had written and allowed the form to grow from that, rather than trying to crush the material into a suitable form. He had at last found the ideal structure for his narrative skills. He had never composed in a linear fashion according to an outline. He always worked like a mosaicist, allowing scenes, anecdotes, impressions, and images to find their proper place, often making notes to himself about such bits, such as "To be placed somewhere," not even knowing exactly where. The structure itself expanded to include just about everything, and he seemed not to care whether he was violating the strictures of autobiography or the demands for linear plot in a novel. Even the famous episode with the madeleine was based on a real experience he had with a piece of toast. A piece of toast, mind you! Today, when we take a bite of toast, we are just taking a bite of toast. But now, because of Proust's willingness to lie, when we bite into a madeleine pastry, we are biting into the search for lost time.

The form will come organically from the work you've created and how you created it. You can't force nor can you always foresee the form. That's the paradox. Even the attempt to break away from the form can become an artificial construct. The struggle to break away from form cannot be in itself another search for form. The struggle is not to BREAK AWAY, but to BREAK INTO, to find one's voice, to work within the "invisible" form, the form that grows organically from the authentic voice, not the writing voice you've taken years to craft, not the writing voice you've been influenced by from years of reading "writing" and trying to emulate that. It's not about how *much* you read, but about *how* you read. What you look for, what you pay attention to, like looking for

the North Star when you've lost your way, that North Star as a way to find out where you are, as a way to find your way back home.

Bon Voyage and Welcome Home.

* okay, footnote:

Lori and I dealt with securing our burial sites at Hollywood Forever Cemetery. It had its morbid moments, but on the whole, it was surprisingly comforting. We thought a bit about what we'd like written on our tombstones, and I said, "Here's what I want written on mine: 'FINALLY, A PLOT.'"

Image: Street art interpretation of Paleolithic paintings in the caves at Lascaux, on view and fenced in LA's Arts District. Photo by Adam Leipzig.

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