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## In Defense of Omniscience

Part of the problem with trying to teach anybody anything is that we who know how to do it forget what it was we didn't know. Having arrived at understanding for ourselves, we forget what the problems were, what we were confused by, what was getting in our way. It's like teaching someone to drive a stick shift. It doesn't seem that complicated after you've been doing it for ten or fifteen years. You don't think about it anymore. Your left foot knows where to find the clutch, when to depress it, when to let up and how fast, how much gas to feed with the right foot, when to slip the shift out of one gear and into the next, where the various gears are, where your eyes should be when all this happens (on the road, not on the diagram they give you on the ball of the stick, not on the floor beneath the dash where the clutch was the last time you looked, before it moved, so that you can no longer locate it).

My father, who taught me how to drive a stick shift one summer afternoon when I'd come home from the university to work road construction with him, was one of the world's worst teachers in that, once he'd mastered any difficulty, he no longer considered it to be difficult. Difficult was how he characterized anything he *hadn't* mastered. Driving a stick, he told me that afternoon, was something any goddamn idiot could do. Half an hour later he had to pick up his carelessly thrown down gauntlet and admit he was wrong. There was one goddamn idiot who couldn't seem to learn, no matter how loudly instructions were bellowed at him. My father couldn't seem to grasp that I was wired in parallel, that, when my left foot came off the clutch, my right instinctively left the gas. Part of it, too, was that he'd started me off at the foot of a steep hill, his reasoning being that I would encounter hills eventually, and he didn't want my instruction to be deficient in this regard. Finally, the gearbox was slippery, and I kept locating reverse by accident, grinding the transmission frightfully. I can still remember my father's frustration at this, it seemed to him, most unnatural of mistakes. "Jesus Christ," he complained. "Can't you *feel* it?"

This is the problem in a nutshell. Once you've learned how to do something, you do it by feel. In familiar situations the wrong thing *feels* unnatural. Right feels right, wrong feels wrong. Easy. The timing, the

hill, the slippery gearbox, once mastered, become familiar, and we forget what it's like to lurch along the road, other motorists swerving into the passing lane when they come upon us and recognizing us for what we are—novices—sailing by, honking derision, often flipping us the bird. We forget that to be a novice is to be in unfamiliar situations pretty much all the time.

Omniscience, my friends—you see I've finally sidled up to my subject—is a slippery gearbox, and most apprentice writers prefer to drive the more "automatic" prose transmissions: first person literary, close third person. And these work perfectly well in most situations, getting writers where they want to go. Some authors will write through entire careers without ever tackling true omniscience and will write very well indeed. Ah, but the stick is a wonderful thing, and there's nothing quite like it once you've learned, and in this essay I'll try to explain why.

First, some background. A surprising percentage of the literary novels being published today are told from an omniscient point of view. I confess that I have not done anything like a scientific study. I have simply been struck by a disparity that I believe would be borne out by formal research—that professional writers are far more likely to opt for omniscience than are novice and apprentice writers. In lieu of statistics, here's some compelling anecdotal evidence. When I teach Introduction to Fiction Writing to undergraduates, one of the exercises that I and many other writing teachers employ to teach point of view is to have students write the first page of a story from several different points of view (not character viewpoints but literary points of view). When I first started teaching, I went over the various broad options for telling stories: first person literary, dramatic monologue, close third person, effaced, omniscient and, grudgingly, stream of consciousness/interior monologue. After explaining how they all were supposed to work, I told students to pick three. Or pick four, depending on how ambitious I was feeling. Until I noticed that, when the assignment came in, everybody avoided omniscience. Everybody. Beginners are drawn to the flashy, on the one hand, and the simple, on the other. They all want to try the seldom used dramatic monologue form because, I suspect, one of the two or three novels they've read is *Catcher in the Rye*, a book richer in technique and style than substance. Beginners are even drawn, despite my warnings, to stream of consciousness, which they see as a license for incoherence. They like the effaced point of view because they don't have to enter their characters' thoughts and close third person because it seems to answer that old workshop question, "Whose story is this?" and they enjoy literary first person because they like the sound of their own voices

or the idea of mimicking other voices. Full-blown omniscience? No takers. They don't see the margin in it.

But these are, after all, beginners. Surely more seasoned apprentices would not share the beginners' prejudice. To find out, I consulted the 1990 Residency Worksheets of the Warren Wilson MFA Program, which contained the fiction of thirty-five talented, intelligent writers, most of whom have been writing long enough to have become discouraged for whole months at a time. Out of thirty-five, how many, gentle listeners, would select the voice of choice of Henry Fielding and nearly the whole eighteenth century, the point of view most suited to the wide canvases of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel, the point of view that has never been anything but the mainstay of storytelling in our own century, regardless of the literary movement then in vogue (experimentalism, minimalism, postmodernism, any other "ism")? How many of these stories would be told by an omniscient narrator?

By my count, four. I did not count stories that began with an omniscient paragraph before zooming in, camera fashion, to close third or limited third person. I did count stories that hadn't mastered omniscience but, rather, seemed to be striving in that direction, the omniscience unintentionally leaking away at times. Four out of thirty-five. That statistic alone may be meaningless, but consider this. In the first workshop of this Warren Wilson residency one of the stories on the worksheet concerned three brothers attending in shifts their dying father in a hospital. The story was told in the form of notebook entries, each son offering his thoughts and observations to his brothers. The story built nicely to a satisfying emotional conclusion, and the workshop consensus seemed to be that the story was successful despite some difficulties of execution. The notebook entries, more than one reader pointed out, got more interesting toward the end as the brothers became less reticent and more honest in what they wrote in the notebook. Also, it was said, the author seemed to have considerable difficulty in releasing what Steven Dobyns has referred to as the secondary information of the story—descriptions of the hospital room and hospital procedure—because these brothers would have little reason to describe a room or discuss a procedure in a notebook entry intended for their brothers, who know what the room looks like and are themselves witnessing medical "process." Also, these brothers tended not to tell us, until very late in the story, some pretty important things about themselves. They had no reason to, because they knew each other.

Since we had identified but offered no remedy to these difficulties, I asked how the author might have done the story differently to allow eas-

ier access to the needed information. Quickly, there were hands. One person suggested selecting one of the brothers, letting him be the principal storyteller who would perform that function, in addition to writing his own notebook entries. This idea (providing a close third-person point of view) was immediately rejected and for valid reasons. It would upset the balance of the story, which gave equal time to each brother, suggesting their equal importance as characters. Another hand. Why not let the dying father tell the story, let the notebooks be secondary? That would keep the relative balance by making no brother more important than the others. True, but it would diminish them and their conflicts collectively. Also, the father was comatose. This solution too was rejected. Let one of the nurses tell the story, someone threw out in desperation. The person next to me groaned. Nurses have even less reason to describe hospital rooms, and no nurse would be privy to the kind of personal information about these brothers that has to get revealed somehow.

Dead end. Impatience in the room. Could anyone, I asked, think of a natural way to tell the story that would surrender necessary information about the brothers and the setting and the situation, without upsetting the careful character balance of the story as it existed? "Well," someone said, "I *liked* the notebook entries," thus effectively diverting the subject. (And, indeed, the notebook entries were looking more attractive again, their problems notwithstanding.)

Obviously, I was hoping that someone would see an omniscient narrator as the solution to the specific problems raised by the author's chosen method, but no one saw it, not even as an option. Omniscience, I freely admit, might have towed in its wake another different set of problems. The author's notebook entries, though they wouldn't have been my choice, might still be the best choice for her. That's not the point. The point is that omniscience, for many apprentice writers, is rejected even before it's considered.

There are reasons: (1) omniscient narrators tell a lot, and telling is something that students of fiction writing have been warned against early and often; (2) omniscience is an outside, not an inside view, and the clichés of our profession seem to disapprove. Get inside your characters, we recommend. Become your characters. See through their eyes; (3) omniscience feels old-fashioned, even stilted—Henry Fielding addressing us as Gentle Reader; (4) omniscience is the most arrogant of techniques, inviting the writer to play God and placing the burden of wisdom in all matters that pertain to the story squarely on the shoulders of the author. When we're misinformed, stupid, bigoted, clumsy, we can't blame any of it on the character we've "become."

But before I examine these issues, let's, just for fun, define *omniscience*

and illustrate what it achieves. I'll begin at the beginning, with examples of the three major third-person points of view I was given in my first fiction writing course:

1. Bob kissed Ellen. (Effaced. We don't know what the characters are thinking or feeling.)
2. Bob kissed Ellen, but he was thinking of Sue. (Close third person. We go into the thoughts of one of the characters.)
3. Bob kissed Ellen, but he was thinking of Sue, and Ellen was thinking of Tom. (Omniscient. We go into the thoughts of more than one character.)

Okay. Simple enough. Omniscience allows the writer to know more and reveal more. The problem is that the example is unlikely to convert many writers to omniscience. Who'd want to write such a sentence? Worse, the example doesn't begin to convey or illustrate the real advantages of omniscience. So, let's examine a couple of sentences that will. Here John Steinbeck, in *Cannery Row*, describes Dora Flood, madam of the local whorehouse: "Dora Flood is a great woman. A great big woman with flaming orange hair and a taste for Nile green evening dresses." Here we begin to see the true advantages of omniscience. First, there's the convenience of being able to describe Dora from the outside—her flaming orange hair, her Nile green dresses. It's clearly an outside view, because Dora would never see or describe herself this way. But even more important is the matter of voice. Omniscient narrators, even when they seem matter of fact, convey attitude. It's not so much the author speaking to us as it is the author in a particular pose. Here Steinbeck's attitude is sardonic, clever, distant, and yet affectionate. When in the first sentence he tells us that Dora is a great woman, the word *great*, modifying a noun, seems to convey a judgment about her character. In the second sentence, when the same word *great* modifies another adjective (*big*), we realize that in addition to learning something about the character of Dora Flood, we've also learned something about the "character" John Steinbeck has become, or the pose he has struck, to tell the story. He's copped an attitude that may or may not be the same as other omniscient narrators he uses to tell other stories.

Omniscient narration, then (at least full-blown omniscience), exhibits the following traits. It looks at characters from the outside but can "see" inside, directly into thoughts and feelings. It transcends time and space. The omniscient narrator can be in as many places as he or she needs to be and possesses knowledge of all moments—past, present, and future—and is free to reveal it. (Of course, there are varying degrees of omni-

science in literature, though examining them would be the subject of another essay.) And, finally, there is always a narrator, a voice that embodies a clearly defined attitude, an authorial pose, a consistent and recognizable way of seeing and understanding. By way of illustration, consider the following passages from Jon Hassler's wonderful novel *Grand Opening*:

The moment he set foot in homeroom, Brendan was offered a stick of gum by a shifty-eyed boy named Dodger Hicks, who had been lying in wait for a friend. Among the twenty-four boys and girls of the seventh grade, Dodger had not even one friend, the parents of Plum having warned their children away from him because his father was a convict, his mother drank, and Dodger himself stole things from stores—crayons, comic books, candy.

Dodger was older and taller than the rest of the seventh grade, having taken nine years of school to get there. A poor reader, he was taunted for what his classmates assumed was stupidity and had spent every recess and noon hour of his life lingering at the edge of a game. His face was dark, his cheekbones prominent. He had a habit of nodding his head when he spoke, and of squinting and showing his long teeth when he listened. His dark hair, which hung unevenly about his ears, he trimmed himself, using a pair of small shears pilfered from art class. As he gave Brendan a stick of grape gum . . . he said he had stolen it that very morning from Kermit's Grocery, the door being unlocked and no one inside.

"That's our store," said Brendan. "My mother and Dad bought it."  
"No kidding?" asked Dodger. He gave Brendan the rest of the pack.

After school Brendan lets Dodger tag along home with him. Dodger examines with interest all of Brendan's toys and is particularly fascinated by a boomerang that Brendan has been unable to make return. Dodger has better luck.

The boomerang sailed up and away, spinning as it climbed, and at its apogee—incredibly high and small—it tilted almost vertical as it wheeled around and began its return flight, picking up speed and spinning faster and faster and heading straight for their heads and passing over them as they threw themselves flat and crashing through the kitchen window. At the sound of the breaking glass, Dodger was up and running. He never glanced back or said goodbye.

The noise woke Grandfather, who called from his window

upstairs, "Where are we, lad, and what was that noise like a china closet tipping over on its face?" This being Grandfather's second awakening in this unfamiliar house, he was of the opinion—as he had been for awhile this morning—that he and his wife and two daughters were lodging in a tourist home en route West, retracing a trip he had made in 1921 to visit relatives. At breakfast it had taken three cups of coffee and a stern word from Catherine to convince him this wasn't a stopover in Billings.

"We live here," Brendan shouted up at him. Then softer, "And my friend broke a window."

"We live here?"

"Plum! Remember?"

Grandfather backed away from the window, smartly rapping his skull with a knuckle—usually a sign that a surge of fresh blood was making a swing through his brain and carrying off his delusions.

Indeed, one of the first things Grandfather recalls, once his delusions are carried off, is his beloved wife, long dead, and his life on the railroad:

Thirty years married and twenty years a widower. . . . Thirty years building railroad lines, then nearly twenty years as a brakeman. In those years a brakeman was exactly what his title implied. Besides throwing switches in the railyards and keeping tally of the box cars dropped off and picked up, a brakeman scurried along the tops of the cars, often while they were in motion, to turn the wheels that set the brakes. Treacherous work. He had seen a brakeman killed one icy afternoon in the St. Paul yards. His own freight was pulling out, heading west; he was standing on the rear platform of the caboose and looking off to his left at another freight pulling in. He saw the brakeman standing on a cattle car of the inbound freight. The man wore a long black coat and black mittens. He noticed Grandfather and waved, and then as he turned and was about to leap the gap between cars he slipped. Down he went, striking his head on a coupling and then dropping to the track, and the wheels of the cattle car passed over his legs, or rather passed through them, for they were cut clean off just below the hip. Grandfather, riding away, signaled his engineer to stop and he jumped from his caboose and ran through the sleet to the other train, which continued to move, wheel after steel wheel rolling over the bloodsoaked pants and coat tails. Grandfather pulled the man away. He was out cold, had been knocked out before he hit the ground, thank God. Grandfather waved and shouted but the train continued to crawl through the yard, and when the caboose finally

gives us access to Grandfather's inner thoughts but is able to evaluate them, see them for the delusions they are.

Not being restricted by time and space also has the effect of encouraging digressions. If the spell works, we see the story of the man dismembered by the train as part of Grandfather's personal history, but more interesting is the ease with which that digression is slipped into the larger narrative. It is followed by two more train stories (not quoted here), each recalled by Grandfather and each as rich and enjoyable as the one quoted earlier. Think of them as Grandfather's stories if you choose, if you enjoy that illusion, but in reality they are Jon Hassler's stories. The author clearly knows a lot about trains and train lore, and he's chosen a point of view that will allow him to reveal what he knows in the most natural way. Omniscience means, of course, all knowing, and it favors writers who know things and are confident about what they know and generous enough to want to share their knowledge.

And, finally, Hassler's omniscience allows him stylistic freedom. Effortless though the storytelling seems, Hassler's "narrator" is having great fun with the language, and the person speaking to us (Jon Hassler? Jon Hassler in a particular frame of mind or mood?) has a consistent and recognizable attitude. When we first meet Dodger Hicks he is not awaiting a friend but, rather, "lying in wait of a friend." Friendship by ambush. Grandfather's confusion is dispelled not by fresh blood to the brain but, rather, fresh blood "making a swing through his brain." The man whose legs are amputated by the train suffers a "lavish" loss of blood. Omniscience is neither voiceless nor mechanical in its telling. Indeed, it offers as much opportunity and latitude to exercise a writer's love of language as any other point of view, indeed more than many.

Having seen some of the things omniscience can do, let's return to the kinds of objections I often hear from students when I suggest omniscience as a possible solution to a story's problems: (1) *Omniscient narration stresses telling, not showing*. True. But there's nothing wrong with telling, provided it's balanced with showing. The trick is to know when to tell, when to show. It should be remembered that we're storytellers, not story showers, and fiction writing is not film. Novels are not pre-screenplays. In a screenplay everything must be shown. There's no such law in fiction. And, often, telling the reader things is a test of what the writer actually knows, and it can also reveal what he or she doesn't know. The more limited (and limiting) points of view can offer an attractive (though dangerous) refuge. If the writer knows next to nothing about, say, law, it's tempting to tell the story from the point of view of a character who's equally ignorant. (2) *Omniscience doesn't allow you to be truly inside your characters*. *We don't see through their eyes*. True again. But

rumbled by, there on the back platform stood the second brakeman looking down in disbelief at his dying partner, whose loss of blood was so lavish it spouted like a fountain from his stumps and he lost his life before he came to.

Ah, the damn trains. The wonderful damn trains.

While I don't wish to belabor the obvious, allow me to point out some of the features and advantages of Hassler's omniscient point of view. Perhaps most important, no other point of view offers such immediate access to the story's necessary information. Dodger Hicks comes to life as a result of this access. We not only see him standing there, "a shifty-eyed boy," in time present, but we also have access to his past, to the events of his young life that have made him shifty-eyed—the fact that he has no friends, that the other children have been prejudiced against him by their parents. We know that Dodger steals things, and we know what he steals. We know not only that he's swiped a pair of scissors but that he uses them to trim his own hair, an intimate detail that powerfully suggests the realities of Dodger's life: that in his family there's no money for haircuts and that nobody cares enough for Dodger to trim his hair. Because of an omniscient narrator's ability to transcend time and space, to examine the present and the past within the same short paragraph, we learn an amazing amount about Dodger very quickly. No other point of view gives a writer such easy, natural access to the things that need to be revealed. If you don't believe it, reread the sections of *The Great Gatsby* that go into Gatsby's past, things that need to be revealed to us but that Nick Carraway has no access or only strained access to. *Gatsby* is a great novel, a transcendent novel, but the transitions into and out of the past, the explanations of how Nick came to learn such things after Gatsby's death are often tortured, sometimes simply lacking. You can see the writer struggling with the artistic implications of his choice. I have no doubt that first person was the right choice for Fitzgerald, but in the wake of that choice were real problems, including access to necessary information.

Hassler's omniscience also allows the narrative baton to be passed with great ease from one character to the next. The chapter excerpted here moves gracefully and naturally from Dodger to Brendan to Grandfather without any of the devices required by more limited and limiting points of view. Neither a new chapter nor a space break is required. Nor is any explanation needed. One moment we're told what Brendan is seeing and thinking when the boomerang comes zooming back at the boys. The next paragraph begins, "The noise woke Grandfather," and

sometimes there's nothing to be gained from being inside. The metaphor of "becoming our characters" derives, again, from the screen (and the stage). You must lose yourself in order to become your character. Great actors will do almost anything to become their characters. On a recent "Saturday Night Live" skit "Robert DeNiro" has several segments of his spine removed so he can play a shorter man. But "being" and "understanding" are not the same. We can understand murderers without becoming murderers. If being inside were the best way to understand something, we'd all major in self-knowledge, whereas few of us do, even those who seem to have taken up permanent residence in confessional mode. (3) *Omniscience feels old-fashioned*. Well, gentle reader, who gives a damn? Are we talking old-fashioned in the sense of being part of an extended, rich literary tradition? There are worse things. That which is trendy, for instance, is a worse thing. (4) *Omniscience encourages the writer to intrude into the fiction, and authorial intrusion is to be avoided*. *Omniscience is thus an arrogant technique*. Let's take the last point first. Poet Elinor Wilner has joked about rewriting the Bible in her poems. Pretty arrogant behavior, right? Except that arrogance is part of the equation. We aren't writers to be timid. If playing God scares you, there are other professions. And who says authors shouldn't intrude into fiction? What they shouldn't do, it seems to me, is intrude clumsily or stupidly or unwittingly. Who could object to the presence of the omniscient narrator in the following passage from Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, in which Mack and the boys go hunting frogs?

During the millennia that frogs and men have lived in the same world, it is probable that men have hunted frogs. And during that time a pattern of hunt and parry has developed. The man with net or bow or lance or gun creeps noiselessly, as he thinks, toward the frog. The pattern requires the frog to sit still, sit very still and wait. The rules of the game require the frog to wait until the final flicker of a second, when the net is descending, when the lance is in the air, when the finger squeezes the trigger, then the frog jumps, plops into the water, swims to the bottom and waits until the man goes away. That is the way it is done, the way it has always been done. Frogs have every right to expect it will always be done that way. Now and then the net is too quick, the lance pierces, the gun flicks and that frog is gone, but it is all fair and in the framework. Frogs don't resent that.

Not content to speak for all Mankind, Steinbeck wants to speak for frogs as well.

So, then, what am I advocating? That you should write more stories

employing omniscient point of view? No. At least not exactly. The real reason that apprentice writers first shy away from omniscience, then gradually gravitate toward it, is a reason few beginners suspect or could articulate. Omniscience, in the end, is a mature writer's technique. Our being drawn to it has something to do with years, with experience of life, with the gradual accumulation of knowledge and pain and wisdom. Omniscience not only invents a world; it tells us how that world works and how we should feel about the way it works. Few writers at twenty-five or even thirty are ready to assume such a mantle. Omniscience is permission to speak and to speak with authority we know we really don't have, about a world that in our century (any century?) is too complex to know. Ultimately, omniscience forces us to pretend we know more than we do, and we're afraid we'll get caught. We're afraid we won't know as much as we need to and that our imaginations will not supply the lack, for omniscience places a premium on both knowledge and imagination.

But it's a sweet, lovely, rich, generous stick shift of a technique, and it'll take you places you can't go with an automatic transmission. The first few times you try it, it'll buck you all over the narrative road and send you fleeing back to the vehicle you already know how to drive, wondering what perversity would make anyone want to make a hard job harder. But many of you will return, and those who master the technique will come to enjoy the more complex involvement with and control over the machine.

After I finished my novel *The Risk Pool*, a long first-person narrative, I began two other books,<sup>1</sup> one in first person, the other close third. I've since switched both into omniscient, where I hope they'll stay. I've granted myself permission to speak, taken a deep breath, and prayed that what I speak will be knowledgeable and true and wise. If it isn't, I can always go back to close third and blame the characters. I turned forty this year. I've begun to understand the attraction of telling people what frogs think.

<sup>1</sup> These novels, published after the original lecture was given, are *Nobody's Fool* (New York: Random House, 1993) and *Straight Man* (New York: Random House, 1997).