

STALKING THE ELEPHANT

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Abstract

This article uses the image of stalking an elephant as a way to describe what writing novels is like: along with this metaphor, the author describes the dreaming of the novel and how the writer attempts to live inside the wide-awake fictive dream in order to flesh out his imagined world with the aid of what he calls his “inmost reader,” another metaphor for the invisible guide he feels leads every writer of fiction toward the realization of a completed work.

Key Words: Novel-writing, inmost reader, the novel and its dreaming, stalking the elephant, modes and ways of engaging the fictional world.

Any discussion of novel-writing should probably begin with a disclaimer: mine is that I’m still fairly new to the form (about eight years now), and I bring to it a beginner’s sense of wonder and of possibility and also of sacredness.

I believe the novel is the most capacious of literary art forms, capable of absorbing anything a writer can imagine and even some things he can’t, which sounds improbable and absurd but which I hope to show is not. This is the novel’s ever expansive gift and also its very real and forbidding elusiveness, as the world and the novelist permeate and suffuse each other with the quicksilver but sometimes indelible touch of the least incident and sensation, like Proust’s madeleine at the beginning of Remembrance Of Things Past or the scent of crushed almonds in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Love in the Time of Cholera.

I’m also thinking of an anecdote between James Joyce and his one-time secretary Samuel Beckett who was taking dictation from the nearly blind master one

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day in Paris: in the middle of their session that day, someone knocked on the door whom Joyce invited in and spoke with for some time.

After the guest left, Joyce asked Beckett,

Did you get that down? I want to put it into the book.

Beckett was flabbergasted that Joyce even considered putting in such a random visit into the novel he was working on. But I wonder if this anecdote doesn't somehow point to deeper and broader stuff that may be pertinent to our enquiry here today: that the novel instead of being defined like many art forms by its boundaries (like the sonnet or the villanelle) is instead defined by its maddening, almost delirious refusal to be defined and its boundless and protean ability to absorb and contain myriad influences, even a random visit from someone off the street. Without saying a word about it, Joyce set forth an implicit belief that novel-writing at least for him was ever open and inclusive, inclusive enough to entertain the idea of incorporating the conversation of someone just stopping by to visit. This kind of radical openness may seem almost scandalous to some, especially when we know how careful and painstaking Joyce was as a stylist.

I'm not trying to suggest by this example that novels don't have hard-to-achieve forms—far from it—, only that these same forms are unique to the particular novel in question and do not come out of any kind of preordained mold or pattern: each novel, if it is at all fully realized, presents a textured and nuanced world of its own graven upon the page that finds a way to beguile us with its speech from the viewpoint of one narrator or any number of narrators, however they are construed, a statement which is not very original but which I utter here as an act of good faith to somehow recognize the peculiar animal we're dealing with. Novels *talk* to us in an intimate and familiar way to tell us about the particular events in their worlds, as seemingly incidental or magical as some of these events might be: we're lured into the telling of it even if we read it in the silence of an empty room without moving our lips, seduced and caught up by its cadences and rhythms—we merge, in a sense, and become one with it, enveloped in the atmosphere of its evoked associations and intimacies.

“Tell me a story,” Robert Penn Warren writes in his poem *Audubon*, “In this century, and moment, of mania/Tell me a story./Make it a story of great distances, and starlight./The name of the story will be Time./But you must not pronounce its name./Tell me a story of deep delight.” This could be the clarion call of every reader, which contains within it a kind of child-like but unyielding and staunch demand: what Warren doesn't indicate in his poem, however, is what happens if this “deep delight” is not somehow met and satisfied, but I think we can imagine the scenario well enough.

The reader puts down the book and walks away, or looks for another one that contains this same deep delight that entices her to keep reading.

From the novelist's point of view, or at least from this one's point of view, the challenge incumbent on every writer is to cast a spell deep and mesmerizing enough to co-opt the reader's agreement or suspension of disbelief and lead her along by the spell of the voice that drives the narrative wherever it may lead, a destination that is ultimately less important than in *how* the novel goes about telling its story. This is every novelist's unavoidable charge and responsibility no matter how experimental the book in question is, and none of us who try to write novels can avoid the responsibility of this same glorious burden to tell by any means necessary.

Nor should we want to: the joy of the writer in this respect is very similar to the joy of the reader and may even be indistinguishable from it, opposite sides of the same spinning coin in a gradually disclosed discovery that doesn't give up its secrets easily or sometimes ever, which is perhaps somehow synonymous with the "deep delight" Warren mentions in his poem.

So how does this happen exactly from the writer's point of view?

How does the novelist pull off such a high-wire act to compel the attention of the reader and make her want to keep reading?

I'm not entirely sure, but I think it has something to do with dreaming and the reader inside every writer, in addition to something I call stalking the elephant. Let me try to explain by first elaborating on what I mean by dream. The novelist is haunted by a certain vivid and wide-awake dream that won't leave him alone; he wants more than anything to dwell inside this dream and bring back dispatches or commentary to his own inmost reader or listener that no book club member, however devout, can shake a stick at. This inmost reader is the novelist's true audience and never leaves him or her, less a projection or schism of self than a kind of guiding compass spirit that lays down a mysterious but irrefutable sounding trail for the writer to follow, perhaps even a debris trail in reverse that points to an unbroken and shimmering whole waiting to be discovered before the smoldering trail is lost.

I know how crazy this sounds, to speak of a reader within the writer waiting for the writer to write what the inmost reader already knows, but there it is: I don't know how else to describe what I think is going on at the deepest levels of writing fiction. However many books you write or I write, they're already there somehow waiting for us *before we even write them*, which the inmost reader already knows. This *already* is crucial, the truth waiting to be discovered in the deepest strata of the writer's subconscious: this is also why once the novel is written, it's no longer the sole possession of the writer (if it ever was) but a gift for anyone who would read it and

indeed the whole world, though of course the writer always gets his or her lion share of the credit.

The writer's job is as much to discover the books she has to write as it is to write them, which is ultimately the same thing, writing being another word for discovery and vice versa. They are perfectly fluid and interchangeable, as seamless as stitches in the same weave of fabric. Otherwise, why would anyone write at all, especially something as time-consuming and heartbreaking as a three hundred-page novel? Don't be fooled by the mindless cult of celebrity that prevails in a country like America today: works of art, if they are any good at all, have the mysterious quality of anonymity about them no one can take full credit for, let alone explain. At most the writer is a very devoted participant in this act of creation but by no means a solo agent working alone, though of course in every other way she *is* alone. Because if literary art were just the result of an individual personality, we'd have no *Hamlet*, no *Snow*, no *Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*, nothing that would endure the person who had the privilege of participating in the act of its discovery.

The inmost reader already knows this at a level the poor writer can't match; if he could, he wouldn't put pen to paper at all but would do something, anything else. And this is what's so beguiling, so bewitching about the inmost reader: in perfect silence and perfect waiting, she bids and invites the writer to do his work, tantalizing him here and there with glimpses of the whole dream he knows is there, waiting to be discovered. The inmost reader is infinitely patient and wise, but will not suffer half-hearted attempts, though she does sometimes allow numbskulls to participate in the discovery of a masterpiece. Unfortunately, it's true that you don't have to be a nice or well-adjusted person to be a writer, which is another way of saying that the ways of creativity are mysterious and unfathomable and unpredictable, however much we would like to believe otherwise.

The inmost reader leads by a tone that points to the fictive dream the writer is driven to inhabit and to realize, however long and fitful the process of going into this wide-awake dream lasts in order to bring back a full report. Some of these dreams are horrific or disturbing, and some of them are told through the voice of a child or battered woman: some are about war and some are about a village or small town, but all of them have this dreaming quality about them, both in the writing and the reading of them, and especially, perhaps, in the former.

When it's going well, I for one always have the feeling that I'm taking dictation however partial or imperfect, getting down what the voice or voices deigns to tell me, like a kind of privileged eavesdropping. In daily life, eavesdropping might be interesting but it could get you in trouble: in writing, I don't know how one can get along without it. This is why the inmost reader is so important: even though she's

totally silent, she somehow reads parts of the book to the writer who faithfully puts down what she says.

Have I lost you yet, or perhaps even alienated you?

I promise this was not my intention. All of this is a question of degree and not kind: because everyone dreams, and we've all heard someone say, I had a strange dream last night—but the novelist goes much further and more deeply than a brief description or summary: he can't stop himself, you see, he must pursue the dream to the very end with the unnerving patient guidance from the inmost reader. He has to go back to the dream again and again sometimes even in spite of himself, seeking to live his best and brightest hours within the shimmering glow of its aureole. He's obsessed not so much with the meaning of the dream but giving full-throated voice to it in a way that some might even consider maniacal except for that same inmost reader who is satisfied with nothing less than full and total disclosure, the best and utmost the writer can give.

So some writers are led or catalyzed by a tone, like Kate Chopin's The Awakening with the etudes of Chopin playing in the background—others are impelled by an image: Faulkner again, looking up a little girl's muddy drawers in a tree as she tries to see into her family house and the recent death that transpired there in The Sound and the Fury; and still others are impelled by an important historical event, as in John Edgar Wideman's Philadelphia Fire when the local authorities burned down and killed some poor black folks in a Philadelphia project.

Whatever the catalyst is, the writer riffs and improvises on it like so many variations on a theme, trying to satisfy the inmost reader who, remember, already knows the whole story and is telling it to the writer to tell to himself and then, hopefully, touch other readers. We know dreams are fascinating because logical chains of cause and effect break down and events flow and merge into each other seamlessly: a bird may speak or turn into a man or woman, the sky may turn purple then sepia-toned, or a biological catastrophe may give rise to an unlikely but poignant love affair in the basement of an abandoned schoolhouse with windows made of singing paper.

The novelist says, in effect, I had this strange dream: let me tell you about it *while I'm still inside the dream*. And if the novelist is any good, she will be loathe to tell you what it means because she doesn't know or even care to know: its meaning doesn't concern her, and if it does, she's writing something else, not a novel.

Mark Twain, with characteristic wit and caustic brevity, was very straightforward on this point in one of his famous aphorisms: "Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot." In one fell

swoop, Twain lays waste to the conventional sacred cows of what a novel must have or do, banishing any shred of motive, morals, or even the greatest idol of them all, the mandate that the readers of novels must look for plot. But absent of such elements, I think it's safe to say many readers, not to mention writers, feel a little lost, at least initially: many of us have had the above criteria ingrained in us so deeply that we sometimes forget how beautifully strange and inexplicable novels can be, just like our dreams. If it's not important and even offensive to Mark Twain to find the plot in a novel, or if James Joyce is willing to insert a chance encounter into one of his masterpieces, I wonder what the implications are for the rest of us?

But let's go back for a moment to dreaming again and the inmost reader for whom the writer is writing, or I should say listening to: I haven't even gotten to the elephant yet. If you're like me, it's very difficult to describe a dream to someone who didn't experience it: we know from the get-go that describing it is going to be a challenge, that the dream begins to change in our mouths from the very first word onward. So naturally we do what anyone does in a situation like that—we start improvising on the spot—not out of a premeditated desire to deceive but because the telling of the dream and the dream itself are suddenly forking off in different directions before our very eyes and ears, and there's nothing we can do about it but continue to try to talk about the dream the best we can.

The inmost reader knows this, by the way, and delights in it greatly: any dream that can be told easily is no dream worth talking about, or I should say writing about. Because every dreamer is a kind of writer or storyteller the moment she starts trying to describe her dream. Rarely do we stop and say, Wait a second: no, it didn't happen that way: let me go back and start over. Instead we just go on, caught up in the momentum and the urge to tell someone about the dream. This is all very human and very common, which does not detract or minimize its central mystery or importance one whit: in fact, given that this dreaming process happens to everyone, writers and non-writers alike, it's safe to say that we all understand and accept it as somehow necessary and somehow important, though again we may not be able to say exactly why it's necessary and important, only that it is.

Do you see how wonderfully strange this all is?

We're dealing with a phenomenon that everyone experiences and no one can explain, with all due respect to Freud and his descendants. Twain reminds us that we can ascribe motives and plots and morals to narratives all we want, but they're like small pennants or flags pinned to an elephant walking into the jungle: they're colorful and perhaps very descriptive, but it's the elephant that really commands our attention, the way it lumbers along, the way it looks, the dirt-blasted cracks in its hide, how it sounds as it's walking away or toward us, huge, maternal, wise, and terrifying. The

inmost reader knows the elephant better than anyone, and tacitly asks or cajoles or even commands the writer to follow and take notes, which the writer dutifully does in the course of writing his or her novel. They stalk the elephant together, not to kill or claim its tusks, but because here is this amazing, awesome creature that is going on some mysterious errand whose destination the inmost reader already knows.

But the clumsy, stumbling writer doesn't: he's doing all he can just to keep up. Something is written on one of the elephant's huge ears but he can't make it out. He has this hunch that if he could read it, it would solve the mystery of where the elephant is going, but of course he's mistaken on this point. The important thing is that the elephant is on the go, and if the writer is faithful and earnest enough under the guidance of the inmost reader, he can discover or rediscover what stalking such a magnificent beast is like, regardless of where it goes or what it means right into the quaking heart of mystery itself.