

Zuri Biringer

Dr. James Cohn

Summer Fellowship

26 August 2012

Preface

The goal of my fellowship was to explore the relationship between creative writing and reading fiction by deeply immersing myself in great works of fiction while also working on writing a story of my own. I chose to read authors in particular that are masters of fiction, focusing on short stories.

My reading followed a planned progression, chronologically in terms of original publication dates: Gustave Flaubert's *Un Coeur Simple* ("A Simple Heart," 1877), Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich and Other Stories* (1872-1904), Marcel Proust's *Swann's Way* (1913-1927; the first section of Part One can be read as a short story), and David Foster Wallace's *Oblivion: Stories* (2004).

These authors are unique in their styles and subjects. They are united in being considered great authors, yet they wrote at different times, in different places, about different subjects, and in different styles. (David Foster Wallace is too new to be *canonical*, but he's recognized as a modern master and a great representation of contemporary short story writing nonetheless.) I decided on short stories (a) because they are easier than novels to reread and (b) they are hard for an author to write well. The short story's inherent spacial limitations require that the author have a really tight structure and style: all the information must be squeezed and compressed into the most efficient sentences, paragraphs, and chapters.

Flaubert's is considered the originator of the modern realist style¹. His prose is terse, he is brutal with his characters, and he leaves authorial commentary alone. Tolstoy is more of a yarn weaver

¹ Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Girous, 2008. p. 29.

-- characters rarely die suddenly, there always seems to be a gradual buildup to crises -- and he's a hardcore moralist which is something that doesn't often work well in fiction. Proust is much more experimental with his long sentences, loose plot, and stream-of-consciousness tangents involving sensory memories. Then there's David Foster Wallace, the odd duckling of the bunch who's too contemporary to be considered classic just yet. He avoids simple categorization but he can be adequately described as writing in a cerebral style, somehow both sincere and satirical, about classic human themes as they apply to early 21st century America. What ties all of these men together is their innovation. They took creative writing and did something new with it, opening clearings into new ways of expression, characterization, and narration.

The writing I did to enrich my reading falls into three forms: translation, pastiche, and the précis. I translated Flaubert's story from French into English and also wrote a pastiche, a story that mimics an author's style. For Tolstoy I selected his more important stories and wrote a précis for each (a hyper-synopsis, sensitive to structure and narrative devices, which clocks in at around two pages, double-spaced).

The initial work of translation was an exercise in making tough artistic choices. One must choose which elements of the original story merit preservation at the sacrifice of lesser elements. It is often impossible to do a literal rendering and at the same time maintain the implied meaning and feel of a work. It is an exercise in expression, but with already determined subject matter. Translating leaves one with a greater appreciation and understanding of how the grammatical structure of a particular language affects the expression of ideas.

For the précis I referenced *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense* for analytical categories which I could use to frame my readings. Analyzing a story in writing via categories such as *plot*, *theme*, *characterization*, and *symbolism* surfaces deeper elements of storytelling that often pass by unnoticed. You begin to appreciate what a writer is really *doing*, and this enhanced appreciation in turn informs your own writing. For instance, when editing you can see what works in your writing (or what doesn't) and *why*. The more one is sensitive to literary aspects like rhythm or symbolism, the more one has a frame for critique and problem solving in their own work.

This fellowship has just begun to lift the veil off of what an incredibly complex, uncertain, and often confusing endeavor creative writing is. The act itself is hard to describe owing to the intuitive, 'feel-oriented' nature of the process: when I occasionally tried to observe my own cognitive gears grinding, I became paralyzed. When you read published fiction, you're getting the final draft, the version that's been perfected. It helps to know that nobody writes a perfect first draft, but it's still somewhat of a mystery to me, stepwise, how one progresses from the sketch of an idea to a first draft, through all the editing, and finally to the point where you say to yourself: 'ok, this is done, I can be ok with this.'

I had originally planned on writing five short stories, each mirroring the style of one of my authors, but it soon became clear that such a project was way too ambitious. A single story written in my own style was more than enough to fill my summer hours.

Thanks to Jim, my outstanding supervisor, for his never-ending encouragement, sharp wit, and keen advice on all of my readings and writings. Thanks also to Shira, for helping me with questions and loaning me books.

Flowers

Siobhan stood looking at the room. A smile began to form as her eyes paused over each of the objects--the benches, the drying racks, the PCR machines, the fume hood. She raised a finger tentatively to her lips, her joints still red and swollen from washing glassware, and she walked briskly to her bench, lifted a vial from its holder, and made for the door. She was gone before it latched.

Stepping out into the sunlight she grinned and flung her arms wide. She looked down at the flowers which lined the pathway: here points of pink, there electric lavender. Her eyes sparkled.

She purchased a bouquet of daffodils on the way home. She set them on the mantle and stepped back for aesthetic appraisal. After standing in five different spots she decided they would look better on the dining room table.

She skipped dinner, had a glass of wine, and went to bed early. The next morning at her five-thirty alarm, she threw on a red tank-top, jean shorts, and a pair of runners, and, driving to work, she daydreamed of meaningful conversations with middle aged people wearing thick glasses and who nodded intently when they listened.

The double doors hissed open for her and she walked into the lobby, trying to avoid acknowledging Jeremy the front deskman until the last possible moment. She raised her eyes, her face primed with a neutral yet amiable expression, but he raised a finger, opened his mouth slightly and spoke.

“Ah, miss Peirce; excuse me, but there is a package with your name on it.”

He leaned under his desk and produced an oblong box, wrapped in brown paper and thoroughly taped.

“Here you are. Be gentle.”

She took the parcel, turned it in her hands, and noted four ‘Fragile’ labels: one each on the top, bottom, and opposing sides.

“Thank you, Jeremy. Have a nice day.”

She put the package under her left arm--it was oddly heavy--and when she got to room 213B, she slid the package onto a shelf next to her lab coat which she grabbed with her right hand. She buttoned down and entered the lab.

There was James, over there Hilary, Craig and Martin were working together, Steve was back in the corner calibrating images, and Ross was bent over his bench scribbling furiously in his notebook, occasionally pausing to shoot a pained look at the ceiling. No sign of Eric, the Principal Investigator.

Siobhan sat down at her bench, pumped her swivel chair to the appropriate height, and spread open the pages of her lab book on the table’s shiny black surface.

She was working on a drug--KindredSpirits it was called--which would alleviate feelings of loneliness and neglect, replacing them with warmth and a sense of belonging.

II

The following Tuesday she took the bus home. She was sitting with her right cheek against the window, gazing off into the distance, right leg crossed over the left. He walked up and sat down right next to her. She covertly scanned him with her peripherals. He broke the silence, leaning back and cracking his interlaced fingers overhead, then touched her lightly on the shoulder and asked with a look of complete concern and curiosity if the heart shape on her left calf was a birthmark or a tattoo.

“Um, it’s a birthmark,” Siobhan ventured hesitantly.

“That’s cool,” he replied, “a heart tattoo is kind of ditzy, but a birthmark... now that means something more doesn’t it?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” Siobhan was reluctant to talk about her body in this way with a stranger, yet there was something simultaneously exciting about discomfort she felt.

“Well, you were obviously meant to love,” his eyes glimmered, he smirked, and turned his head back toward the front of the bus. Siobhan was too nervous to reply, but her outward demeanor remained stolid.

The scenery flew by the window. Her nose was now pressed against it and John was gone, having gotten off a couple stops back--he had introduced himself before disembarking. She easily named the shrubs, trees, and flowers as they passed by in a blur.

“Maybe I just need to loosen up,” she thought.

III

She decided to experiment. She unscrewed the cap and pipetted double the standard dose right onto her tongue. The atmosphere was charged not unlike a storm cloud's. She braced herself against her desk. Pen and paper ready for notes.

A twisting feeling began in the pit of her stomach and ran up behind her heart to her mouth where it left a sour, metallic taste. She hadn't expected to feel jealous.

Her pulse quickened as she began to wonder how long this would last. Why hadn't she designed an antidote?

The emotions triggered thoughts, vivid images rising out of the blackness. She peered through the window to see her seventh grade boyfriend making out again with her best friend. She saw her sophomore crush pinned against a tree by Ronnie Bloomfield. She didn't cry, she held it in. She cursed the sunshine, outside, mocking her. She pounded the sharp end of a pen against the back of her wrist to create some grounding pain with pathetically ineffective results. The burn of jealousy and hatred built inside her until her hands shook. The staggering pain was too much to handle. She imagined kicking a glass door and throwing herself stomach first onto the jagged shards which rose like 2-D stalagmites, onlookers grasping their mouths in terror. Her face had become a grimace, a quivering taut sheet that looked as though it might rip in places if

stretched further. She took the bottle and put it in a locker, slamming a padlock firmly into place and throwing away the little paper disk on the back which held the combination.

Later, after coming down, she had wondered if she should terminate the project. It puzzled her--this solution had been the highest rated so far by her test participants. She paused to watch a cute guy in sunglasses and a tank top lazily skate past her window. She shuddered to imagine what the past solutions had felt like to participants. Of course, it was probably just an anomaly in her body chemistry, an overreaction. She wondered what percentile she was in and thought what she wouldn't give to have encyclopedic knowledge of those feelings in order to understand them, unpack them, cash them out, deal with them, know how to make them cease.

Upon rereading her notes she realized that the meaning of her one deep realization was less apparent now, just from looking at the words. A single purple sentence stood out among her pages of red writing: "Maybe it's not them who are not reaching out to us, but *us* who are not reaching out to *them*."

She was called into her supervisor's office the next morning. He explained that the company had taken a big risk investing in her research and was hoping he could see some evidence of her work during the next board meeting.

"Have you tried it?" he asked, raising his eyebrows.

"What?"

“Your love potion, or whatever it is. Never mind. Anyway, we’d like to see something by next Wednesday at the latest so just put something short together and everything will go smoothly.”

She left his office but not before tripping over the rug and nearly knocking over a large vase of irises sitting on an oak endtable as she stood. He gave her a smile, sympathetic and dismissive, and she didn’t regain her composure until leaning over the bathroom sink and splashing cold water over her face.

IV

She saw John on the bus again; this time he asked her if she wanted to go for drinks.

“I just want to hear a little more about your research,” he had said. She had told him about KindredSpirits--it was a working title.

The lounge they went to was called the Holy Gräbel. He knew the spot, but she had heard about it too and the lighting inside was cozy and soft but not dark. If the suede couches weren’t so broken in, they would have been trendy.

He took a picture from his wallet and showed it to her; it was a polaroid of him as a teenager, standing next to a girl and his mother, looking tough in a world of sepia.

She had found a spare bottle of KS in her nightstand drawer the next evening, and she decided to try it again, despite her misgivings, in the name of science, for purposes of falsification. Drop, drop.

Tears filled her nose, giving a sensation of drowning between gasps, drawing forth memories of learning the backstroke as a child and getting chlorinated water up her nose, not trusting the instructor's hands under her back which were not as supportive as they should have been.

The emotion mounted and she closed her eyes at its intensity to see blazing lights against her eyelids, lights which solidified into the shapes of doorways pouring blue lava, orbs of red liquid falling slowly from a dark sky. Disembodied ethereal voices singing in harmony to some special wordless tune, whose meaning bore directly into one's heart where it struck home like a poison arrow.

She reached into her chest and pulled the arrow out.

She sighed, rolled over onto her stomach and was overcome by a second wave of emotion. Sadness it was not the right word, it was more profound, more significant, like the 'tears of joy' triggered by a profound and immensely fortunate surprise such as seeing a loved one thought dead. She propped herself on her elbows and looked down at the green stripes of her sheets and thought about lying in the grass.

V

You get that feeling in your face, in your throat, in your chest. It's a kind of vibrating uncomfortable clenching, the kind that could develop into a cold sweat if you let it. The feeling has a life of its own, it doesn't care if you eat, if you feel ok, if you have to lay down on the couch and put a damp cloth over your forehead pounding pounding with agitating thoughts. Go drink a glass of milk, is what you tell yourself, and you do it. Not too hard, just open the fridge, remove the plastic jug, uncap, watch the cold white liquid pour out into the highball glass, recap, return the jug to the fridge. There, that feels much better.

She went to the bathroom. The light was on and the door closed, but thankfully when she opened the door and peered inside, no one was there. She didn't remember leaving toilet paper floating in the bowl, but whatever. She remembered the words of a slovenly Slovenian, something about the marxist surplus-excess of enjoyment, french women orgasming, and the significance of the penis as a conduit for both urine and semen, substances vastly different in their ontological and symbolic value. Turning the shower on, she sat down on the black tiles and closed her eyes. She opened them and looked up into a cloud of misty droplets.

Learning how to meditate, the advice you get from teachers in orange robes is a lot like advice from haggard AA veterans on how to stay sober: just keep doing it, just for today, keep on enduring, keep on coming to meetings, and have faith in the method. Remember the good, the

true, and the beautiful was what my ajahn² told me. You get cool sensations down the backs of your arms and across your belly? A good sign, but try to get that cool feeling-tone happening in your skull next time. That cool air going up into your nostrils--imagine sucking it up behind your forehead then blowing it straight back across your crown and down behind the occipital lobe and cerebellar regions. Think convection. Fill that head with a cool breeze, then begin shooting streams from that reservoir out over the rest of your body. You want to soak it, every single cell, every tangible inch; bathed in coolness. What's that? Yes of course you're allowed to enjoy it, why not? Lean back and get second-order on that pleasure. Impossible to overindulge.

² Thai word for 'teacher.' Something along the lines of the title 'Venerable.' A monk must have around ten thousand hours experience meditating in order to be called *ajahn*.