## The Parts That Are Only Glimpsed: Three Reflexes

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Jacques Barzun once said that the ideal writer would recast his own death sentence as he was reading it, if it were a bad sentence. While I have never had the pleasure, I feel that this might well be true, because writing at an acceptable level comes to be a reflex after a time, gets imposed critically on one’s reading and produces a twitch if frustrated. But there are death sentence reflexes and there are other, less immediately essential but ultimately valuable reflexes upon which one comes to rely.

One way or another, writers acquire a set of mental habits that advise us as to when we should describe a character and to what extent, how much physical description is warranted, or tolerable, at a given point in narration, where to drop plot clues, when to begin a new paragraph, when a simple sentence is preferable to a lengthier, more complex one, et cetera. These are the death sentence reflexes. I have a few others that may be nonstandard, so I thought I’d run some of them out for your inspection, in case you’re in the market for them. Who knows?

Hemingway said, in *A Moveable Feast:*

It was a very simple story called “Out of Season” and I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself. This was omitted on my new theory that you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.

This observation bothered me for a long while, because it struck a certain chord in echoing amid my own feelings and practices in writing. I was not at all sure that I believed it as he stated it, but I decided that the observation warranted a little meditation because it suggested a great number of effects, some of which I had attempted in my own ways.

First of all, any story we tell is as much an exercise in omission as inclusion. Our death sentence reflexes normally take care of this, so that we hardly think of the bits of scenery, stray thoughts, passing faces, unimportant physical details we are leaving out.

Somewhere, sometime early I came to believe in tossing in a bit of gratuitous characterization as I went along. It seemed to add something to a story as a whole if—by means of a few extra sentences—a stock character could be shown to have an existence beyond his walk-on role. I remember doing this with the civil servant Briggs—and showing something of the bureaucracy behind *him—in Isle of the Dead* This I suppose to be a corollary of the Hemingway principle—an indication of the presence of things perhaps important in their own right but not essential to the story itself—actually the reverse of cutting an essential item and hoping that its light shines through. But I believe the effect is similar—in making people feel something more than they understand. It works to expand the setting of the entire piece and to provide evidence of the larger reality surrounding the action by giving the reader a momentary, possibly even subliminal, feeling that there is something more there.

Then, I guess we have Freud to thank for the introduction of childhood trauma into the modern novel, as a key to adult character and actions. I am against the notion on principle, but I do like the technically nonessential flashback. I like it because over the years I have read too many novels where the main characters seemed to come into existence on the first page and plunge immediately into whatever conflict was brewing. In general, I do not like pastless characters. So, I decided early that when more complicated techniques are not required, a quick, brief flashback or even just a reference or two to something in the protagonist’s past not connected with anything that is going on in the story’s present could efficiently remedy the situation. In *This Immortal,* Conrad explains being late for an engagement because of having attended a birthday party for the seven-year-old daughter of a friend. Nothing more is ever mentioned about it. It is of no consequence to the plot, but I wanted to show that he still had other friends in town and that he was the kind of person who would go to a kid’s birthday party. Three birds with one sentence.

Obviously, I am not of the school which holds that everything in a story should advance the action. The shorter the story the more I will concede on this point, for purely practical reasons involving the economy of the briefer form, but there is elbow room in a novel, novella or novelette and I believe in using it to strengthen characterization and to suggest something of the broader world beyond the story’s scope.

And finally, there is a small exercise I do in writing longer fiction. I do not know how it would work for anyone else, or even whether it actually works for me—that is, whether my books would be any different if I did not do it. It is the closest I come to the original Hemingway dictum, however, and it is the main reason I was so intrigued by his notion when I first came across it. I do leave something out; or rather, there is something which I do not include.

In writing anything of length, I always compose—either on paper and then destroy it, or in my head and let it be—a scene or scenes involving my protagonist (and possibly separate ones for other important characters) having nothing to do with the story itself—just something that happened to him/her/it once upon a time. I accept it as a real experience, a part of the character’s life history, and I may even refer to it in the story itself. But I never include it. I do this under the belief that the character should be larger than his present circumstances indicate, should be defined for me in terms of a bigger picture of his life than the reader ever sees.

The only time I broke my rule and saw one such incident published was when Fred Pohl asked me for a story while I was tied up tight doing *Isle of the Dead,* and I gave him such a sequence (“Dismal Light”) rather than take the time to write something new. If you are familiar with both the short story and the novel, I suppose that—viewed from the outside—it is a shoulder-shrugging matter as to what effect that story might have had on the book. I feel it helped me, however, because that offstage piece of Sandow’s past showed me how he would behave immediately after he left Homefree.

So, I propose that minor characters, then, by quick reference to their occupations and/or off-scene problems, can be used to expand the general setting of the story, while adding to its verisimilitude with their own improved status as individuals—a double gain; I suggest, also, that even a brief reference to his/her/its past can strengthen a character by adding another point to that character’s lifeline; and I feel that a fully realized but not included incident in your character’s past can help you to deal with that character in the present—and that all of these devices serve to “make people feel something more than they understand” in your story. Life being full of things felt but not understood, I look upon this as enriching the tale by imitating the actual experience of existence.

I do these sorts of things now without spending much thought over them because I have reduced them to reflexes. In fact, this is the first I have thought about them in years. While they are not of the variety of reflex normally used for recasting death sentences, I do feel they serve to add life to a narrative.