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Two or Three Things I Know about Setting

Max Byrd

A word of confession at first. Several years ago I strayed from the strict world of eighteenth-century scholarship and began to write fiction of my own. I started with “hard-boiled” crime novels about a predictably oversexed and wisecracking private detective in San Francisco. Then I moved on to more expansive and complicated thrillers with international themes and sinister, exotic locales such as Harvard Yard and Paris. And most recently, I have been writing historical novels about the American past, the first of which treated a few years in the life of the *philosophe* Thomas Jefferson. (I resist the temptation to describe this as progress from hard-boiled to egghead.)

Not completely to my surprise, writing fiction has dramatically changed the way I teach the eighteenth-century novel, and also changed the kind of scholarly criticism that I assign to students or read myself. (I am in entire agreement with Johnson’s observation that “theory” is “speculation by those unversed in practice.”) But one thing that has not changed is my admiration for Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, which seems to me still the definitive account of its subject. I like especially the fact that, for all its impressive historical and sociological learning, *The Rise of the Novel* is a highly literary book, by which I mean that it is chiefly concerned with matters such as plot and character, the topics in my experience that

working novelists and editors are chiefly concerned with, not to mention readers. And I find absolutely true and right Watt's central argument that the "defining characteristic" of the novel is "the individual apprehension of reality."¹

Or to put it another way, the novelist is in love with concrete nouns.

Defoe is a novelist not so much because of his myth-making powers or his ability to project himself psychologically into his narrator, but largely because his mind turns constantly and automatically, as he writes, to the names of physical objects (open any page of *Robinson Crusoe*). Carol Houlihan Flynn sees the great white feather bed that Moll Flanders tosses from a burning house as a complicated symbol of death, "physical and spiritual loneliness," and "the weight of sexuality"; but really Defoe is not much given to symbols like that—the white feather bed is simply *there*, like Jay Gatsby's cascade of beautiful silk shirts, because a novelist's imagination fastens with greatest delight onto things, not concepts.² A careful reader can see the exact moment when *Tristram Shandy* changes from being a rather vague and undefined ecclesiastical burlesque into a novel—it is the moment in chapter 21, volume 1, when Walter Shandy's wandering attention pauses to focus on "my uncle Toby's" "new pair of black-plush-breeches," and the real, literal, authentic world of what historians call "material history" suddenly falls like a rock into the story.

This sense of material history is nowhere stronger than in the presentation of "setting" in a novel. Watt uses the term "space" (as "the necessary correlative" of "time") and remarks on the indifference to realistic time and space in earlier writers such as Sidney and Shakespeare. The picaresque novel of the late seventeenth century, he concedes, has incidental descriptions of realistic settings. But "Defoe would seem to be the first of our writers who visualized the whole of his narrative as though it occurred in an actual physical environment." (Which is exactly how a novelist works, with the scene unrolling like a strip of film in his head; alternatively, Ford Madox Ford advises the beginner to "write as if the action of your novel were taking place before your eyes on a brightly lit stage.")³

This discovery of setting as an element of craft is for me one of the most interesting events in the rise of the novel. From Defoe's tenacious

1 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1964), pp. 10, 15.

2 Carol Houlihan Flynn, *The Body in Swift and Defoe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 62.

3 Watt, p. 26; Ford Madox Ford, quoted in John Braine, *Writing a Novel* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), p. 51.

and obsessive lists of physical objects in a landscape, Richardson will turn to the more suggestive and psychologically charged presentation of interior settings only—his narrow passageways and shadowy corridors lead directly into the house of James; and Fielding will go on to be at times as topographical and systematic as an ordnance map, a liberating precision that reaches its fullest expression in Joyce's *Dublin*. Eventually, after the novel has passed through its Gothic filter at the end of the eighteenth century, setting will become, in the hands of writers such as Balzac and Emily Brontë, almost the equivalent of character itself.

But the truth is, although Defoe was an awful stylist and a coarse, inconsistent creator of character, like most great artists at the beginning of a new tradition, he manages to lay out all the important principles. When I teach the rise of the novel, I ask my students to think about three basic rules for setting, all of which can be derived from Daniel Defoe.

Divide and Contrast

What most readers remember first about *Robinson Crusoe* is, of course, the desert island. And nobody has written more eloquently than Watt about the universal, nearly mythological force of that brilliant image. For the practising novelist, however, Defoe's account of the famous island is also a textbook exercise in dramatizing setting.

The first thing any storyteller has to learn is how to create contrast and conflict—drama. Robinson Crusoe's memorable island is not a simple, unified, undramatic space such as a *New Yorker* cartoonist might draw. His island has a "good" section where he is washed ashore and where he builds an elaborate fortified cabin, his "Sea-shore House." Farther inland he constructs a very different "Country House" in a pleasant shady savannah that he transforms into a farm and enclosure for his goats. The "bad" section is at the other end of the island, a long rocky beach where Crusoe finds bones and other remnants of cannibal rituals and which he avoids as much as possible, out of sheer terror that he might be captured there and devoured.

And this is the *sine qua non* of setting. If you have a space, divide it into parts and set them in collision with one another. If you have an Isabel Archer trapped in Gilbert Osmond's "house of darkness, house of suffocation," place her again and again where she can see a window, and through the window the wide green lawn that rolls away to freedom. If you are F. Scott Fitzgerald ferrying your protagonist from one part of Paris to another—a routine novelistic task—take advantage of the natural

division and conflict of the city: "The Place de la Concorde moved by in pink majesty; they crossed the logical Seine, and Charlie felt the sudden provincial quality of the Left Bank." In so simple an act as meeting a train in pre-Civil War Washington, Gore Vidal opposes "stately avenue" and "squalid train depot" and notes that along the sidings "Huge carts stood ready to be filled with Northern merchandise to be exchanged for Southern tobacco, raw cotton, food."⁴

Defoe has an instinctive feeling for such division and contrast. Crusoe's cave behind his seashore house may be, as Homer Brown suggests, a personal image of his fascination with being devoured, but it is also a way of doing what a novelist does automatically, at every opportunity: multiply contrasts—inside/outside, light/dark.⁵ In the *Journal of the Plague Year* Defoe almost reflexively contrasts sick London with healthy countryside, dangerous streets with safe interiors. Moll Flanders has two entirely different Londons: the secret place where she dwells apart, and the public commercial stretches where she goes in disguise and steals.

In *Robinson Crusoe*, if nowhere else, Defoe also takes the next step: divide and contrast your characters' reactions to the setting. When Crusoe returns to the site of the cannibal feast on the beach, he has one reaction, Friday has another: "my very Blood ran chill in my Veins, and my Heart sunk within me, at the Horror of the Spectacle: Indeed, it was a dreadful Sight, at least it was so to me; though *Friday* made nothing of it."⁶ This is the principle that leads Somerset Maugham (a writer most unjustly neglected by the academy) to place two entirely different kinds of Englishmen, Warburton and Cooper, in an outpost of the empire and have one accommodate, one defy their surroundings. It is how Conrad deals with jungle, and Melville with the sea. At the highest level of art, Hemingway will have two characters look at precisely the same landscape, and one, the literalist, will see nothing but an arid, sterile plain, while the other, the metaphorist, will see beautiful fertile hills that look "like white elephants."⁷

4 Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1951), part 2, chap. 42, p. 196; F. Scott Fitzgerald, "Babylon Revisited," *Babylon Revisited and Other Stories* (New York: Scribner's, 1960), p. 211; and Gore Vidal, *Lincoln* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), p. 3.

5 Homer O. Brown, "The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe," *ELH* 38 (1971), 562–90.

6 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. J. Donald Crowley, World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 207.

7 W. Somerset Maugham, "The Outstation," *Short Story Masterpieces*, ed. R.P. Warren and Albert Erskine (New York: Dell Books, 1954); Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants," *The Oxford Book of Short Stories*, ed. V.S. Pritchett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

Present Your Setting in Motion

The second rule of setting is especially congenial to someone as temperamentally restless as Defoe.

A few years ago I attended classes in bomb squad training at the California Highway Patrol Academy. One of our lessons concerned how to search a room in which a bomb is concealed. What the searcher does *not* do, of course, is look around at panic-stricken random, letting the eye jump from place to place as impulse carries it. Instead, you divide the room into quadrants (an alternative method is to divide it into bottom third, middle third, top) and you proceed to look systematically, from quadrant to quadrant, sweeping high to low, up and down, until you find your target.

And this is how a novelist presents a setting.

The reader does not begin by seeing Crusoe's island all at once, as if on a static map or from an aerial view. On the contrary, slowly, inch by inch, we push aside the overhanging leaves and branches, shade our eyes, and follow Crusoe's wary, tentative footsteps deeper and deeper into the island. Only after a long period of exploration and travel will we finally reach the climactic site of the cannibal rituals and the beach with the solitary footprint, our target, so to speak. When Moll Flanders commits her first theft and turns to flee, Defoe moves us rapidly from street to street, dark alley to dark alley in the great city until we burst free of the labyrinth and sprint to safety.

Nothing could be more different from the setting presented in the opening chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady*—a novel constructed mostly of houses and rooms—but the principle of motion is the same. James begins with an English summer-house at twilight, when the air has grown “mellow” and the shadows are “long upon the smooth, dense turf.” Then by degrees he carries us up the lawn to the wicker chairs where three men are taking their tea, and past them on to the great brick house itself and into its rich, luxurious interior; and finally he swings back again, down the lawn to the river's edge and up once more to the tea-drinking trio (his target) and the dialogue begins. Fitzgerald follows the same principle in the sentence about Paris quoted earlier: we feel the difference between the contrasting parts of Paris only if we are in motion, crossing the Seine. P.G. Wodehouse (mulishly neglected by the academy) often begins a Blandings Castle story by following a moonbeam from room to room or tracing an awe-struck newcomer's arrival up the gravel paths and through the gardens of that porcine Eden. When Phillip Marlowe calls on General Sternwood in his overheated greenhouse, we begin by standing on the doorstep of the mansion and proceed step by step, looking over his shoulder, through the

entrance hallway, down the corridors, until the butler pulls open the last door, the steam rises, and we are in the general's presence.⁸

The Setting Must Provoke an Emotion

I sometimes ask my undergraduate fiction-writing class to do a setting exercise: "describe your own room from the point of view of someone—a member of the opposite sex—seeing it for the first time." I hope, naturally, that they will use dramatic contrast and conflict (a riotous bed, a neat desk; a clear window, a cluttered wall) and also lead the reader's eye systematically to a character-revealing point or image (a painting over the desk, a snowsled hung on a door). But most of all I hope that the character seeing the room for the first time will have an *emotion*.

Poor castaway Crusoe has the strongest possible emotions about his island:

the Anguish of my Soul at my Condition, would break out upon me on a sudden, and my very Heart would die within me, to think of the Woods, the Mountains, the Desarts I was in; and how I was a Prisoner lock'd up with the Eternal Bars and Bolts of the Ocean, in an uninhabited Wilderness, without Redemption: In the midst of the greatest Composures of my Mind, this would break out upon me like a Storm, and make me wring my Hands, and weep like a Child.⁹

Moll Flanders, too, roars and weeps like a child at the sight of Newgate Prison, where she was born; and H.F. contemplates plague-stricken London, sometimes with curiosity, mostly with fear and trembling.

The key word in Fitzgerald's sentence, quoted earlier, is, of course, "felt": "Charlie felt the sudden provincial quality of the Left Bank"; a paragraph later Charlie will look on an especially beautiful prospect of the avenue de l'Opéra and exclaim: "I spoiled this city for myself!" When Jane Austen tells Fanny Price's story, she naturally divides and contrasts: the house "in Portsmouth is the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety. Nobody was in their right place, nothing was done as it ought to be." Therefore the house at Mansfield Park is notable for its "elegance, propriety, regularity, harmony" and Fanny will ultimately choose it for her home. But from the very start Jane Austen's genius leads her not only to divide and contrast, but also to provoke multiple emotions from one setting. If Fanny Price will come to be happy at Mansfield Park, her *first* reaction, as a little girl, shows the opposite emotion:

8 Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), chap. 1.

9 *Robinson Crusoe*, p. 113.

The grandeur of the house astonished her, but could not console her. The rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure, and she crept about in constant terror of something or other; often retreating towards her own chamber to cry.¹⁰

Imaginary settings with real tears in them—it is pleasant to remember that not all settings lead a novel's hero or heroine to lamentation and sadness. Crusoe will eventually dry his eyes and come to regard his island as his comfortable "Home"; at the end he calls it his "Kingdom." And when the novel has risen about as far as it can go, Huck Finn will remind us that the real world it takes for its setting can also provoke us to love:

Sometimes we'd have that whole river all to ourselves for the longest time. Yonder was the banks and the islands, across the water; and maybe a spark—which was a candle in a cabin window; and sometimes on the water you could see a spark or two—on a raft or a scow, you know; and maybe you could hear a fiddle or a song coming over from one of them crafts. It's lovely to live on a raft.¹¹

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10 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. R.W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 14–15.

11 Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*, chap. 19, "The Duke and the Dauphin Come Aboard."

