

WHY FICTION?

for Charlie L'Homme

“Without literature, of course, we would have no knowledge of the meaning of love.”

– John Cheever

I am the last person who wants to be told what love should mean, but there's truth for me in Cheever's audacious assertion. Truth for the reader, truth for the writer. What it says to me is that literature produces the crucial illusion: that we can share another person's subjective world. In life outside of books, we all know that condition doesn't prevail as much of the time as we would like; inside of books this condition is business as usual. Reading Chekhov's "The Lady with the Pet Dog," we take for granted that we know what is in Gurov and Anna's secret hearts; and though it is expressed in a way that Chekhov would probably have found unreadable, we take for granted the same thing about the protagonist of Donald Barthelme's "The Indian Uprising." Even when Hemingway makes us guess at the characters' subjective experiences, we still do guess, because we know without asking that fiction is the form in which we will become privy to the unspoken, the inexpressible. Often we know the thoughts and feelings more clearly than the characters who are having them, yet we don't feel surprise at being offered such knowledge.

Fiction not only reveals the inner mechanism of the social being, which we could hear about all the time in other ways, but also the existential self, the inner inside that is *not social*. It speaks to that part of us which is stubbornly, inevitably singular, the part which is private and which we vaguely apprehend whenever we try to understand what has connected all of the experiences we have had since birth: behind

them all is something indescribable we call the self, or soul, or spirit. Fiction validates that utterly private experience, by letting us know not only that other people have had such experiences, but that we are having them ourselves. It enables us to know our own knowing, which we somehow were not aware of, yet which we encounter in fiction with a feeling of recognition, not discovery, that shows we held this unarticulated knowledge all along.

Not only does fiction perceive this part of the world – this “inner inside” that I believe is our humanity – but it then gives us a picture of the world that constantly remembers what happens in there. Fiction remembers what the social sciences leave out – what they have to leave out because they possess no technique for investigating it or communicating it, because they are about people *en masse*.

Consider Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path,” a story that appears over and over in anthologies of short fiction.

“It was December [the story begins] – a bright frozen day in the early morning. Far out in the country there was an old Negro woman with her head tied in a red rag, coming along a path through the pinewoods.” We are with a narrator who places us at once, with special clarity in time (December, early morning), and not quite so clearly in space (“the pinewoods”). Perhaps “the pinewoods” are enough to suggest the South, especially given that we know who the author is; on the other hand, they are vague enough to lend a distinct feeling of being in a story-world. We are not reading history or anthropology; if we were, the pinewoods would be in a specific state and probably a clearly defined region of it. These are the pinewoods of the imagination; a certain freedom inheres in that. We are at a distance from the one person inhabiting this landscape, looking at an area “far out in the country” through which one bright spot moves: the red headrag of this “old Negro woman.”

In the next sentence we are radically closer to her: “Her name was Phoenix Jackson.” The narrator, we discover, is not an observer scanning the scene impartially; this voice telling the story knows Phoenix’s name, and by naming her elevates her from the generic status of “old Negro woman” to an individual, known and therefore already, by the conventional magic of fiction, the object of our sympathy. Undoubtedly the reader unconsciously guessed in the second sentence that the “old Negro woman” would be the protagonist (otherwise why mention her there?), but now that she is named her role is certain. Through an agreement we in this culture make with fiction, we tentatively accord her our sympathy, even in this third sentence of the

story, simply because we know she is the protagonist. One of our goals as readers is to find a place to attach our ability to care, and one of the writer's goals is to make that possible; naming helps.

"She was very old and small and she walked slowly in the dark pine shadows, moving a little from side to side in her steps, with the balanced heaviness and lightness of a pendulum in a grandfather clock. She carried a thin, small cane made from an umbrella, and with this she kept tapping the frozen earth in front of her. This made a grave and persistent noise in the still air, that seemed meditative like the chirping of a solitary little bird."

Phoenix is not merely "old" – which the narrator has already told us once – but "very old"; if this repetition is a choice and not a mistake, then we get a clear sign that being old is a crucial issue, perhaps *the* crucial issue, of this story. Welty reinforces that thought in a way that does not register consciously on first reading, by comparing Phoenix to the pendulum of a grandfather clock; the image underscores the notion of time passing, and at the same time the name of the particular kind of clock reminds us of old age.

For the second time the word "frozen" appears in this opening paragraph. The year is at its nadir – we are not to forget that – and in the immemorial simile, Phoenix is in the December of her life. Yet at the same time, she possesses "balanced heaviness and lightness." Brightness and vitality continue to manifest themselves in the red rag and the steadiness of Phoenix's movement; the sound of her cane tapping the earth is "persistent," and it seems "like the chirping of a solitary little bird" – the sound of something young and assertively alive.

To skip many interesting turns in "A Worn Path," by the end of the fourth paragraph we are brought, it seems to me, still closer to Phoenix: "On she went. The woods were deep and still. The sun made the pine needles almost too bright to look at, up where the wind rocked. The cones dropped as light as feathers. Down in the hollow was the mourning dove – it was not too late for him." As I read these sentences, it seems to me we move into Phoenix's consciousness. No longer are we observing her from the outside, an old woman wearing a headrag coming through the woods, but rather we see as she sees: the pine needles are "almost too bright to look at." Once we've heard Phoenix speak, it seems likely that she would say that "the cones dropped as light as feathers." The narrator observes, "Down in the hollow was the mourning dove – it was not too late for him," but at least half of this observation seems to belong to Phoenix; she, who personifies all of the forces of nature, would be the one to say "it was not too late for him." This phrase does double duty; it tells us again the time of day – early,

because that is when doves start to sing – and by the way it is said, it makes us ask who or what it is too late for. These are Phoenix's own concerns; we have been drawn inside her mind.

The narrator who began by watching from a distance as Phoenix navigated her way through the woods has shown that it can enter into her awareness of the world; later there is momentarily no distinction between the two when the narrator conveys to us a dream or hallucination Phoenix has, without comment: "She did not dare to close her eyes, and when a little boy brought her a plate with a slice of marble-cake on it she spoke to him. 'That would be acceptable,' she said. But when she went to take it there was just her own hand in the air."

No character in this story is close to Phoenix; no one in it shares her subjectivity. Most of the people she meets treat her with condescension or disdain. One unmistakable subject of the story is the prejudice Phoenix meets with because she is black, poor, and old. But unlike a sociological treatise on the process of stigmatization, or an op-ed column on ageism, the story, being fiction, has a narrator, and in a world where not one character is close to Phoenix, the narrator shares her consciousness, and brings us to share it too. So through the artifice of fiction we become the source of the understanding she gets nowhere else; we validate her way of making sense of the world, and so in a peculiar way by reading the story, and being drawn into Phoenix's awareness via the narrator, we make the story's affirmation of her life possible.

Exactly to the extent that we, the readers, create a community for Phoenix by reading, we also do the same favor for ourselves. A piece of human experience has ceased to be foreign to us, and to that extent our compassion has grown.

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Luckily, people don't have to be made to read fiction. I say luckily because at this moment community with others is chronically in doubt and private experience is endangered; and fiction is a kind of knowing that comes into our privacy and seems to make it co-extensive with another's. It even takes in the parts of subjective experience for which there are scarcely words, and it does that for the reader (in the recognitions it stirs) as well as for its characters. Not only is this a good deal like what we think love is, it may be that literature constantly invents what we think love is, and keeps alive an inner inside that can be so reached.

We are accustomed to saying that our era is defined by technology, by which we mean computers and computer networks and the programs that run them, and this is hard to argue with. I would just suggest that the ingenious inventions of our times have not rendered all previous ones obsolete, among them literature, a technology we human beings have invented for not being alone.

An earlier, longer version of this essay was published in *How Writers Teach Writing*, ed. Nancy Kline (Prentice-Hall, 1992).