



WRITING AS DESIGN

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BY ZONA GALE

WHEN we use the word "fiction" here, we are considering fiction as a mode of transposition between living material and a fresh participation in that material by the reader.

The reader is helpless. He will receive that material sentimentalized or boiled very hard, scaled down to be less than it is or left as a flat record of fact. Or he will receive it as that which celebrates and transfigures, points his understanding through and beyond, offers glimpses of some farther fields for us—and thus for fiction. We may not yet enter upon those fields, but art can do so. Fiction can do so, and can do so through the only materials with which it has to work—that of human appearance and relationship.

At Zion National Park, one of the most beautiful of the parks of the United States, the lodge is set between the canyon walls, sheer rises of rock of a thousand feet and more, before and at the rear of the buildings. There the waitresses, the bell-boys, the drivers are college men and women, earning for next year's schooling. We sat in the lodge lounge after dinner, when we heard an excited voice crying: "Come out here! Everybody out!" Everyone went to the doors and out onto the stone terrace. What was happening? No violence, no sudden claim to difference, no action among creatures. No—but over Lady Mountain, a thousand feet high, the full moon was rising. Pine boughs of the summit were cut black and slim on the gold. There was the impulse to fiction in the call of the bus boy or the bell-hop who experienced the moment and let us know: *The moon was rising.*

Out on the oval of lawn before the lodge,

a man and a woman were walking—a husband and wife, for certain. In the pouring silver of that night she was moonstruck, without a question. "Let's stay out here for hours," she said. "Let's walk and walk. I never saw moonlight red on rock walls. Look at those peaks. We mustn't miss it!" But he said, "Margaret, I've looked at peaks since breakfast. I'm dead tired. My legs won't walk." She was making the transposition of material from its appearance as flat fact to its inner energy and intensity. He was no fiction writer.

There was a poet so glamoured by such values that once he sent a telegram to a beloved woman. Name. Address. "The moon is rising." No signature.

A young girl on a western train, going home from college. What college did she attend? "B. Y. C.," she said. "What was B. Y. C.?" As she answered there was a certain upward look of the shy, the one aware of her difference, or of the one forced to speak against her will. She was saying, "Brigham Young College," and one unfriendly to her religion might have fancied that there, in her look, he caught the future of a whole system of thinking. One either experienced this with her—or one merely took her reply and passed by on the other side. The first way exercises the impulse to fiction. The second exercises the receiving apparatus for fact.

Years ago I saw a tiny clearing on the desert, a little adobe house, a few willows, a few geraniums, some pans turned to dry. No sign of creatures about. But in the yard, a child's painted wagon. A child's wagon. The race safe in the commonplace cradle of

routine, of the human program, so long as a child's wagon was to be seen, made, hammered, painted, used. Lately, on a desert train, I wondered: Was that sense of safety warranted? For some said (I thought) that the program and the race were now whole points off-center, were a compass crazed by too much electricity. Dramatically, on the moment, the train passed a mean settlement, a handful of unpainted houses. And in one yard lay a small dusty blue toy automobile and its truck. Frame and motor replaced adobe and wagon—and the race still seemed safe—not perhaps cradled in its routine, but safe on some new tangent of direction, ambiguous and beautiful.

All through the West lie the camps of the CWA—or its substitutes—temporarily abandoned in the summer while the men go to the higher altitudes, where they could not work in winter. One catches the comments: "Foolishness. Unnecessary work. Why don't they do something that *is* something? Who's paying them? You and I, out of our own pockets. The taxes are going to wreck us . . ." And so on. But now and again and again one who says: "It is tomorrow. Men and women giving service as a matter of course—to the government, for one year, two years, not for war and destruction but for social construction, before they go to their own personal constructing and earning jobs." And one remembered: "Professor Charles Zueblin used to say that every man and woman, before he entered upon his profession or trade, should be conscripted to give a year's work to the state—for forestation, for municipal building and design, for irrigation, for that which he himself could best do. Not, then, artist set to road work or skilled salesman to digging, as was inevitable in the rush and skelter of our present need—but men and women, serving the state according to their gifts and equipment, for one year or two, for a stipend, before beginning to work for livelihood and for possible accumulation." In the first comments there was apprehension of flat fact; in the others, creative comprehension.

Riverside, California, is a city which lies as a jewel among cities. The great asset of the town is a mountain, high and rocky, planted by the people with thousands of trees and shrubs, watered, set with bronze tablets to men who have loved it; and one there to Jacob Riis, who suggested the Easter sunrise service which yearly sends twenty thousand people to the summit for a chorus of trombones and music, and for prayer. The town has a great community hall, with an exquisite sunken garden and waterfall. Its Shanty-town has been demolished, and bears green and flowers and fountains to greet its guests—welcomed too on the motor road, by a vast curved bridge over the Santa Ana River and a shrine to St. Francis of Assisi, patron saint of its unique and magic Mission Inn. Dedicated to Fra Junipero Serra, this is the Inn, host to presidents, where art galleries and organ music, and a chapel set with a priceless shrine and vestments from a Mexican palace, are marvels even in a state of marvels—the Inn which caused Mr. Archer Huntington to say that an occupation with an historical significance and a religious background, could never die. And now the town moves towards a civic center, with municipal and federal buildings, churches, Y.W.C.A., and the Inn to be set about a stately court, lighted by the double cross and mission bells, knit by the unique pergola which covers with beauty miles of foot pavement of the streets. One man, Frank A. Miller, has stimulated it all—from developed mountain to civic center. And he says with a smile, "Moses said that godliness is profitable. I say that *Beauty pays*." The essence of modernity—"Beauty pays." Not the modernity of those sad library posters which proclaim, "Learn more, earn more." But the modernity which knows that beauty and order, in a business or in conduct, are the rule. That you recognize evil, as Baudelaire did in fiction, and as the Continental and English and American moderns do—as quite gorgeous local color, as a contribution, but that order and beauty and delicacy and

sensitiveness are the rule—and against such there is no law; and to such, the order of the stars and time and electricity and crystals and human fate witness abundantly. You look at a town creatively, or you look at it as a cart driver sees it, his profile, blank and oblivious, etched on the gold California sky.

I think of the cry of a farm woman: "The grain burned up, the clover didn't catch, the corn hung small in the ear." Hebraic that, Biblical in its bitter cry against her lot—Greek, rather, in her woe before fate. I think of the Winnebago Indian woman, who at fifty-odd had a wish to live in a house. She, who had never lived save in a wigwam, had a wish to raise her standard of living, to have a sewing-machine and curtains. Once one gave her a yellow rose and she threw back her head and said in the Winnebago tongue and with half-closed eyes: "Last night I dreamed of flowers." Material for fiction—but not more truly so than when this Indian woman asked a neighbor to telephone to a friend: "We don't want my son-in-law here no more. If you would please take him away." In any of these multiple incidents, it is not—and here lies the magic—it is not the incident itself which is the material for fiction; no one could make a *tale* of any of these. But it is that which lies within, and it is the complementing power to be 'mazed and bemused by them, to be thrown into a mood and then to induce a mood in others—in a current of emotion.

Never think that a tale has been told if it has not moved the beholder to that moment of emotion. That emotion—the catharsis—is the power to experience creatively that which is occurring. Perception is the tale's conception, action is its body, style is its garment, emotion is its soul. Emotion—as the power to experience creatively that which is happening to another. The sensibility to experience it as if it were happening to one's self.

How shall one deepen that sensibility which gives one this self-identification with others—for the purposes, shall we say, of fiction writing or of fiction reading?

A distinguished Japanese, a professor of Oriental literature at an American university, said recently that one of the exercises of students in Japan is sometimes to try to catch one another's meaning swiftly. To know at once what another is trying to say, either about some abstraction or about some sensitively perceived concrete fact. Not to be left staring at another to see if one *can* have caught that which he is trying to impart; but to catch it, like a flash! Also to experiment in saying those things which are truth, which delight or which wound, so that the other may recognize in himself why he is wounded or why delighted, and in himself can resolve both reactions to their due proportions. Exercises in heightening perception—why not? As one sharpen's one's musical ear or sensitizes one's piano or harp touch. Exercises in raising to the *n*th power one's sensibility, one's awareness. Awareness—there is the key. Matching the integrated jewels of experience, for fiction. Or, to change the figure, playing on all the moments of human relationship so that one may be aware of their constant orchestration—of the dissonance or the resonance of our momentary performances.

But *do* we thus sharpen our sensibilities, through the day? No—for all the way from the heightened delicacies of which the Japanese professor reminds us, to our simplest instances, as of that moment at breakfast when one of the family ventures a little joke, and looks about the table, bright-eyed and expectant, to one and another and another, hoping for an answering spark, and everyone goes right on eating oatmeal and no one smiles; and from school to business, when one utterly fails to sense another's situation or need or human fineness or weakness—all the way, we miss our opportunities to sharpen our tools or preparation for the writing, or for the reading, of fiction. We can multiply these remembered instances, simple or intricate, in which we have failed to exercise the fiction writer's craft, in which we have missed the content of a given moment.

Now if one is exercising any human relationship whatever, it is important to catch these implications. But if one is writing about human relationship, one *must* catch them—for otherwise one will have a flat, dead, two-dimensional fiction—a fiction with a form perhaps, perhaps even with a style, but a fiction lacking the beauty not only of its integrated ornamentation, but of its potential pattern. Lacking not only that which Edgar Saltus called, in architecture, “excesses of grace,” but lacking the full energy of *design*. Design, which is the secret synthesis of art—as of life.

Design, in fiction, is theme treated with heightened awareness. And design, as such, has no dependence and indeed no dealing with plot. Foreordained plot is that mechanism which twists to its own uses the lovely materials of design, often indeed giving to design one arm and one wing, one foot and one wheel, and instead of a spirit, a motor. Almost as much as to unawareness, it is such plot to which fiction has fallen victim, as if the sky were to be platted by visible boundaries. Fiction, winged by theme, powered by design, is often chained and tortured by plot.

Fiction at its best, then, is the fruit of perfect self-identification of the writer with his materials—with beings, with situations, with objects, with time and place. It is the application to life of a heightened perception which experiences people and all things as if the writer *were* those people, those things. For the fiction writer “There, but for the grace of God, go I,” is heightened to, “There go I”; is heightened to, “While there is a poorer class, I belong to it; while there is a criminal class, I am of it; while there is a soul in jail, I am not free.” It is the literal self-identification “with every fault, frailty and futility,” and also with every magnification and enhancement of the human being. It is to see within, it is to see through, it is to see all material as it were as intimate and as *warm* as one’s self. These walls, this separation of being which we set up and imagine, are specious. The appearance—and this is what the realist deals

with—is separative; but the consciousness, which the creative writer deals with, is one.

The creative writer must pass at will not only into the awareness of another being, but he must see objects and settings and scenes with a like intensity.

There was the thorn tree in May Sinclair’s “The Three Sisters.” The girl crossed the lawn and saw a thorn tree. There it was, abruptly alive—bursting with its whole inner power, doing its utmost, poignant, wrapped in light. Not a bush, but a burning bush. Not a cup, but the Grail. That is the process of Art.

The process of art was to be observed of late in a great factory. Attached to the floors of roaring machines were long sheds where cotton had been stored against the needs of the years. Looking down those dim stretching aisles of bales a visitor observed:

“This is like having money in the bank.”

But the great manufacturer saw the bales differently, saw them transfigured:

“Bent backs,” he said.

Bent backs of those who picked the cotton, of those who should spin it into yarn and weave it into fabric. That observation employed the process of creative art.

Consider the objects in a cabinet. To one observing there may be a vase, a figurine, a cruet, a lustre pitcher. But to the owner these leap with life, life of the dead lady who gave the vase to his mother in 1863; of the figurine, brought to him when he was eight; of the great artist who left the cruet with him until he should come west again; of the lustre pitcher, coming to him from the daughter of the friend of his mother’s girlhood. It is to uncover, like that, but in a flash and in emotion, the meaning of all persons, all things, that the artist strives. So that objects and events and situations, like beings, shall be transfigured into their real meaning . . . that at last they may find their common denominator—their unity.

In a recent address in Ohio, Superintendent Wirt, of the Gary school, put this simply and impressively in its application to social living. He said:

"There is a key—a factor which we all seek, which shall work upon living the true transformation of art. This key, this unknown factor, will shape life into new meaning, even as the artist's vision re-shapes and re-assesses and transfigures his material. The magic touch is possible to the life of men as it is possible to the material of art. Only the artist has found his key. We have not yet found ours."

This is more than Dreiser's need for "self-identification with every fault, frailty and futility." More even than a need for self-identification with great experience. It is the significance of the theory of *revelation* as applied to living. It is the true Design for Living—and Writing.

A psychologist defines the artist as "the seer who does pioneer work in perceptual understanding in finding the hidden possibilities in our perceptual world." And Bernard Shaw's definition runs: "The great artist is one who adds a fresh extension of sense to the heritage of the race."

What, then, shall be said of the fiction which finds its area of expression exclusively among the gangster, the parasite, the dissolute, and those who regard the patterns of most law and all convention merely as inhibitions? Those novels which confuse with a strong style, the frequent use of certain words which heretofore have not been considered permissible in fiction? Those novels which deal with the primitive still among us, richly aware of the rich reactions of the body, but yet unaware of its extensions, more exquisite.

But these novels need not trouble anybody. Indeed, these, as they disappear, and they will disappear, may leave major contributions to fiction—even as futurism and cubism, as they disappear, are leaving important contributions to pictorial art. For because of futurism and cubism and realism and naturalism we extend our materials—and any extension of materials often results in abuses, in over-emphasis, in crudity, in extremes. But once we are accustomed to

our new, and really valuable, mediums, we shall begin to treat these too with the process of art—to mellow, to subdue, to transpose, to integrate, to transfigure.

The one who writes at his best, like the one who lives at his best, must achieve this new attitude towards his materials and therefore towards life. He may write about gangsters and the dissolute, but in that case he will write of them as Tolstoi or Hugo or Balzac wrote—not as a smirking school boy might write.

Too often this social experience of achieving a new attitude towards life has been confined to religion. People have had a great experience of increased awareness of themselves, of their neighbor, and of God—and they have called it being saved. "Brother, are you saved?" That is, have *you* had this intense experience of entering into a sense of God, of life, of one another? Salvation, the West calls it. Illumination, the East says. As awareness, the creative writer knows it. As penetrating through appearance, as experiencing all aspects of life *anew*, as coming into a special grace of seeing, of understanding. The religious would say, "The practice of the presence of God." The creative writer would say, "The practice of the significance of life." (And how do these differ?) All the time, the artist has been having the revelation alone as he worked. *If he was an artist.* Otherwise he was a transferrer, as the old priests copied out, transcribed beautifully, illumined. Priests of the closet, realists. But the creative writer was the priest of the altar. No copyist he. For he must work a kind of transfiguration of human beings, of experiences and of objects, resolve them into their essential meaning, hidden until he touched it.

Art and science grope for the look within. And today we are thinking of art, and specifically of literature, as the power to interpret and to communicate values which, without due process of art, are incommunicable. That there are these values no one can doubt. We live on the edge of intelligence, and the powers and perceptions of tomorrow

are veiled from us by our own limitations. But art and science are two peep holes into man's future. There are others. Love is one. Conduct is one. The power to enter upon fuller living, which both bring, are in themselves keys to the more abundant life which all the world is seeking. Indeed love and conduct are the chief means of apprehending life which the majority of the race possesses or ever has possessed in the past. Art and science but carry farther the inner perception of life whose common language is love and conduct—love and conduct raised to their high powers. There are those who do not divine enough in the wonders of art and science and who refuse to enter upon their own heritage of love and conduct, who will not love highly and will not make conduct yield its treasure. But the universe of those who accept these wonders, who do love highly, do behave exquisitely, or do

touch reality in science or art—their universe is our universe, yielding wonders of which we have but dim glimpses. Love was man's first gesture towards wonder, conduct or religion was his second. Art is another means of apprehension, permitting man to peer farther within. This is the soul of design, that it is a way of extension of apprehension.

This, then, we may demand of fiction—that it present to us our material not scaled down to be less than it is or left as a flat record of fact, but that it transfigure its material, that it let us look through and beyond. We have need to sift and winnow that which comes from the presses as fiction and to demand of it that it tell the truth about the world of men, women and events—tell it “for all there is in it,” so that it shall hold for us the glimmer of some farther field than we yet know.