

The Shown and the Telling: Voice and Style in Fictive Works

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'Show, don't tell' is a piece of advice familiar to all students of creative writing. But what is the difference between showing and telling? Is it even possible to favour one above the other? Are there aspects of our lives that can't be shown, and can't be told? Are there aspects that must be shown, and must be told? And what are the wider implications of following this advice?

'Show, don't tell' is, in many cases, very good advice. I take no issue with Chekhov when he says, 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint on broken glass'. In his example the broken glass is, without a doubt, the better image. The glint of moonlight is more vivid, more striking, and more dramatic than the shining moon. We ask, *what broken glass? Broken by whom? Why? How? Where?* We do not ask, *What moon? Why is it shining? How? Where?* The moon always shines, but glass is only broken circumstantially. It is by inviting the reader to consider the circumstance that Chekhov creates the scene: the reader is positioned temporally, because the glass is already broken, spatially, because we are close enough to see it, and atmospherically, because a certain kind of perception is required to see the glint of something lovely in a broken thing, and even those who possess that quality of perception will only stop to remark it if they are in mood to do so.

But can we generalize from Chekhov's example? Can we reduce 'don't tell me the moon is shining' to simply, 'don't tell', and can we reduce 'show me the glint on broken glass' to simply 'show'? 'Showing' and 'telling' are not opposites in any sense, and drawing a clear distinction between them is often difficult: one might just as well say, for example, 'don't tell me the glass was broken, show me how it came to break'. This is a subtle distortion of the point that Chekhov makes, and one that I will discuss in detail a little later. For the moment, I will say only that Chekhov's advice does not suggest that there is any kind of antithesis between the shown and the told. He is simply pointing out that a specific visual description is better than an ambiguous or hackneyed one.

Visibility is not the only aim of descriptive language, of course, and description is by no means the only aim of fiction. It is easy to see why the glint on broken glass is better than the shining moon, but as soon as we leave the realm of visual description, any distinction that might be made between showing and telling immediately breaks down. A piece of fiction is not a poem, and even in the most imagistic fictive works, things have to happen, which means that time must pass, and things must change. A scene without action is not a scene: it is only a sketch. A scene is constructed from two basic elements: images, things that can be seen, and actions, things that happen.

Students of creative writing are taught that there are four types of action: decision, deed, discovery, and accident. A character in a story might plan to commit murder (decision); he might actually murder someone (deed); he might chance upon a murder (discovery); or he might kill someone without prearrangement (accident). That same character might feel too tired to make dinner (decision), order a pizza (deed), realise that he's out of money (discovery), and then, due to a mix-up with the orders, get the pizza for free (accident). All of these things are dramatic, because they're all actions: they're all things that *happen*, things that cause the world to change. A story about pizza might be much more engaging than a story about murder: this would depend, naturally, on how well the actions were described.

There is a difference between an action that is shown and an action that is told: with a shown action, the narration occurs in the drama of the moment, whereas with a told action, the narration recalls and summarises the event after the fact. We might reconfigure Chekhov's advice in this way: 'Don't tell me the glass was broken, show me the vase going through the window, show me the water seeping into the gravel, show me the yellow petals in the dirt.' An action, like an image, is intensified by specificity: specifics work to fix the event of the story more vividly in the *circumstance* of space and time. At the level of circumstance, which is to say, the level of the scene, specificity is a desirable quality: actions and images are, generally speaking, better shown than told.

Abstraction does not exist at the scenic level, and it is perhaps for this reason that abstraction is generally understood to have a negative connotation when it is used to describe fiction. A fictional event that is judged to be 'too abstract' has not only failed to *persuade* the reader, it has failed to *evoke*: it is void of meaning, invisible, inert. But a figure might be called abstract for two reasons: firstly, because an image was imprecisely rendered on the page, or secondly (and this second definition is often forgotten) because the writer deliberately sought to communicate a metaphysical idea. An abstraction is always metaphysical: it is not an image (because it is not visible), and it is not an action (because it cannot 'happen'). An abstraction can become scenic only if it is made manifest, either in a thing, or in a person's behaviour.

Turning an image into a symbol, or turning an action into a sign, is an act of alchemy on the writer's part, and the transformation happens in two parts. First of all the image in question must become metaphor, which is to say, the image, the thing that is scenic and present, is made specifically representative of something that is *not* scenic and *not* present. In some cases, the thing that is invoked is another image, absent from the scene at hand; in some cases, the thing that is invoked is an abstraction. 'The road snaked through the valley' is an example of the first type, whereas 'the road was her salvation' is an example of the second.

The second stage in this alchemical process is in a sense a transposition of the first. To turn an image into a metaphor, one connects the scenic with the not-scenic. To turn a metaphor into a symbol, one connects that connection back to the scene. I conceive of these three terms relatedly and somewhat circularly, rather like the hierarchies of power that exist in a game of paper-scissors-rock. An image, most simply, is something present and visible. A metaphor is the act of connecting something that is *not* present to something that *is* present: because it is an act, it is deliberate, and asserts itself. A symbol draws a connection between the act of metaphor and the image in question. A ring is symbolic of marriage because it connects a literal ring to the metaphorical connection of circularity with eternity and bondedness. But in certain contexts a ring is merely an image. A bathtub ring, for example, is not symbolic of marriage, and any story that tries to force this connection will feel just that—forced—because the necessary progression through the three stages of meaning has not been observed.

Let us return to Chekhov's dictum, 'Don't tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint on broken glass.' In this example both the moon and the broken glass are visible representations of visible things, which is to say, they are *images*. They inhabit and comprise the scenic world of a piece of fiction, meaning that they are visible not only to the reader but to the characters as well. The more specifically an image is rendered, the more visible the material reality of a story becomes. 'The broken glass' is less visible than 'the broken wine glass', which in turn is less visible than 'the broken wine glass with the twisted stem', which in turn is less visible than 'the broken wineglass with the twisted stem, split into five pieces, the smallest of which still showed a brownish trace of lipstick in the shape of Mrs. Jessop's lower lip.' The more specifically an object is described, the more securely it is fixed in the scene.

If the two nouns in Chekhov's example (the glass, and the moon) were to be used not as images but as metaphors, then the difference between the shown and the told becomes much harder to evaluate. Consider a scene in a novel in which a woman is compared to the moon, or a scene in which a day of a child's life is compared to a glint of moonlight on broken glass. It is no longer clear which image is the better one, because both of these

examples depend for their success upon the way in which their invocation is managed by the writer. Comparing a day to a glint of moonlight might easily come off as precious, contrived, unrealistic, or even unwarranted, depending on the context in which the metaphor appears. Conversely, comparing a woman to the moon might, under certain circumstances, strike the perfect note.

The properties of an image do not vanish when it the object is invoked as a metaphor: the glint on the glass is no less vivid, the shining moon is no less recognizable as something we have seen before. But we find, now, that their specificity is no longer circumstantial: they are no longer fixed in time and space. As metaphor, they must be *believed in*, and in order to be believed in, they must be made persuasive in some way. Persuasion and exposition are related arts, but urging a reader to accept that a glass has been broken takes very little effort at all—one can do it with a single adjective, ‘broken’—whereas urging a reader to accept that a woman resembles a satellite is rather less straightforward: such a project requires gaining the reader’s trust, sympathy, and curiosity. The writer’s first and most obvious problem is that the two objects are very unlike; because of this, the writer must look more closely at the properties of both, in order to draw pertinent parallels between them. The more sophisticated these parallels, the more persuasive the metaphor will be.

No distinction between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’ exists in the metaphorical realm, that invisible layer that hovers like an atmosphere above the scene at hand. To say ‘her marriage was a cage’, one establishes a connection between a specific marriage with the general idea of a cage: this assertion seems very much like telling. But equally, to say ‘her marriage was a cage’ is to put the reader in mind of an actual cage, which, because it is an image, can be visibly and vividly shown: one might say, ‘her marriage was a cage, fashioned with bars of wrought-iron, and suspended from the ceiling of the parlour; she gazed up at it frequently, and occasionally said to herself that she would take it down and dust it, one of these days.’

I have considered the moon and broken glass both as images and as metaphors; I wish now to go one step 'higher', as it were, and consider how the two objects might behave were they to be used as *symbols*. In using the term 'symbol' I do not refer to recognisable cultural symbols (the cross, the rose, the wedding ring) but to fictional images that have been invested with meaning *by the writer*, within the context of a single work.

In *Anna Karenina*, Vronsky's racehorse Frou-Frou is something that can be seen by Vronsky and Anna as well as by the reader. But the circumstances of the horse's purchase and eventual death are such that the horse becomes metaphorically representative of something that cannot be scenic: Vronsky's psychological state. In making this invocation—connecting the scenic horse and the non-scenic psychology—Tolstoy makes it possible for the reader to consider the act of invocation, the act of metaphor, and to question, in turn, what the intentions of that invocation might have been. In meditating upon the connection between Vronsky's psychology and his horse, the reader may well conclude that Frou-Frou is in many ways representative of Anna. Frou-Frou is not a scenic representation of Anna, who after all is scenically present herself, but a representation of the *idea* of Anna, something that cannot be scenically bounded, because it is at its heart abstract. The horse has become a symbol.

It is useful to note that while the first stage of this alchemical process is executed by the writer, the second stage is executed by the reader. In creating the scene of the officers' races, Tolstoy created a circumstance richly connotative of other scenes in the book, both in terms of action and in terms of image. Horse and rider run the race together, but they do not have an equal share of risk and danger, and they do not have an equal share of prestige. Vronsky struggles to keep the horse under control. The horse eventually dies, needlessly and tragically. The horse is the mode of transport that is fast being replaced by the railway. These qualities all connect the scene at the officers' races with actions and images elsewhere in the novel. But although this connective patterning was plainly deliberate on Tolstoy's part, it is the reader who must make these connections productive: it is the reader who endows the horse, finally, with the idea of Anna Karenina. If Tolstoy was a lesser writer—if the shadows and echoes of the book were fewer—then such an

investment would be impossible: the horse would be only a horse. Of course, it is possible to read *Anna Karenina* without ever wondering what Frou-Frou might ‘mean’, and some readers might argue that this reading experience is in fact the superior one. But the choice is the reader’s alone. If a symbol is to be successful, it must be able to be read as an image merely. An unsuccessful symbol is one where the writer attempts to insist upon the symbolism herself, or worse, to declare it.

How, then, can Chekhov’s moon and broken glass become symbols? We saw that, as metaphors, the two images depended upon context; as symbols, they depend upon the quality of the work at large. If moons and motherhood and cycles and the passage of time are thematically present, and if the work possesses qualities of intelligence and empathy that incline the reader to read generously, then—and only then—might these two images be read as symbols. A glint on broken glass is definitively successful as an image, and conditionally successful as a metaphor; as to whether or not it will achieve success as a symbol depends upon the writer gaining the reader’s trust to such a degree that the reader consents to regard the work as a whole in a more imaginative and empathetic way.

The action, the counterpart of the image, advances similarly through three stages of connotation. A gesture, the active equivalent of a metaphor, contributes in some small and partial way to our understanding of the not-visible, the motivation and intentions of a fictional character. A gesture may well be symbolic of the character’s psychology at large, and in this case, the action will become a *signal*, the active equivalent of a symbol. In Henry James’ novel *Washington Square* Morris Townsend, in the middle of a disagreement with Catherine Sloper, warns her not to make a scene. “‘A scene,’” she replies, “‘—do I make scenes?’ ‘All women do!’ said Morris, with a tone of large experience.” In six words all the lofty ignorance of Morris Townsend’s character is captured: we understand that his ‘tone of large experience’ does not suggest an actual large experience, and in this way we are able to see, at once, both our own impression of him and his own impression of himself. The action, his speech, has become a gesture, giving us a sense of Morris Townsend’s motivations, which, when the reader considers

its significance, becomes a signal, an index of Morris Townsend's psychology as a whole.

I have used this particular example because the characterological signal ('with a tone of large experience') is an adverbial phrase. The adverb is a part of speech that is much maligned in contemporary fiction, and this prejudice shares much in common with the advice 'show, don't tell'.

In my first semester at the Iowa Writers' Workshop a colleague said, in response to a story of mine, 'The adverb is the bastard child of the verb, and the adjective is the bastard of the noun.' A year later, still at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, I heard an esteemed professor say to a roomful of graduate students, 'A verb is a grade-A, grass-fed, twenty-dollar T-bone steak, and an adverb is cheap hamburger.' It is interesting to me that both conceptions conceive of the major parts of speech as nouns, as things that are shown, rather than as verbs, things that tell and are told; it is also interesting to me how emphatically and even defensively these views were expressed. One is tempted to ask, 'What has the adverb ever done to you?'—to which one might add, 'and how, and when, and with what intent?'

Not all adverbs are frowned upon: those that relate to time, place, and frequency are all acceptable, and no creative writing teacher is going to scold you for using the words 'yesterday', 'once', 'here', 'first', or 'later'. It is those adverbs that seek to capture some aspect of character that we find to be distasteful. When an adverb modifies a verb of speech, we are particularly enraged: it is here that the advice 'show, don't tell' is most often used. The phrase 'he said angrily' will be struck from an undergraduate manuscript and replaced with 'he snapped'; the phrase 'he said encouragingly' will be edited down to 'he said', because there is no single verb in English to describe an encouraging act of speech. But even in this instance—when the adverb is supplying something that cannot be supplied by the verb—we resist the adverb. Let the speech be encouraging of its own accord, we say. Let the character in question exhibit traits of encouragement in other ways. Just don't tell us how something was said. We cannot bear it.

Gertrude Stein, in her essay 'Poetry and Grammar', confesses a boredom with the stable, visible noun. She writes,

Verbs and adverbs are more interesting. In the first place they have one very nice quality and that is they can be so mistaken. It is wonderful the number of mistakes a verb can make and that is equally true of its adverb. Nouns and adjectives can never make mistakes can never be mistaken but verbs can be so endlessly, both as to what they do and how they agree or disagree with whatever they do.¹

This notion of 'agreement' or 'disagreement' is worth exploring. In the sentence '*He spoke condescendingly*', the adverb does not fully attach itself either to the action's agent or to its perceiver, the person condescended to. It may be the case that this man *did* speak in a condescending manner, but it may also be the case that the perceiver is too sensitive, or too quick to judge, or even mistaken. The adverb is unspecific: it oscillates between form and content, and needs powerful context (factual evidence or a strong preference for one point of view) to affix securely to either.

In this the adverb occupies a curious place between specificity and abstraction: if a point is made 'precisely', for example, the reader's attention is drawn both to the precise quality of the execution, and to the state of precision as a general category. Whereas an adjective serves to enhance the specificity of the noun, the adverb, much more mysteriously and unpredictable, serves to enhance the abstractedness of the verb. The 'broken' in Chekhov's 'broken glass', for example, does not invite us to consider the quality of brokenness, but the specific conditions under which the glass came to be broken; if the sentence were to be rendered, instead, 'glass lay brokenly about', the reader would experience a loss in visual and a gain in cerebral understanding, or, if you like, a decrease of voice and an increase of style.

It strikes me that when we encounter specificity in nouns (farthing, nebula, piston, mote) we tend to readily appreciate the beauty and fullness of the word. A particularised noun is

¹ *ibid.*, p 290

never an irritation; instead it shows a writer's affinity for her subject, proves the depth of her research, allows her to glory in the sonic gladness of the very rare. A particularised noun is, above all other things, convincing. It persuades the reader that the truth of the fictional world has been distilled to its most essential, its most authentic, its most true: we can agree that *cat* is truer than *pet*, and *Siamese* is truer still. A noun of great specificity is one that has been located circumstantially; it is scenic, just as Chekhov's glint of broken glass is scenic in a way that his shining moon is not.

Specificity in verbs, however, is nearly always irritating. Masticate, pontificate, equivocate: we consider Latinate compounds of this kind to be unwieldy and absurd. To say *defenestrate* when one might simply say *pushed out the window* is not only showing off, it is an obfuscation: the action itself, the motion of the verb, is not particularised in the reader's mind in any valuable way. *Defenestrate* (unlike *Siamese*) is not more vivid than its less particularised synonym, *pushed out the window*. It is not even more 'true'. Instead, the word comes off as a kind of self-congratulation, a smugness, a show. It calls attention to itself rather than to the action it describes. This smugness is not directed toward the verb's agent (*defenestrate* is not a particularly loaded term, implying a judgment upon the pusher or the pushed) but rather, directed toward the *reader*: if we do not know the word, or if we rarely come across it, then its causal usage in a piece of fiction makes us feel worthless and dim. (Of course, *defenestrate* is an extreme example, but think of all the variants on the verb *to say* that are invariably struck from undergraduate fiction manuscripts for the reason that they are considered to be heavy-handed, even tyrannical: *he groaned, he muttered, he growled, he hissed, he commented, he exclaimed, he remarked, he rejoined.*)

Abstraction, the converse of specificity, manifests itself in parts of speech in quite a different way. If a writer of prose wields an abstract noun as an idea, such as 'Love' with a capital L and 'Hope' with a capital H, then we are irritated. Rendering an abstraction in such a way is a reduction rather than an enlargement; it seems psychologically immature, and we resist it. Rendering these abstractions as adjectives is much better: we can understand 'loving' and 'hopeful' because the abstraction is only partially applied. *I love*

and *I hope* are not irritating at all: a verb changes its definition depending on its subject, and so the potential for multiplicity in the word itself is preserved. Finally, the adverbial: *lovingly* and *hopefully* are definitive, and not reductive in the slightest. *He looked at her lovingly* renders the action without doubt.

Here we have the exact inverse of what we found when we examined the potential for each part of speech to convey specificity. By this descending order of stability, we can perceive that the noun, the adjective, the verb, and the adverb are increasingly less able to support specific meaning; but increasingly more able to convey abstraction. It is the adverb's volatility that makes it capable of rendering abstraction in a specific way, just as it is the noun's fixity that makes it capable of rendering specificity in a way that is able to be abstracted.

Consider, now, two words that will hopefully be unfamiliar: the noun *leister* and the verb *to mercerise*. One does not feel implicated by not understanding what a 'leister' is, for it is a simple matter of one's worldly *experience* not having furnished one with such a term (for naming always begins as a necessity). If one draws a blank upon 'mercerise', however, one feels that it not a matter of inadequate experience but of inadequate *intelligence*. It is much more shameful to be ignorant of the meaning of a verb. Thus the very noun-ness and verb-ness of these parts of speech is written into their reception in the reader's mind: a noun attaches itself to the reader's *experiences*, the material fact of their lives, whereas the verb attaches itself to the *process* by which these experiences come to accumulate. Importantly, the author is considered to be a visible agent (active, present) in her wielding of the verb, but wholly invisible (bounded, fixed) in her wielding of the noun.

I have titled this essay not 'the showing and the telling', and not 'the shown and the told', but 'the shown and the telling', in order to draw a contrast between the story as noun, something that is created in what is shown, and the story as verb, something that is created in the telling. A successful unification of shown and telling is usually called 'voice' if the work in question favours the shown, and 'style' if it favours the telling.

Here we have another false dichotomy to unpack and examine. Voice and style, like the shown and the told, are typically conceived of as opposites, internal and external. By ‘voice’ we mean not the author’s voice but the central character’s, and yet by ‘style’ we mean *not* the central character’s, but the author’s. We use the phrase ‘find your voice’, as though voice is something instinctive and inherent; we do not say ‘find your style’. In describing style we tend to use metaphors of distance and detachment, even of abstraction: we have ‘high style’, for example, but not ‘high voice’. Of course this is not a matter of substance but of immaterial convention: each mode is as authentic and as artificial as the other.

James Wood does not agree with me on this point. In *How Fiction Works* Wood proposes that a close point of view describes a ‘gain in flexibility’² when compared to prose that exists at a greater remove from the character’s consciousness: he characterises free indirect discourse as ‘pure soliloquy’³ or ‘pure voice’⁴ and holds it up as the superior form. His use of ‘free’ and ‘pure’ here is endlessly troubling to me. ‘Close’ point of view is defined chiefly by how rigorously it is constrained by the immediate pressures of a story’s reality. Wood’s belief that a fictional consciousness achieves its *purest* state of flexibility and freedom when it attaches itself most strongly to the material facts of the world demonstrates his prejudice in favour of the shown over the telling. ‘Pure’ pretends to distill and ‘free’ pretends to enlarge but neither adjective, for me, is earnestly used: the ‘close’ point of view remains incapable of capturing all that is truly free or truly pure about thought and being, which is to say, abstractions, impressions, ambiguities, and ideas.

I suspect that the shift away from the style-driven narratives of the nineteenth century to the more voice-driven narratives of the twentieth has been affected by the changing attitudes to the individual in relation to the whole, or, if you like, the degree to which we believe that an individual can be perceived from the perspective of the whole. Certainly many of the biases in contemporary fiction show a bias for the visibility of the noun over

² Wood, James. *How Fiction Works*, p 9

³ *ibid.*, p 11

⁴ *ibid.*, p 16

the flexibility of the verb. Syntactical subordination, for example, is seen for the most part as an unnecessary complication, a kind of irritating ornament that serves only to aggrandize the author: as James Wood puts it, the author 'gets in the way'. We accept that particularised nouns are persuasive (they show the writer is an expert), but particularised verbs are annoying and show-offy (they show the writer thinks he/she is an expert). Even the notion of the 'unreliable narrator' (a term which has no applicability in works of 'high' style) presupposes the possibility of *reliable* narration, which draws our attention back to the scenic, visible world.

A common distinction between literary and genre fiction draws a similar contrast between the image and the action, the noun and the verb: in genre fiction, character exists purely to advance the plot, whereas in literary fiction, plot exists purely to elucidate character. But this is a definition drawn with the purpose of congratulating literary fiction and distinguishing it from what it perceives to be its lesser counterpart. In all great works of literature the concepts are not only freely interchanged; they are indistinguishable. Virginia Woolf, for example, is all voice and all style; both her characters and her images are occasions for the motion of her thought, which is relentlessly alchemical. Likewise Hemingway, in whose image the idol of the shown is most often erected, deals freely in symbols and in signals; indeed his works are composed of little else.

Camus gets to the heart of this double vision when he remarks that the act of describing 'marks both the death of an experience and its multiplication'⁵. Description is fundamentally a process of translation (of thought, of things, of being, into words) and for this reason a description is always 'abstracted' from the world it endeavours to reflect and create; at the same time, however, it is 'specific' in the sense that the description is itself a multiplication of the experience described.

My distinction between image, metaphor, and symbol, in the case of nouns, and action, gesture, and signal, in the case of verbs, owes a debt to a wonderful quote from Eudora Welty. She says: 'Greater than scene is situation. Greater than situation is implication.'

⁵ Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p 95

Greater than all of these is a single, entire human being, who will never be confined in any frame'. Welty's scene / situation / implication exist as concentric wheels; a story can be a scene and not a situation, if the writing is pedestrian; a story can be both scene and situation, if the writing is perceptive; and the story can be scene, situation, and implication, if the writing is both perceptive and intelligent, forcing the reader—that 'single, entire human being'—to consider the implications of the story in the real world, and to endow the images and actions of the story with symbolic weight.

A sophisticated metaphor—which is to say, a metaphor that is precise both in its specificity *and* in its abstraction—is concerned not with replicating the scene at hand but with expanding it. James Wood calls the metaphorical realm the 'rival reality' of a piece of fiction, but this definition is misleading: the metaphorical realm, the story's mood and atmosphere, adds to the scenic world by giving voice and shape to all that we *cannot* see and hear and touch. This enlargement happens for the writer as well: a good metaphor is an act of imaginative empathy, seeking to connect the animate with the inanimate, the visible with the invisible, the word with the world.

I am reminded of Stephen Dedalus, the protagonist of Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*. As a boy Dedalus 'wanted to meet in the real world the unsubstantial image which his soul so constantly beheld.' Later he outlines his theory of aesthetic philosophy in this way:

'Pity,' he announces, 'is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human suffering and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.' Here Dedalus is drawing a distinction between the 'scene' of human suffering, in which dimension actions and images reside, and the 'secret cause' of that suffering, the atmospheric dimension that lies above and around it, as a soul to a body. He goes on to say that:

the tragic emotion... is a face looking two ways, towards terror and towards pity, both of which are phases of it. You see I use the word *arrest*. I mean that the tragic emotion is static. Or rather the dramatic motion is. The feelings excited by the improper art are kinetic, desire or loathing. Desire urges us to possess, to go to something; loathing urges us to abandon, to go from something. These are kinetic emotions. The arts which excite them, pornographical or didactic, are therefore improper arts. The aesthetic emotion (I use the general term) is therefore static. The mind is arrested and raised above desire and loathing.

Stephen Dedalus observes that pity (human suffering) and terror (the secret cause) are phases that comprise the tragic emotion; the tragic emotion is unlike the earlier phases in the sense that it is static, lifted above circumstance, and therefore able to observe that circumstance with detachment. This is in a sense a refiguring of Welty's three phases, scene / situation / implication, which I have appropriated, drawing a distinction between the nouns used in fiction, which advance through the phases of image / metaphor / symbol, and verbs used in fiction, which advance through the phases of action / gesture / signal. In contemporary fiction the former triad is preferred. Evidently we are less comfortable with the idea that our actions betray some kind of truth about our characters than we are with the idea that the things we touch betray some kind of truth about themselves. This arrogance has too many possible causes to outline here; I believe it owes equally to Freud's legacy and to the current contempt in which we hold that legacy, but that is an argument for another time.

The contemporary novel is set apart from the novels of all other ages for the ubiquity of its secular individualism—which, being unconcerned with the collective or metaphysical properties of human nature, strongly favours the scenic world. 'Show, don't tell' is very good advice if one is dealing in actions and images merely—just as 'write what you know' is very good advice if the writer's life experience is scenic and individually defined. These maxims betray a worldview that is characterized by an indifference to abstraction, and by a scorn for all human attempts to render and understand mystery and the absolute.

The miracle of being is something that is at its heart unknowable; and yet being is not an abstraction, but a manifestation. Our bodies are the symbols of our souls, and our lives the signals of our souls: great writers understand this, and so traffic in symbols and signals alone. These are the alchemical writers, the writers who are all voice, all style, all showing, all telling: these are also the most empathetic writers, the most imaginative writers, the most connotative writers. For, as Welty gently cautions us, the abstraction of situation from scene, and implication from situation, must be made in service of an understanding of human nature. The soul is never circumstantial, never able to be fixed in space and time, able to be invoked only by metaphor, allegory, and fancy—and yet the soul is bodily; it is in all of us. Truth, says Adrienne Rich, is an increasing complexity.

‘Truth is an increasing complexity’: this is a piece of wisdom that the dictum ‘show, don’t tell’ simply cannot contend with. In preferring the scenic to the metaphorical, the relativistic truths of circumstance are preferred to the mysterious and unknowable truths of philosophy. The miraculous, in contemporary fiction, is defeated by the dogged totality of the ‘real’, by which I mean a materiality that is irreligious, unmischievous, incurious, *of itself*, and—worst of all—wholly *recognizable*, neither stranger nor more beautiful than the world we already inhabit. But works of this kind exercise neither the full potential of the fictive act nor the full potential of the human spirit. A work of fiction comprises not only the shown and the told, but the showing and the telling. There are truths that cannot be seen, except by metaphor, and intentions that cannot be dramatized, except by gesture. Showing the glint of moonlight on broken glass is good, but Chekhov’s advice only gives us half the picture: there must be somebody telling us why the moonlight matters, as well.