

I Second That Emotion

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A few years ago, I attended a literary gathering and heard four poets and memoirists read from their work. They were all accomplished writers, varied enough in their approaches to evoke laughter, sighs, nods of acknowledgment, a collective gasp at one point, and, toward the end of the evening, some tears as well. Tears are not uncommon at readings, of course—I have cried at several—but in this case the tears came not from audience members but rather from one of the readers, who had warned us that she might “choke up” because of the emotional content of the autobiographical piece she was about to read. Her introduction, followed by a tearful presentation, suggested either that the work was too new to share publicly or that she had planned her reaction and was intentionally manipulating us. As she spoke, I sensed listeners growing more and more uncomfortable, as I was. Some leaned back into their chairs, some crossed their arms. The more emotional the reader’s performance became, the less effect it seemed to have, an unfortunate outcome, especially given that the work was potentially moving in and of itself. But it was as if the writer did not trust the work, or perhaps did not trust us to do our job as listeners: to bring our own emotional response to the work.

As I listened, I kept thinking of Chekhov’s advice to a writer who had sent him a story: If you “want to touch the reader’s heart, try to be colder . . . As it is, your heroes weep and you sigh.” John Gardner has a similar take on this issue in *The Art of Fiction*. “In great fiction,” Gardner writes, “we are moved by what happens, not by the whimpering or bawling of the writer’s presentation of what happens. That is, in great fiction, we are moved by characters and events, not by the emotion of the person who happens to be telling the story.” Certainly Chekhov and Gardner are not suggesting that the writer herself be unmoved by events and characters, but rather that she allow the reader the space to complete the transaction her words set into motion. For isn’t that what readers of literary fiction, poetry, and nonfiction want the chance to do? To, in the words of that Smokey Robinson hit, “second that emotion”?

If so, how does a writer, in particular a memoirist or other nonfiction writer, move the reader? For if the reader is the one being moved, the writer is the

mover, the one who sets something into motion, who provokes, stirs, excites to action or feeling. One way to stir the reader is the technique Chekhov and Gardner suggest—for the writer to withhold her own emotional reaction to the events and characters she describes, allowing these elements to speak for themselves. Thus, another way in which writers can move readers is by setting characters and events into motion on the page. When we as writers *make a move*, we are in effect *making a motion*. A motion doesn't have to be a grand gesture. Often, all we need do is nudge the reader in a particular direction, and then get out of the way.

This nudging is one of the literary moves George Orwell achieves with mastery in “A Hanging,” a brief essay about an event Orwell witnessed while serving in Burma with the British Imperial Police. The essay, which focuses on the execution of a Hindu prisoner, proceeds mostly by narration and description, allowing the reader—at least this reader—to complete the emotional transaction. I am moved by several details—the prisoner’s “thick, sprouting moustache, absurdly too big for his body, rather like the moustache of a comic man on the films,” and also by the dog who appears out of nowhere, jumps up on the prisoner, and attempts to lick his face. But it is this subsequent description that always stops me in my tracks:

It was about forty yards to the gallows. I watched the bare brown back of the prisoner marching in front of me. He walked clumsily with his bound arms, but quite steadily, with that bobbing gait of the Indian who never straightens his knees. At each step his muscles slid neatly into place, the lock of hair on his scalp danced up and down, his feet printed themselves on the wet gravel. And once, in spite of the men who gripped him by each shoulder, he stepped slightly aside to avoid a puddle on the path.

Here, in one brief paragraph, is everything I need in order to sympathize with the character and his plight. Even seen from the back, his body reveals the singular humanity it houses—his bobbing, childlike gait, the lock of dancing hair, his bare feet—every detail leading to that excruciatingly graceful gesture of stepping around the puddle.

Reading Orwell's description, I am moved, by which I mean I shift positions, edging closer and closer to the character through each carefully described detail. I experience a similar reaction whenever I read Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, his memoir of the ten months he spent in the death camp. Before I read the book, I expected that the horror of the events themselves might arouse my sympathy for the prisoners, including the narrator. But I was surprised at which segments most affected me, segments which, upon subsequent rereadings, still affect me. The first occurs in the chapter “October 1944,” which centers on the process during which those referred to by fellow prisoners as “*Muselmann*”

("the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection") are chosen for extinction. Levi describes the prisoners' actions once they realize that selection is imminent:

All those able to find a way out, try to take it; but they are the minority because it is very difficult to escape from a selection. The Germans apply themselves to these things with great skill and diligence.

Whoever is unable to prepare for it materially, seeks defence elsewhere. In the latrines, in the washroom, we show each other our chests, our buttocks, our thighs, and our comrades reassure us: "You are all right, it will certainly not be your turn this time, . . . *du bist kein Muselmann* . . . more probably mine . . . and they undo their braces in turn and pull up their shirts."

This single gesture—of the men pulling up their shirts to show a comrade that he will be spared, even when they know that he probably won't—carries more emotional weight than dozens of other pages of Levi's stirring account. As Flannery O'Connor once noted, a writer can't create "emotion with emotion, or thought with thought. He has to provide all these things with a body." And though Levi includes plenty of passages of reflection, abstract idea, and even explanation throughout *Survival in Auschwitz*, in the most moving passages, he embodies his thoughts by providing physical description and scenic detail.

Another segment of Levi's memoir that engages me emotionally is the description, in the chapter titled "A Good Day," of the surroundings of the Buna rubber factory where thousands of prisoners were forced to labor. On this particular morning, as the men approach their destination, passing the mountains and "the steeple of Auschwitz (a steeple here!)" and Birkenau, where "our women finished" and where "soon we too will finish," Levi and the other men notice, for the first time, "that on both sides of the road, even here, the meadows are green; because, without a sun, a meadow is as if it were not green." As the passage continues, Levi provides historical context for the factory and its tower, raging against "the insane dream of grandeur of our masters, their contempt for God and men, for us men." Then, suddenly, in the next few paragraphs, everything changes for the narrator, and, thus, for his readers as well:

But today the eternal puddles, on which a rainbow veil of petroleum trembles, reflect the serene sun. Pipes, rails, boilers, still cold from the freezing of the night, are dripping with dew. The earth dug up from the pits, the piles of coal, the blocks of concrete, exhale in light vapours and humidity of the winter.

Today is a good day. We look around like blind people who have recovered their sight, and we look at each other. We have never seen each other in sunlight: someone smiles. If it was not for the hunger!

Rainbow. Serene. Sun. Light vapours. Good day. Sunlight. Smiles. Hardly

the words and phrases one expects to encounter in a memoir about Auschwitz. But, as Levi goes on to suggest, the mysteries of the human heart are difficult to solve. “For human nature is such that grief and pain—even simultaneously suffered—do not add up as a whole in our consciousness, but hide, the lesser behind the greater, according to a definite law of perspective.” Even hope, which most of us regard as a positive emotion, contains both light and dark elements. Levi names it “unavoidable hope,” a feeling that, according to him, was one of the most painful emotions of the whole experience—“this last senseless crazy residue of unavoidable hope.”

These passages from Levi suggest that another way to move our readers, in addition to withholding description of our emotional reaction and embodying emotion through scenic enactment and physical detail, is to allow the whole, complicated field of emotion into our work. Give the light and dark equal space in which to dwell. Accept the “law of perspective.” Perhaps that is what Chekhov was getting at in the advice I mentioned earlier, which I now quote in more detail: “When you want to touch the reader’s heart, try to be colder. It gives their grief as it were, a background, against which it stands out in greater relief.”

Cold, hot. Dark, light. Grief, joy. Hope, despair. Do these so-called opposites actually run on separate tracks? Not to writers who allow the whole field of emotion into their work. Writers who, if we borrow from Keats’s definition of “negative capability,” are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.” I close with excerpts from two nonfiction texts that engage me on a deeply emotional level—*ambush me* might come closer to the truth of the experience—because of the writers’ ability to dwell in this realm of mystery and doubt.

First, an excerpt from Chinese writer Lu Hsun’s “This Too Is Life,” an essay in which he describes an earlier illness. At one point in the essay, he recalls waking in the night and calling out for his wife:

“Give me some water. And put the light on so that I can have a look round.”

“What for?” She sounded rather alarmed, doubtless thinking I was raving.

“Because I want to live. Understand that? This, too, is life. I want to take a look round.”

“Oh . . .” She got up and gave me some tea, hesitated a little and quietly lay down again without putting on the light.

I knew she had not understood.

And, finally, an excerpt from Harold Brodkey’s posthumously published memoir *This Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death*, in which he recounts, among other life events, the final two years before his death from AIDS. In the last autumn, Brodkey writes about waking in “a strange form of fright—geometric,

limited, final,” yet two pages later, in a section that includes a reference to his wife, he makes this surprising move:

And yet I am happy—even overexcited, quite foolish. But *happy*. It seems very strange to think one could enjoy one’s death. Ellen has begun to laugh at this phenomenon. We know we are absurd, but what can we do. We are happy.

“This, too, is life.” “We are happy.” Fright, joy, life, death, dark, light, all dwelling simultaneously in the same room? Is this possible? For these writers, yes. And why not? As it turns out, these writers’ willingness to trust their own material and their readers, to allow events and characters to speak for themselves, and to write their way into their own particularity, their inimitable oddness, results in work that touches on the universal, reminding us of the complexities of all human experience. By bearing witness to the whole truth of their emotion, however contradictory and confusing and seemingly illogical that emotion might seem at first glance, these writers have made the first important motion. It is our privilege as readers to second it.