

On 'Writing what you know'

(For LitNet)

Henry James wrote, in 'The Art of Fiction', (1884):

I remember an English novelist, a woman of genius, telling me that she was much commended for the impression she had managed to give in one of her tales of the nature and way of life of the French Protestant youth. She had been asked where she learned so much about this recondite being, she had been congratulated on her peculiar opportunities. These opportunities consisted in her having once, in Paris, as she ascended a staircase, passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur*, some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. ... The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life in general so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it – this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience, and they occur in country and in town and in the most differing stages of education. ... Therefore, if I should certainly say to a novice, 'Write from experience, and experience only', I should feel that this was rather a tantalizing monition were I not careful immediately to add, 'Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!'

This elegantly weighty pronouncement still seems relevant today to the question of *writing what you know*. James's point is that 'knowing' (he calls it 'experience') can take many forms, not all of them direct; that the knowing that relies on the 'the power to guess the unseen from the seen' may be as valuable to the novelist as experience of a more immediate kind.

That power, 'the condition of feeling life in general ...completely', has much in common with the *empathy* that both Thia Beautement and Mike Rands cite as the novelist's way of spanning the gap between nation and nation, between race and race, between

person and person – and between species and species, JM Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello would add, though she calls it ‘imaginative sympathy’.

It follows from this that yes, there is no reason why a novelist should not write about countries other than his or her own, any more than about historical periods other than his or her own. I have written four novels, two of them set in more-or-less contemporary South Africa, two of them set in early twentieth-century England. I probably ‘know’ the two settings in different ways, the one through direct experience, the other through reading, but I wouldn’t say that I know the one *better* than the other. There is even a sense in which I may feel, whether rightly or not, that I know the foreign country better than my own: my own country is in flux, puzzling, not-yet-resolved; England of 1910, though complex, has been chronicled and documented, inscribed and described. Indeed, the challenge in historical writing is to bring back to a semblance of unruly life the packaged world of the past, whereas the challenge in writing about your own time and place is to find pattern and structure in the swirling chaos of contemporary events.

But it is probably a mistake to talk about these novels as if they formed two disparate groups, one South African, one English. Even my most ‘South African’ novel is informed on every page, in every sentence, in every comma and every semi-colon (*especially* every semi-colon!) by those classic English novels that I, like Janet van Eeden, cut my teeth on; the rhythms and cadences, the organic structure of those novels stealthily inhabit my writing, as potently as their overt thematic concerns. And this is surely true of the majority of writers writing in English: willy-nilly he or she appropriates, even while transforming it, the rich sediment of a form that predates his or her contribution by some centuries. To put it differently, the fact that a book is a novel may be more pertinent than its country of origin.

Jorge Luis Borges has argued that ‘the idea that a literature must define itself in terms of its national traits is a relatively new concept; also new and arbitrary is the idea that writers must seek themes from their own countries.’ I suppose the historical accuracy of this depends on what we take *relatively new* to mean, but, as coming from Borges, it does claim a certain authority. He goes on to say, even more airily and contentiously: ‘What is our Argentine tradition? I believe we can answer this question easily and that there is no problem here. I believe our tradition is all of Western culture ...’

Extreme as this may seem, it's a salutary reminder that in terms of its formal characteristics and indeed many of its thematic concerns, the novel has a certain history which forms an unacknowledged component of even the most 'African' of novels.

There is thus something arbitrary in the form of apartheid still prevalent in many bookshops: separate (but unequal) shelves for 'Fiction' and for 'African fiction'. (Thus my novel about the English suffragettes ends up in the 'African' shelf, where readers looking for African fiction will not buy it and readers looking for non-African fiction will not find it.) The assumption seems to be that readers are so set in their patterns that they want to read only either non-African or African fiction and don't want to be distracted in their single-minded pursuit of their own particular enthusiasm. I don't think this is true; but if it is, it is certainly a tendency to be discouraged rather than catered to. Readers, like writers, are surely enriched by an awareness of the contemporary African novel as forming part of and contributing to a tradition older and larger than itself. The novelist, by being 'one of the people on whom nothing is lost', takes his or her place in this tradition while extending it in new directions.