

“Countering the Roll.” *What Makes Good Writing Good*. William Coles and James Vopat, eds. (Lexington: D.C. Heath and Co., 1985) 141-148.

From *What Makes Good Writing Good*

Countering the Roll

[Ed: Student essay follows on p. 9]

No narrative is a complete record of events. But good narrative gives the illusion of completeness. A narrator's impulse to completeness is a measure of how much of the narrative must be told to satisfy a listener or reader. Louise's narrative, imperfect though it is, outwits our need for completeness. Furthermore, it relieves our need for another kind of wholeness: the unflawed surface of Standard Written English. The fragmented surface of her prose (profuse misspellings, incoherent sentences, merged structures, redundancies, failure to punctuate, mistaken verb forms, inconsistent pronoun reference, inconsistent verb tense) takes little away from her success in conveying that illusion of completeness. Louise's control of narrative structure *counters the roll* of opposing forces--in this case the sweep of substandard grammatical forms and the passion to tell everything.

Rodin, asked once how he would make an elephant, replied, “You start with a large block of marble and then you remove everything that is not an elephant.” You may have discovered, as Louise has, that as a writer you exceed Rodin's method. The writer removes not only what is not elephant but also as many features that *are* elephant which a reader can willingly surrender without threatening the illusion of completeness. Louise's intuition about structure, reinforced by classroom work that focuses on wholeness, means that she understands what to include and what to omit. She understands that her piece of writing is best served by permitting certain

lacunae to exist in the telling. Good narrative begins instantly by intimations of wholeness, often as early as the first clause, to render the reader incomplete; finally, methodically, despite and often because of its omissions, it renders the reader complete.

In part, Louise owes her success to the tension of her two-part structure: a dream of love (unknown/unreal/incomplete) and the fulfillment of that dream (known/real/complete). Her intuition and skill prepare the reader for the power of the brief final paragraph. All of the previous text records the failed romantic expectations of her narrator, "I." The waves of emotion which "I" withholds from herself throughout the account of her search finally belong to the reader--upon the swift realization of love in the birth of the child. We readers, having ourselves been completed, complete the text.

Like alert readers of any strong text, we are aware of an enveloping wholeness from the outset. For one thing, the title tells us that this discourse will reveal the nature of this writer's "first love." Immediately, Louise's opening sentence introduces us to the governing tension: the outer life of "I" (playing with dolls) and the inner life ("thoughts of love danced through my mind"). Icons of Sir Lancelot, Robin Hood, and "fair maiden" quickly are unmasked by her anxiety about life's unwholesomeness, against which her dreams are played: "I" wonders about her unknown beloved, "Would his morals run to the underground life of crookedness...?" And later in that first paragraph, a sweeping introduction to her confusion, she adopts the less interesting language of penny-dreadful novels and TV soaps: "I am but a [*sic*] honest, hard-working girl wanting to feel special..." "I keep changing within as my body changes on the outside."

By means of a deft transition at the end of paragraph one, "...I find myself confused even more so as my dreams change," she moves forward in time with the sureness of a Nadine

Gordimer, unwilling to waste the reader's time in getting from here to there. "The familer [*sic*] young men in my dreams are suddenly becoming older...." Since the inner life of a romantic dominates the outer life, "I" confirms her romantic nature and uses her dream life as if it were a lens left in the heat of passion to intensify her real-life longings. "My waking hours I suddenly find the same things happening. If fiction is about "people at the end of their rope," as Alfred Kazin has said it is. then Louise is making use of the techniques of fiction. For we detect a certain fraying of the nerves. Put another way, "I" has become a patient who will either recover or die.

Louise's " I " enters an interregnum--between child and mother--a period of a confused and unfulfilled sexuality. That same sentence about her waking hours flows on, picking up strength along a riverbed of unrecognizable feelings: "My waking hours I suddenly find the same things happening and I being young and naive cannot grasp what it is that I have that men are now finding attractive." "I" is in possession of something, a magnet that attracts pleasure and love, but she deprives herself of its usefulness by her failure to recognize "what it is that I have." Louise inexpertly weakens that plain, beautiful statement by expressing in a prolix adolescent imagery the reluctance of "I" to grow up: "running wild in the fields of the mountains" and drifting "in the colors of the butterflys [*sic*] as they dance in mid-air." Although these excesses lack adroitness, she knows the right moment- for adolescent dreaminess. Many beginning writers have exquisite timing, but need skill to express with elegance what they have intuited.

She senses that her "butterfly" writing demands concreteness. She appropriately counterweighs her mid-air writing with the fairy-tale grimness of "I" watching from her "tower of concrete," a Rapunzel with hair still up, the tower reifying a certain morbidity. She experiences guilt at being unwilling at sixteen or seventeen to be "strapped down," an interesting

word choice that merges *strapped* and *trapped*--the rigid norms of her life embedding the trap of domestic duty. She is also guilty of “not wanting to follow the norm.” For those of us readers whose “norm” at sixteen or seventeen has been to graduate from high school, enter college, discover Mozart or Manet, confront sex move through outgrown friendships--“I” adroitly leaves us to infer a context for the “norm” she rejects.

At this point of inference, Louise is preparing us for a change of tone. Towards the end of paragraph one, she has carelessly slipped into a present tense, but now returns to her governing past, abandoning the generalized, dreaminess of adolescence that dominated the first paragraph, for a program of action in the past tense. “I” hints at a more perplexing anxiety in the paragraph about “older men” and their vaguely unwholesome sexual overtures. Notice that the paragraph begins with an emphatic rearrangement of normal syntax, “Off I went scouting,” a business-like if ironic response to what the “norm” finally requires her to do: find a husband. But older men who pamper and adore her are unable to bring her to terms with what is expected of her. “I” continues to want “only to be involved in my mind.” She continues to reserve sexual feelings for that dark pair of sexually alive shadows whom she formally refers to as “mother and father,” finally allowing her feelings to devolve solely on “father”: “this I would never get from Dad.”

Enabling Louise to express order amid tension the paragraph becomes a powerful convention which over-reaches and unifies her sentences. In other writings submitted during the semester, as in earlier drafts of this piece, I discover that her unit of expression is the paragraph. This wess interesting to me since I habe long been persuaded by the writing of both basic and practiced students that the paragraph as a convention evades the composing mind; though it engages the revising mind. Louise’s early drafts exhibit paragraphs that begin with a capital

letter and flow forward to a period, all the discourse along the way punctuated by commas placed where periods ought to be. In those unrevised writings, her period is a super-period. Although in the draft published here she rarely inserts commas to set off elements (sentences) of the paragraph, her paragraphs retain their first draft, period-free vigor and unity. (I am always on the alert that students not drain the vigor from their writing as they revise language and punctuation.)

In fact, notice the stabilizing force of the one-sentence paragraph, “The push was on to get me out of the nest.” Having restated her “I” as a more passive “me,” Louise does what William Labov says all naturally gifted storytellers do: she interrupts her narrative to admit the presence of an outside force.¹ I recall Labov's dramatic narration of an event in the words of a man involved in a barroom brawl over a woman; the narrator suddenly finds himself on the floor, a stranger peering down at him and saying, “Don’t move. Your throat’s been cut.” For Louise and the reader, “The push was on...” is equivalent to that outside voice suddenly stabilizing the narrative with “Don’t move. Your throat’s been cut.”

Throughout her narrative Louise uses the paragraph to provide movement in time. Despite errors in tense, she clearly sets off the essentials of her narrative from each other in sequence and permits the lacunae of her narrative to make their effect. The penultimate paragraph carefully lists the qualifications of her chosen bridegroom, which she erroneously believes will excite romantic feelings. Within this paragraph she concentrates her faith that he could be “trusted with my tender feelings that I held back for so long.” Her trust ends badly, inevitably it seems to us, although I suggest you think about how little we needed to know of the conditions which actually yield this inevitability. We are aware of the sexuality of a young woman and a young man but the paragraph indulges in no descriptions of personal disappointment, no account of sexual frustration, no explicit failure. Failure is limited: “I” still

“did not tingle when he touched me.” But, she says “our need... took preference [*sic*],” and Louise drives her text, past this interestingly evasive and elliptical acknowledgment of sexuality, precipitously towards the expected child.

Finally the obstetrical paragraph. I call it this not to be humorous but to introduce the presence of an efficient cause delivering “I” of her dilemma. The daringly economical paragraph has two sentences. The first holds the second in consequence. First, it in childbirth, witnesses the infant's beautiful helplessness. Then she falls in love “completely” for the first time. At this moment the reader suddenly sees that the narrator’s earlier search for love has been distinctly passive. Although “I” “flirted and pretended,” these disingenuous actions required only superficial participation. We note that the “all American guy,” the “best prospect” whet was “tall, good looking ; poliet [*sic*], well spoken, protective, quiet and hard working” put no demands on her. In the final paragraph she repudiates her own passivity. Love shifts from a custodial duty to an active power: she reverses herself, becoming that classic dynamo of one-way love: a mother.

In all writing—even that of a writer as untutored as Louise--conscious literary triumphs are inseparable from unconscious ones. In the seamless product, effort is indistinguishable from luck. In my classroom; such successes often single out the work of a strong beginner from other beginners. In this example, an intuitive sense of structure (reinforced by classroom attention to structure) holds Louise’s remembered adolescent worlds firmly in place. It permits her provisional readers (you and I, teacher and classmates) to bypass the inconveniences of illiteracy for the literacy of what Kant has called the “free lawfulness” of creation.² Just as Hawthorne in his story “Wakefield” omits the scene in which Wakefield returns to his wife after disappearing from her for seventeen years and Melville in “Billy Budd” does not permit us to accompany

Captain Vere into Billy's chamber after the trial, so Louise astutely pulls the shade on her unhappy marriage.

I am not suggesting that Louise's writing is ready for a wider audience. I am suggesting that students serious about learning to write--as Louise appears to be--are entitled to be strengthened by their strengths as they confront the continuing labors of learning to write the standard language. I have done what I could to make my student Louise aware of her uncommon ability to hold the reader by means of narrative structure. I argue that one of the standards of literacy is the power to possess the reader.

Study Questions

1. If you had been asked to select a piece of good student writing, would you have selected Louise Kramer's? Why? Why do you suppose Sandra Schor has selected it?
2. Sandra Schor says that in the final paragraph of Louise's essay Louise "repudiates her own passivity." Do you agree that Louise has been passive? In what ways has she been active? Does her narrative reflect both of these conditions? Justify your answers by considering the whole narrative.
3. Discuss a movie in which certain events are presented leisurely and in great detail while one seemingly important event is referred to but never shown. Did the film seem to end abruptly? Were you satisfied? Did you crave the unshown scene? Why do you suppose the director skipped it? Why does Louise omit details about her failing marriage?

¹ I heard Labov make this point during a lecture on narrative at Queens College. March 24, 1983.

² Quoted by Susanne K. Langer in *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*, vol. I, p. 218.

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My First Love

As I played with my dolls, thoughts of love danced through my mind. I laid in my bed dreaming of the male would be my Sir Lancelot or my Robin Hood and I would be his fair maiden, the dreams that I were dreaming had me wondering what kind of man I would fall in love with. Would he be a rich intelligent person sensitive enough to understand my feelings or would he be a poor honest, hard working man too tired to even think I had any needs other than eating and sleeping. Would his morals run to the underground life of crookedness or would his morals be of higher standards. I realized as the time passed that there are many different kinds of love and this confused me more than I was. Yet the dreams never stopped the searching and questioning of, "Would I ever be in love, except with love?". The answer I longed for seemed to be taking forever. God! I prayed let him come before I shrivel up and die a lonely old maid. For I am but a honest hard-working girl, wanting to feel special and beautiful and fully fulfilled as a woman. I feel my body budding and blooming in area's I did not think would bloom. Each day I awake to a new discovery about myself. I keep changing within as my body changes on the outside. Gee! God? does this happen to all young people longing to find love. I find myself confused even more so as my dreams change.

The familiar young men in my dreams are suddenly becoming older, more mature and seem to be treating me in a different way. My waking hours I suddenly find the same things happening and I being young and naive cannot grasp what it is that I have that men are now

finding attractive. I cling to Dad for protection and Mom for reassurance that I'm still a little girl in many ways. My older brother introduces me to men that are his friends and yet that yearning keeps returning. All I dream of is how I would like to run wild in the fields of the mountains I have explored as a child. I lazily drift in the colors of the butterflys as they dance in mid-air, as I watch from my tower of concrete. I wander in my dreams from men to men and hesitate to ask the question that seems the most important one to me, "Will I be loved gently and kindly that by my early twenties I still wanted only to be involved in my mind.

My parents by this time felt it was time I had a more meaningful relationship to where I would eventually have a marriage. I had other plans that seemed more important to daring young romantic such as myself and I couldn't see myself so young strapped down to a family as some of my friends were at the ages of sixteen and seventeen. My world consisted of worlds I haven't even seen except in the books I have read and movies I have seen. I felt guilty not wanting to follow the norm at the time and this was to get married. Family and friends all agreed marriage would be the answer to my searching questions to the yearning.

Off I went scouting. The young men I liked did not stir any feelings except the feeling of liking. Older men seemed to be attracted to me but I wasn't sure about them either, yet they pampered and adored me. Being naive I could not accept these feelings for it was reserved in my mind only for mother, from father and this I would never get from Dad.

The push was on to get me out of the nest.

Deciding the answer to my question was just to find that "All American Guy" with a promising future. I flirted and pretended until I found someone whom I thought would fit into all my ideals about a man including my dreams. He was tall, good looking, polite, well spoken, protective, quiet and hard working, he seemed to me the best prospect. We married almost

immediately after his return from duty in the service I felt this charming young man could be trusted with my tender feelings that I held back for so long though when he kissed me I did not hear the wedding bells nor tingle when he touched me. The romantic description that I would hear so much about still had not happen to me. Our need for one another in many ways took preference. We married at twenty-one and by twenty-two were about to be parents.

The day came when I gave birth to our daughter, tiny, helpless and so very beautiful to me. It was then that I fell in love so completely for the first time.