

Here at Craigville this evening (18Aug 86), at the Annual Cape Cod Writer's Conference that always meets here, a NYC bookeditor will be lecturing on "What Editors Are Looking For." I may go to greet the folks but without expectation of learning much: I know what editors are looking for. Even more, I know what they're NOT looking for: they're allergic to writing that so disturbs as to turn off your average reader, meaning folks who might otherwise buy the book or mag. While some editors have taken a chance on me (and not lost), most that've had my MSS have chosen not to: just too risky. Which goes a long way toward explaining the Evolution of the Elliott Thinksheet....One turnoff in my style is the telling of tales so slanted as to press their slantedness into the consciousness of your average reader, who then reacts "That's not so!" or "That's not fair!" and quits reading. Adpersons (formerly, "admen") and authors-&-editors intent on \$ have this in common: Keep the looker looking & the reader reading. Not the kind of reader I'm looking for....So, from tonight's lecture, I slide into this one "difficult" aspect of my style as an author: notethis thinksheet's title....Sidenote: This explanation goes a long way toward answering a question I hear many times each year: "Why don't you put your thinksheets into publishable form?"

1. So WHY do I so slant my story-telling as to press for my hearer-reader's awareness of the slantedness? Liberation, that's why! Henry Nelson Wieman, my grand old saintly messed-up philosophical theologian teacher at the U. of Chicago, defined spiritual growth as "the increase of appreciable awareness" (indeed, from oneangle or "slant," defined God as the cosmic-historic force making for humans' increase in appreciable awareness). Just look at this cartoon in this morning's Cape Cod daily:

Berry has malaciously (in the good sense) exposed the pleasure (in the bad sense) to be had from using power (neither good nor bad sense) with regard only to self-gratification (ie, without regard for the effect on others). In so doing, the cartoonist uses his power to probe behind egoistic powerplays --one of which is the slanted story. Power lust is one motive for slanting....



2.and social control is another. Old power in the USSR is nervous about Gorbachev's "openness" policy, fearing its official honesty (cf. Solzhenitsyn's famous early 1970s appeal to the Russians to "stop living by the lie") may erode "socialist realism," which from even before 1917 has included historical revisionism, the warping or slanting of the human saga in general and the Western industrial story in particular so as to preach Marxist Leninism (+ or - Stanlinism). The apparatchiks have come into and remain in power through the skill of secrecy-and-myths management, which makes "information" an art form. (In Guyana, I interviewed the Marxist "Minister of Information" while the three phones on her desk were playing a spontaneous trio. The full title should be "Minister of the Manipulation of Information.") Human beings can't stand much reality, and some governments (incl. occassionally the USA's) think "the people" can stand even less than the individual. Pray for Mr. G's war against the lie, deslanting, demythizing.

3. Since we don't have public-domain, non-special-pleading access to how it (humanity, "the world") all got started, origin stories ("etio-
tales," on which see #2065) cannot be said to be slanted (ie, deliber-
ately distorted from "what really happened") but are, rather, pitched
(in both senses). No cynicism or even criticism here; it's the human
condition. Liberation includes the continuous developing of critical
consciousness, which includes the comparative: side by side we can see
the traditions' distinctives, each in the light of all others. And we
can become appreciatively aware that some traditions are variants from
others--eg, Darwinism is a variant of the Bible Story (with a little
help, though minor, from other world-stories). And we can make/modify
our story-commitments (1) more intelligently and (2) with more sympathy
for those who tell other stories or tell our story in a different way.
Eg, I'm (1) increasingly committed to the Bible Story and (2) increas-
ingly grateful to God for the world's other stories and other tellings
of my own Story.

4. Slanting can be fun as well as freeing. Last night a pastor who's
sabbaticaling here at Craigville was delighted with my distortion--
told in the presence of others--of how she came to have her first sab.
in her 18 years of pastoring. My version: Her church of these past 11
years refused her a sab. on the ground that "That's only for pastors
of big churches; we have only 150 members." So, in order to get a sab.,
she worked very hard and got the membership up to 500 and blew their
excuse and here she is. Now, everything in my telling is true except
the motivations: (1) Her evangelistic efforts were not as entirely self-
serving as in my telling; and (2) Her church had better reasons for
granting her a sab. than that their excuse had been blown. What de-
lighted her was the fact that my telling unjustly insulted both pastor
and people, and she said "I can hardly wait to tell them your version!"
Yes, she was sophisticated enough to see goodwill and teaching behind
my sly account of "what happened." She knew that my embellishment was
of the barebones facts she'd mentioned offhand to me earlier in the day
--so barebones as to have been stated all in one breath. Yes, I some-
times get into trouble with torquy tales; they make me easy to misun-
derstand. For the reasons stated about, in my opinion it's worth the
risk. In making myself a target for others' practice of critical con-
sciousness vis-a-vis the slanted story, I'm (to put the best face on it)
helping to fill up the sufferings of Christ, the world's self-target.
(Yes, a martyrial tinge.)....So we arrive at a formula conflating Wie-
man and Willis: Intellectual-spiritual growth, education, as the in-
crease of, respectively, critical-appreciative awareness. My lesser
fear is the fear of being misunderstood; my greater fear is the fear of
failing to stimulate my hearers-readers to an increase of their critical-
appreciative awareness (which, in its highest form, is the adoration of
the Holy Trinity).

5. Jesus' parables are real-life stories slanted (some of them astonish-
ingly) against what is and toward what should and shall be. Preaching
the parables should include torquing, twisting, "putting English on,"
the here and now in responsive parallel with the parables. Note that
Jesus' slanted stories frequently enraged the religious and political
authorities, often puzzled-perplexed the populace, always stimulated
his disciples to further enquiry. Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish prophets be-
fore him both passed on, traditioned, the Great (Biblical) Story and
tilted their own tales toward the Kingdom of God. Since Jesus, the his-
torical stream of this rhetorical mode has been richer in Judaism than
in Christianity--partly because Jesus, for Christians, dominates the
mode more than does any figure in Jewish history. Biblical hermeneu-
tics as discipline and as praxis should, among us Christians, take more
seriously than has been true in the past the Jewish storytelling tradition.

more

6. "Objective history"--the dream and claim of "telling it (exactly) like it was," with no slanting--is self-deluding (as it's impossible to eliminate, in historiography and storytelling, subjectivity and intentionality) and dehumanizing (as, eg, the Marxist project of "scientific history" puts the economic-deterministic paradigm in reductionistic control of "the human factor"). The reverse is "romantic history"--the reduction of the historical flow to "roman," the novel, the tale whose "interest" depends on the reader's emotional response to what's happening to the story's characters (not "Just the facts, ma'm" but "Just the feelings, ma'm"). The former enmeshes the story-teller/hearer in a false "rational" paradigm; the latter, in inauthentic sentimentality. We are fact-hungry feelingful creatures, and we're bad news to ourselves and the world and God if we "split" (so, "schizo"phrenia) our two aspects. Truly human storytelling is therapeutic: it promotes the integration of our two sides, aspects, dimensions and therefore also the overcoming of the alienation between and among us. So often the cartoonist brings truth home to us through our eyeballs, as in this (also today) bar scene by our own Provincetown (Cape Cod) artist:

EEK AND MEEK

by Howie Schneider



Please try your hand at psyching this one out! You can't miss the sentimentality and false piety of the first speaker. It's the cheap benevolence of the-human-at-a-safe-distance. It's "far-seeing" in the neurotic sense--ie, far-seeing as an escape from costly, painful near-seeing (in this case, his domestic unpeace). (IRONY: The usual German word for television is "the far-seer.") It's like "Why can't those S.Africans, white and black, compose their differences?" When the second speaker suggests applying the principle of peacemaking in an area where the first speaker might have some chance of making a difference even if not completely making peace, the first speaker becomes irritable (as happens when you "stop preaching and start messing with me").

7. Yes, the thinksheet's title promises that I'll go political, deal with the slanted story as (un/conscious) political action. The cartoon in sec.6 shows one way the slanted story and political action come together: minipolitics (here, the husband-wife relationship) and maxipolitics (here, global: "peace on this planet") are inseparable, for both are of the human heart (fears, hopes, loves, hates, regrets). But here's a big difference between the big and little ends: One can say "Stop the marriage, I want out" but not "Stop the world, I want to get off" (except as a B'way theater title). Folks may not be as stuck in marriages as they used to be, but we're all stuck on this planet. We can abandon our minipolitics, but there's no place to hide from our maxipolitics.

8. One form of the political slanted story is the tribal tale, which is slanted (1) against dangerous neighbors (eg, the Bible book "Exodus") and (2) toward the tribe's ideal of deity-tribe, intertribal, and extra-tribal relationships (eg, Second Isaiah). Another form I may call the virtue/vice tale, which exhibits by eponyms (historical or fictional characters whose substories comprise the tale's dynamic) the baleful

consequences of a particular vice/vices and, by contrast, the blessed consequences of a particular virtue/virtues. If the life-and-world-embracing overstory includes a moral view of reality, as in the two Biblical religions, all the stories subsumed under the overstory will be "ethicoreligious" and therefore also political. Situations will be described-defined existentially, ie in terms of decisions made or to be made with collective as well as individual implications and results. Action proposals will be informed, made plausible, by the "account" given to elucidate the need for the proposed action. (NOTE: "Account" in Eng. can mean a story, or an accounting, or accountability--a revealing flow of meanings. Ditto for Hebrew & Greek--and who knows how many more languages?)

9. One's own personal religiopolitical existence should be expressible/expressed in one's personal story or life-account (in Latin, "apologia pro vita sua"). Early Christianity encouraged and trained the troops in this account-giving. One locus classicus is 1P.3.15 (my tr.): "Always be ready, in case anyone inquires about your Christian hope, to give an account of why you have it." TEV: "Be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you." Personal Christian witness was to include deliberated self-storytelling, naturally slanted toward (1) the conversion of the hearer, or at least his/her "satisfaction" (Vulgate), but without violating (TEV) "gentleness and respect," and (2) the continuing relation of the Christian to the Jewish or pagan (ie, nonJewish & nonChristian) asker. Of late, "telling your story" is "in" in religious and secular group-dynamics--and it ain't all bad though it tends to narcissism and psychomasturbation, confirming the hyperindividualism Bellah et al attack in HABITS OF THE HEART. (LEXICAL NOTE: In 1P.3.15, all Eng. trs. till RSV tr. Gk. "apologia" as "answer," except Rheims, which transliterates from the Vulgate "satisfaction": RSV has, more accurate to the Gk., "defense." Also, RSV goes for "be prepared" (Latin) to replace the A-S "be ready" (in all earlier Eng. trs.). And, pursuant of the storytelling meaning of "account," RSV renders "be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope" (replacing all earlier Eng. trs., which have "to answer").) The heart of evangelism is this personal storytelling; nothing, certainly not the electronic preachers, can replace it. "Why are you a Christian?" Do you have any answer other than that it's your tradition? If not, should it be your future? Maybe so/not.

10. Come again on slanting as fun. How I delighted (before my arm punished me for excess) in calculating reversing the "English" my opponent put on the tennis/pingpong ball! I'm not against the media's "slanted news." I enjoy reslanting, correcting (from my point of view) the distortion, which in our secular culture is mainly in the interest of evading the Biblical God. But my enjoyment is mixed with worry, the worry that John/Jane Q. Public does not have the intellectual-spiritual stuff to make the counterthrust.

11. Various themes can be used to slant accounts. Since WWII, "racism" has been the primary hermeneutic theme to "account" for what's wrong with the world--in my opinion, a storytelling doing more harm than good, as its simplism woefully encourages (1) church self-righteousness via mea-culpa "white" guilt and (2) pseudo-dignity and inappropriate rage in "the oppressed" (ie, those not in power). It may take generations to recover from the nonsense component of this social analysis, to the disgrace of the Christian religion. But themes can be used suggestively, as the 1960s "The Student as Nigger" and, now, Jn. Raines' "Grieving the American Dream" (UCC/MA "Mighty Waters," No.2, 1986), which uses the stages of grief to expound current responses to the death of the hope for "endless upward mobility."

12. Stories can slant toward releasing/reducing/redirecting human desires.