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MOVING FROM IMAGE TO NARRATIVE TO VOICE

Eileen Groom, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University

ABSTRACT

As I review rubrics used for evaluating writing in my institution, I notice how voice often is a low priority or nonexistent criterion. Writing, however, with a voice awakens a reader; writing without a voice numbs the reader. Beginning with an image and moving to a narrative may provide writers with a voice, as it has for me. This article is a contemplation resulting from my own writing on the importance of images in generating not only a narrative but also a voice, in other words, a sense that a unique individual is conversing with another, the reader.

I look at rubrics for evaluating writing at my university and do not see any mention of voice. As a person who teaches writing, however, I remember works written by both colleagues and students that did not numb my brain but woke me up mainly because I could hear the authors' voices. Beginning with an image and moving to a narrative may provide writers with a voice, as it has for me. This article is a contemplation resulting from my own writing on the importance of images in generating not only a narrative but also a voice, in other words, a sense that a unique individual is conversing with another, the reader.

I am reminded of contributing to an annotated bibliography on History as a Literary Art as a graduate student. I am reminded of the shift into making what once was an art and readable, in that case, writing history, into what sometimes resembles a lab report of sorts and not so readable. In the last few decades of the twentieth century and now the beginning of the twenty-first century, authors injecting scientific sounding jargon and replacing narrative with data give the writing of history a legitimacy often reserved for science. The same can be said for writing about composition. To sound scientific, however, whether when writing about history or composition, frequently means to divorce the human being from the words on the page—in other words, to write without a voice.

I define voice as what the words project to the reader or listener: the sense of a unique individual behind those words. I know some of my students have a voice, as if the writer is sitting next to

me, explaining or describing in their unique way whatever the assignment requires. The best nonfiction books I have read are those that make me feel as if the author is sitting across from me over a cup of coffee or walking and talking. Recently, for example, authors Etgar Karet, Ken Lambertson, and Mark Rashid have given me that sense. If a student or colleague gives me a piece of writing that grants me a sense of a unique individual writing the words, I not only read, but I am grabbed. One of the ways to find a voice, I have discovered, is through an image.

Three books that confirmed for me the importance of an image when writing were *The Practice of Creative Writing* by Heather Sellers, *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing* by Frederick Franck, and *Method and Madness* by Alice LaPlante. Sellers (2017) defines an image as “three-dimensional mental pictures that inspire thoughts and feelings, movies in the reader’s mind” (p.133). Sellers (2017) discusses how when children play, their play revolves around a “live image” (p.133). As they ride their pretend horse, it no longer is pretend. They are actually riding the horse. Sellers (2017) also relates how “images are the opposite of thought” (p.137). “Don’t write what you think. Write what you see” (Sellers, 2017, p. 139), or I want to add, smell or taste or touch or hear. To me, whatever kind of writing a person does, the foundation is the ability to “see” before the swirls of thinking commence, to, in other words, be open to the world.

Franck’s book differs from Sellers’s in that

Frank connects moving from image not only to writing but also to drawing. Similar to Sellers, he discusses seeing and states that how “to see is not to grasp a thing, a being, but to be grasped by it (Franck, 1993, p. 39). It is opposite of “look[ing] at” (Franck, 1993, p. 39), similar to talking with instead of talking at, to actual dialogue instead of monologue. Similar to LaPlante, Franck also comments on how seeing is connected to the particular and integrates the experience of most of us in not wanting to be labelled but instead to be seen as an individual, as a particular person.

LaPlante (2009) discusses finding “the particular” instead of a “general conclusion” (p. 67) as a way into a work. She discusses thinking “small,” i.e., working with a specific image, a specific man or woman or house (LaPlante, 2009, p.67) and she defines an image as “anything that has been rendered by any one (or more) of the five senses” (LaPlante, 2009, p. 592). Whatever kind of writing a person does, the foundation is the ability to see the particular not the generality. The particular image generates a story, a narrative. It acts like a mysterious person who generates questions. The answers to the questions become a story told in a person’s own voice.

If I were to consider the negative position to the thoughts of the three authors above, I would be considering the importance of the thought before the image and the importance of the generality before the particular. In the process I may start to lose a connection between myself and the world. I would be similar to the sculptor who forgets really to look at the particular human model and instead of sculpting the model, sculpts the body and face of their boyfriend or girlfriend. If I am first open to the image and open to the particular as opposed to a generality, then a conversation may begin, a narrative may start to congeal, and a genuine voice may surface. I have found the process of moving from an image to a narrative to a voice fascinating to contemplate and participate in. The examples that follow may help explain.

One image that led to a feature article published in an equine magazine revolved around a neighbor’s horse I would visit, an image that would come to me when I needed to relax to sleep. Other images that led to writing included a hummingbird’s bright eyes; another of a young

girl, maybe ten years old; and finally another of an Alligator Juniper that was cut to make room for a road.

Images are not just visual spots of time, but as mentioned previously, what I smell, taste, touch, and hear I consider images. A number of years ago, the image of my blind and almost deaf dad asking me if I was ok after a dinner when my siblings were teasing me worked its way into “Coming Home to Horses,” published in *Equus* magazine, as did the image of my neighbor’s horse who used to wait for my return from walks.

In my “Wishes of Mr. Dunkleberger,” the pleasure in seeing a hummingbird became the core of this man’s morning whether he acknowledged it or not. “He looked up then and through the window became mesmerized by a hummingbird swaying on the clothesline, sending red and green sparkles with each movement. Then, darting to its feeder, faster and more maneuverable than any jet, the gem folded its wings and sipped the sugar water, beak up, beak down, head left, head right. He could see its tiny, dark eye—so, so awake” (Groom, 2017, p. 9). Then he, Mr. Dunkleberger, returns to being wrapped up in the tendrils of abstractions.

The image of a girl, met at a soccer field, many years ago, when I was there with my father and my dog—maybe a thirty second encounter—that little girl’s spirit mirrored what they call a soft eye in a horse, meaning the horse is open, open to the world, bright eyed, curious, and has not yet shut down for whatever reason, from lack of understanding or worse, cruelty. That same little girl brought to mind meeting my cousin’s daughter when she was maybe eight: a hugger, just a soft-eyed girl who then as a young woman caused heartache for her family. The images led to contemplation of and an eventual story about how sometimes it is the sweetest children who can turn 180 degrees.

Many years ago, friends and I hiked to an enormous and ancient Alligator Juniper that was protected from fire by the nineteen firefighters, the Granite Mountain Hot Shots, who then died in the Yarnell Fire in the mountains of Arizona in 2013. As far as I know, the tree still exists. I saw it only once, but its beauty, its nobility left an imprint on my mind. There was another Alligator Juniper that I would visit frequently many years

ago. I took photographs of it in a valley where I would walk before that area was subject to development, construction of houses and Pioneer Parkway, a highway north of Prescott. The particular, this tree, led to the thought about how people can forget and normalize what should not be normalized. The tree is cut; a road is built; and the beauty of that tree and of that land is gone, not even remembered, not even acknowledged. The thought about normalizing was not the seed of an essay “History of a Park.” Those specific, ancient trees were the seeds of the essay and, I hope, of a letter to be written in the future to those responsible for development in Prescott.

In thinking about images in my own life, leading to stories and to my own voice, I realized my voice often is eulogistic or as an author friend commented, poignant. I write kind of in memoriam or as tributes. As a professor, with my time being tight, I often write from images that I do not want to forget and do not want others to forget: images frequently from leave-takings. Sometimes a hopeful element surfaces in my own voice connected to a desire to see more clearly, of not being trapped in my thoughts, my brain. That’s probably why images play such an important role for me—paradoxically the voice behind my own words becomes stronger if I try to see before verbalizing.

I believe movement from image to thoughts twirling into narrative, instead of vice versa, results in voices conversing with readers, instead of talking to or talking at them. The particular image leads to the sound in a reader’s head of a real person behind the words on the page. The conversation begins with the image that leads to a dialogue with that image: “why are you stuck in my brain? Where are you taking me? Allow me to walk and talk with you.” That conversation between image and writer becomes words on the page and becomes a conversation with the reader. A voice blossoms.

I look through a dusty folder to find the poem “The Red Wheelbarrow.” I agree with the narrator in William Carlos Williams’ poem that a red wheelbarrow wet from rain and standing next to chickens can mean so much. If my students and I can try to see first and be open to what we’re seeing, we avoid passing glances or high levels of generalities or seeing specifics only useful as

support. If I do get to that letter about land use in Prescott, Arizona, I shall start with the image of that specific Alligator Juniper, really seeing it, not just a sideways glance or a screenshot here and gone, because that specific tree gives me a voice, in my case, a eulogistic voice for what is important to me and what has disappeared.

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BIOGRAPHY

Eileen Groom is a professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona.

She has had the opportunity to teach numerous courses, including Composition, Speech, Creative Writing, and Studies in Humanities.

She was editor of and contributor to two books: *Methods for Teaching Travel Literature and Writing: Exploring the World and Self* and *In the Air, Your Stories: A Talisman*.