Tell it Cool: On Restraint in Writing

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Abstract
For years, I've encouraged students to "tell it cool" when narrating a tale that is harrowing or emotional. A cool narrator can be a buoy in rough waters. I've always thought this advice came from Hemingway, but at this moment as I search my bookshelves for the place where Hemingway said it, I can't put my finger on the quote. I know it's in there somewhere, likely in one of the letters (bossy letters full of unsolicited advice and signed "Papa" when friends were just writing to ask for money)...

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Tell it Cool: On Writing with Restraint

Debra Marquart

For years, I’ve encouraged students to “tell it cool” when narrating a tale that is harrowing or emotional. A cool narrator can be a buoy in rough waters. I’ve always thought this advice came from Hemingway, but at this moment as I search my bookshelves for the place where Hemingway said it, I can’t put my finger on the quote. I know it’s in there somewhere, likely in one of the letters (bossy letters full of unsolicited advice and signed “Papa” when friends were just writing to ask for money).

In A Moveable Feast, Hemingway famously wrote about knowing what to leave out. In his discussion of the short story, “Out of Season,” for example, he remarks that he left out a key event connected to the real story: “I had omitted the real end of it which was that the old man hanged himself.” According to a letter that Hemingway wrote to F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925, the story was “an almost literal transcription” of an experience he’d had while traveling in Europe with his first wife, Hadley.

This technique of deletion—sometimes referred to as “the theory of omission” and later developed by Hemingway as “the iceberg theory”—was aesthetically justified by Hemingway in the following way: “[Y]ou could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood.”

I emphasize the words “that” and “feel” above because I’d like to highlight the intentionality: first, that a writer would choose to leave out the most sensational part of a real story because it might detract from the other true story the narrator is attempting to tell; and second, that the un-narrated parts of the story, as well as the elisions or strike-outs, will still be felt and experienced by the reader not as story-proper or as essential information, but as a menacing undercurrent, a shadowy presence or negative space of subtext meant to evoke a feeling in the reader. A kind of manipulation by abandonment.

In The Art of Subtext, Charles Baxter describes subtext as “the realm of what haunts the imagination: the implied, the half-visible, and the unspoken,” as well as the “subterranean realm with its overcharged psychological materials.” While the technique of “telling it cool” might more properly be a consideration
of voice or tone, I want to suggest that a subsidiary effect of cool or restrained
telling is often an accumulation of rich subtext that evokes powerful feeling.

No one ever had to teach me about subtext. I grew up in the far cold north
in an ethnic enclave of German-Russian immigrants who saw much, but said
little. When my parents opened their mouths to speak, a few words came out
accompanied by a deafening roar of unsaid things that I was expected to un-
derstand. My grandparents could compress whole volumes into one look. Their
gestures were elegant and encyclopedic. Perhaps all children feel this way about
their parents?

During the time I lived with all of them, my first seventeen years, I suffered
from nervous ticks, flights of ideas, migraines, psoriasis, bouts of panic, hyper-
ventilation. When I went away to college, all these maladies disappeared. But
when I first encountered Hemingway in college, I recognized the layered silences
in his stories as something familial.

Take for example Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” which some
critics have argued is about that same young American couple from “Out of
Season” still traveling in Europe. The couple is waiting to catch a train this time,
ordering drinks, and having an elaborate discussion about some pressing issue
between them. The conversation remains elliptical because of the characters’
repeated use of the ambiguous pronoun, “it,” which has no stated antecedent
in the story. After some clues—lines like “it’s really an awfully simple opera-
tion, Jig . . . it’s not really an operation at all” and “they just let the air in and
then it’s all perfectly natural”—the subject of the conversation reveals itself: the
woman, referred to as “the girl” in the story, is pregnant and the man is trying
to convince her to have an abortion.

“Hills Like White Elephants” is often studied for its ability to deliver so much
story through dialogue, but I’d argue that key elements are delivered coolly in
the few short paragraphs that are largely made up of description, gesture, and
action.

Early on, two of these short descriptive paragraphs allow the third person
narrator to establish the setting and atmospheric details about the hills across
the valley of the Ebro, which are long and white and, we learn, remind the girl
of white elephants. And certainly the white elephant in the story alludes to the
unwanted child the girl is carrying—it’s both the elephant in the room and the
white elephant gift, the unasked-for present that is trouble to accept and diffi-
cult to imagine disposing of. Mysterious at first, this opening paragraph accrues
significance as the situation reveals itself through the dialogue.

Similarly, the last section of the story contains a descriptive paragraph that
commences after the waitress has informed the couple that the train should ar-
rive in five minutes:
“I’d better take the bags over to the other side of the station,” the man said. She smiled at him.

“All right. Then come back and we’ll finish the beer.”

He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the bar-room, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

“Do you feel better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.”

I’ll admit, the first time I read this story in a literature class, this ending elicited a kind of “huh” response in all of us. Then our professor, Don Short—who was not short at all, who was rather tall—raised his voice and began to rant about how the final scene clearly showed the man’s insensitivity. Could we not see it? The man has just been coercing her into terminating the pregnancy (and this was published in 1927, mind you) while also declaring that he will go along with her decision, swearing that he would never want her to do anything she didn’t feel comfortable doing. As the pitch of the conversation escalates in the cafe, the woman says, “Would you please please please please please please please please stop talking?” And later when the man continues to press, she threatens, “I’ll scream.”

At this moment, the man avails himself of the opportunity to flee by moving the luggage to the other side of the station. He spends some time looking down the tracks, then lingers on the other side of the bar away from the girl, people-watching for a time while nursing a glass of Anis. That gesture, that selfish little glass of Anis, was the evidence that our professor offered up as the ultimate proof of the character’s assholishness.

Think about it. This is all done in one short paragraph, but how long would this actually take, in real time—five minutes, maybe ten, maybe more? Certainly long enough for the girl sitting alone on the other side of the bar to feel the sting of his absence and begin to understand what abandonment might feel like. No wonder when he returns and asks her, “Do you feel better?” (meaning, Have you come to your senses?), she assures him, “I feel fine.”

The subtext seeps into the story through the cool and efficient poking device of the word, “reasonably,” in this descriptive passage: “They were all waiting reasonably for the train.” The word allows the third person narrator to draw a contrast, showing us the way the man perceives the woman to be acting: unreasonably.

Maybe I’m reading too much into this. My students often tell me that I’m reading too much into a story. Or maybe this has just gotten too personal, because I think I was married to this guy in the 1980s. But I think the real story
in this story actually happens somewhere earlier, near the middle in another descriptive passage when the woman herself gets up from the table for a moment to flee the abortion conversation.

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

“And we could have all this,” she said. “And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible.”

A little side argument follows between them—Yes, we can have it; No, we can’t, it’s gone—concluding in her declaration, “No, we can’t. It isn’t ours any more.” And in this moment, a sleight of hand occurs in which the previous antecedent to the ambiguous pronoun, it (the abortion), shifts to another antecedent (their lives together, their future).

The woman has announced it here in the middle of the story: they’re done. They’ve ruined themselves, and it’s only a matter of time. We know that things like this happen in relationships—things are said that are irrevocable; things are seen that you can’t un-see. The girl has seen the “shadow of a cloud [that] moved across the field of grain,” and “the river through the trees,” which is not unlike seeing the forest for the trees.

Only I don’t think the man knows this in the final scene, which suddenly makes him pitiful and the ending kind of tragic. He still thinks he’s in control but she’s already decided, I’m going to get through this and lose this son-of-a-bitch.

We know they lasted a bit longer, this couple, because we have other stories like “Cat in the Rain,” which is another tale about a careless husband that equally infuriated our professor, Dr. Short.

That’s what cool narration can do. It can infuriate, can manipulate, because it doesn’t steal the thunder of the drama, but rather pushes the drama down into the subtext of the story, lets it moil around in the undercurrent where the reader can feel the growing weight of it pressing. And if we are curious enough to ask one question about all that silence, then the upper shelf of the text is pierced enough to allow the subtext to spew up into the atmosphere of the story, not as a told thing, but as a felt thing, an unforgettable evocation of unspoken experience.