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Meander, Spiral, Explode

Jane Alison



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Meander

Spiral

Explode

*Design and Pattern in Narrative*

(this is in fact the second part of a longer, colon-split sentence). Several of Baker's words have four or five syllables, while no word of Lin's has more than three. Baker makes more texture with his detail and range of vision, from a microscopic look at amoebas to an overhead view of the suburbs; from lowbrow Roloids to Old Master painting. These two references themselves carry different cargoes of imagery and tone, and that Baker pairs them gives his sentence even more texture, like moving from a hard plastic surface to velvet. Both Lin's and Baker's passages treat minor content. Yet their different kinds of words, syntax, and associations—style and sensibility, you can say—create strikingly different textures. Further, Lin's passage narrates, making the storyworld advance in time, while Baker's describes: a portrait. And this takes me to the subject of movement in time.

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## MOVEMENT AND FLOW

A few years ago my mother had a phase in which every three or four months something would short in her heart or brain, and she'd slump to the floor. Whatever did this left no trace; we guessed some kind of seizure. By the time I'd find her in the emergency room with her skinny arms taped and wired, she'd be back to herself, toss her head, and say, Oh, never mind. I'm *fine*. The last time this happened, as she again lay wired in a hospital bed, we played an alphabet game to kill the dull time as tests were run (names of flowers from *a* to *z*; names of birds; names of cities or cocktails). She began to fall silent for longer spells between words, forgetting which letter we'd reached or fumbling the topic, and her hand in mine grew still. I thought she was exhausted, drifting to sleep—when suddenly her machines flashed and buzzed, her face went hollow,

and just as I cried out the medics ran in. They pushed me away, circled her, pounded, defibbed, injected, until her thin body arched from the bed—alive.

When the cardiologist came back later, he looked pleased: they'd captured what kept going wrong and had an easy solution. Pacemaker.

Since then, twice a year I take her to the "device clinic" so a technician can test the tiny box of technology bulging the thin skin at her collarbone. We sit in a small room with illegible screens, my mother in her wheelchair, me on a stool. The technician types up codes, makes connections, then turns to her. I'm just going to speed you up a few seconds, he says. My mother raises her brows at me, but when he touches a key to make her heart race, her face goes still. Yet I see her eyes change, her gaze turn inward. After a moment he rolls back from his screen. How'd that feel? he asks. Well, she says, exciting. And I marvel at the power in his hand.

\*

Ben Marcus calls the best stories "stun guns," says they hold you "paralyzed on the outside but very nearly spasming within." Yes. Think of what we can do. Our hands (as I type I realize that once I'd have said *hand*, but now most writing takes two hands: curious) can hold a reader fixed, making her feel not her own time

but the time we devise. A story covering millennia can flit by in six minutes. A storyworld of just a minute can burn four hours in your life. It's magic, but a magic that can be mapped, which I suppose makes it technology. For there are different speeds in narrative, and shifting among them—sedating a reader, making him race—is in our hands, to be done with skill, with care.

#### SPEEDS

Call them speeds or flows or even *narrative hydraulics*. Henry James knew how important scenes are, "scene" being one of narrative's steals from drama, letting a writer portray an incident so that a reader almost sees it. After each scene, James said, a curtain can drop, and summary can let a writer hurry over moments that don't deserve the stage. Scene summary; walk, run: a smart way to get through a novel.

Since James, narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman have studied the differences between story time (how long an event in the storyworld takes) and text time (how long the telling on the page takes) and have named speeds according to the ratio between the two. There have been more refinements since (see Brian Richardson's *Narrative Dynamics* for many essays on this, or Anežka

story time  
vs.  
text time

Kuzmičová). But here's a basic menu drawn from Genette and Chatman:

gap	fastest	no text/much story time
summary	fast	little text/much story time
scene	"real time"	text time = story time
dilation	slow	much text/ little story time
pause	slowest	much text/ no story time

Starting at the middle: if an event in the story and its telling on the page take about the same time, we're in "real time." A scene usually comes closest to this, with dialogue, choreography, and slivers of description holding our attention as we "watch" the incident play out. The purest form of real time would actually be the transcription of a character's diary entry or letter or some other page of print: then words on the story's page would equal what's "happening" in the story (printed words on a page), so text time = story time.

If a story's events would take much longer than a reader spends reading them, the narrative speed is fast: *summary*. Here is the Australian writer Murray

Bail moving quickly over several years in his novel *Eucalyptus*:

Early on [Holland] had packed his daughter off to the nuns in Sydney, until—for no apparent reason—abruptly bringing her back. At least in Sydney she learned to sew and swim and to wear gloves. In the dormitory she developed the eager way of talking, between girlfriends, and the uses of silence; on weekends at distant relations' Ellen while scraping vegetables liked to overhear the stories told by men, and she could watch as lipstick was carefully applied. On the property she roamed about wild. He seemed to allow it. Then she became quiet: in her teens.

Seven or eight years here? Summary can be deadly dull, but Bail splices sensory glimmers into his to draw the reader in: gloves, scraping vegetables, lipstick.

I'll take Bail's "uses of silence" to move now to *gap*. This is the fastest, when the text goes mute and we can leap over eons of story time. White space! Overused often, but so useful. All sorts of things can "happen" in white space: a few minutes, a month, centuries—leaving a place for a reader to ponder or guess. On the other side of the gap, back in the

stream of words, you might need to figure out what you missed. In Salarrué's short-short "We Bad," a sliver of space between the story's halves equals several hours one night—but in this space, a man and his son are murdered. This we learn obliquely a few paragraphs after the gap: "In the nearby gully, Goyo and his youngster fled bit by bit in the beaks of vultures." Salarrué doesn't have to picture the murder. He makes us do it, makes us complicit.

So: scene = real time; summary = fast; ellipsis or gap = fastest. Now, back down the scale from real time. If the printed words showing a story event take more time to read than the event would: *dilation*. Tobias Wolff's "Bullet in the Brain," about a book critic named Anders who gets caught in a bank robbery, is the best showcase I know of all speeds, especially dilation. (Try reading the story line by line, noting the speed of each.) Here is one of two specimens of dilation in "Bullet." We're mid-story, once the robber has grown annoyed with Anders; in the below lines we'll start with real-time/scenic treatment (dialogue, narration) before making a deft switch. Anders has caught the robber's attention and been told to look away:

Anders fixed his gaze on the man's shiny wing-tip shoes.

"Not down there. Up there." He stuck

the pistol under Anders' chin and pushed it upward until Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank. . . . The domed ceiling had been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to scrutinize the painter's work. . . . The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders' eye was Zeus and Europa—portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his eyebrows were arched. If there'd been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said, "Hubba hubba."

"What's so funny, bright boy?"

Story time passes as we gaze with Anders at the ludicrous ceiling; we know this because the robber responds to Anders's evident snickering: "What's so

funny, bright boy?" I've deleted several lines from the passage, yet it still takes a bit longer to read about the ceiling than for Anders to study it. Dilation: text time is greater than story time. Wolff dilates extravagantly a few lines later, when the robber (spoiler alert) shoots Anders in the head:

The bullet smashed Anders' skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear, scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of ion transports and neurotransmissions. Because of their peculiar origin these traced a peculiar pattern, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some forty years past, and long since lost to memory.

What follows is a brilliantly counterintuitive *pause*. All action in the story has stopped, and we are told instead what is *not* happening: what Anders doesn't remember. Not his first lover and "the cordial way she had with his unit," not his wife, not his daughter, not the sweet moments when he saw that he

loved literature. The account of what Anders did not remember goes on for a page, and while we read, the story has frozen. Lots of text, but no event: the slowest narrative speed, a pause. But given what we are waiting for—to see what Anders does remember, and for the bullet to "do its work and leave the troubled skull behind"—I'm happy to sit suspended.

When the pause is over, we learn at last what Anders recalls, in a return to scenic treatment. But it's the sort of scene that exists in memory, occupying an enchanted space in Anders's altered brain-time: "This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects . . ." Do you hear that word *heat*? A single word, small as can be. But it takes up time: the long diphthong; the reconfiguration of my inner mouth to move from *remembered* to the opening *H*; another reconfiguration to move from that final *t* and onward. *Heat*. This single word slows me, creates a lull between the act of remembering and what's remembered. This word clears a glade in the mind for the potent, lingering scene that will be Anders's final memory and the end of his story.

Why have a menu of speeds? For illusion, economy, variety, of course. Also for magic and power. See the reader, paralyzed by a white page marked with tiny pictures. Only her eyes move, from cluster to cluster of letters, a dot or two, a curl, but in her brain: synaptic lightning, a whirring glade, *heat*.

## PATTERNING WITH SPEEDS OR FLOW

Choosing different types or lengths of words, sentences, and speeds lets you design a narrative as variegated as a garden. But you can also create *patterns* with speeds, manipulating the story so that repetitions and rhythms emerge just below the surface. You can switch among narrated action, a reflective pause, speedy summary, more action, a curious gap, a pause for comment, and so on: you can make a pattern of flow and still-spots. Chandra's story "Shakti" is a fine specimen of this.

## VIKRAM CHANDRA'S "SHAKTI"

This long story from *Love and Longing in Bombay* is about Sheila Bijlani and her cheery ambition to rise socially, which means battling the old-world socialite Dolly Boatwalla. It's a mini-mock epic told by gossiping men:

What you must understand about Sheila Bijlani is that she was always glamorous. Even nowadays, when in the corners of parties you hear the kind of jealous bitching that goes on and they say there

was a day when she was nothing but the daughter of a common chemist-type shopkeeper growing up amongst potions and medicines, you must never forget that the shop was just below Kemp's Corner. . . . [S]he saw the glittering women who went in and out of the shop, sometimes for aspirin, sometimes for lipstick, and Sheila watched and learnt a thing or two.

Two pages of chatty summary follow Sheila as she becomes a hostess for Air France, marries unlikely, sweaty Bijlani, who manufactures "mixies" (blenders), and lands in a huge apartment on Malabar Hill. "So now Sheila was on the hill, not quite on the top but not quite at the bottom, either, and from this base camp she began her steady ascent. . . . [T]he top of the hill was the Boatwalla mansion, which stood on a ridge surrounded by crumbling walls."

Clear lines. Sheila belongs to a world of mixies and airplanes: newness, fluidity, ascent. Dolly, atop the hill, belongs to crumbling walls and old freighters (she is a "kind of stately ship"). A battle will rage between women and social classes, and it will last years, from a snubbing to a blackballing, to the founding of an exclusive club, to a marriage proposal to a buy-out effort, and at last to a marriage-merger. Chandra

could sum up all incidents in a few sentences, or give each incident full scenic treatment. Neither would be smart. Instead, he gives each element its due time on the page. He shows scenes that are truly dramatic, where something happens that we must see, and intersperses them with summary, gaps, and so on. Good pacing. But the variations in speed over forty pages also reveal two patterning systems that help give the story motion and form.

I see the first system in the *content* of the scenes. Each (insulting) act meets a counteract: attack A, counterattack A', attack B, counterattack B'. This system of retribution has a larger parallel in the social rectification going on throughout the story: the Sheilas of India will rise, and what helps Sheila do this is her ability also to "descend": unlike Dolly, she is empathetic to the woman who works for her, Ganga, who's on a far lower stratum but will repay a favor of Sheila's with an even greater one. Like the airplane that would be her attribute were she painted as a goddess or saint, Sheila can fly up and down. Dolly can only glide on a level. This first pattern, then, is a system of balances.

But when I look through content and instead chart the shifts among speeds, I find another kind of patterning. At the story's key moments, after a dramatic scene comes a nearly still spot. Dolly snubs Sheila in a vivid scene, and then Sheila "sat in her office among

the books and tried to think about what she had felt at that moment. It hadn't been anger, more a kind of recognition," which she parses for a paragraph. We watch her think—time passes—but it is slowed, making this a dilation, and one the narrative's health needs. An incident happens and then is pondered, its deeper sense revealed. A comparable still-spot comes pages later, once Sheila has delivered a crafty snub to Dolly, again in real time. After this friction, narrative and reader need a chance to recover, and we get this in a relaxed description from a safe distance. This pairing of drama with stillness soon happens again, and here the story's flow is not reflective so much as compressed, an inward rage that would look motionless from outside. Sheila wants to crush the Boatwallas. She's thinking about money, but the image is apt: "she saw how it could be like a stream, unpredictable and underground, and she was going to turn it into a torrent that would flow up the hill instead of down, crumbling the bloody Boatwalla gate like paper. It was going to burst out of the hillside under the mansion like a fountain from the interior rock." Later, sleepless,

[s]he could see the shapes of the companies they owned, how they fit together, and she moved the segments against one another like the pieces on a chessboard,



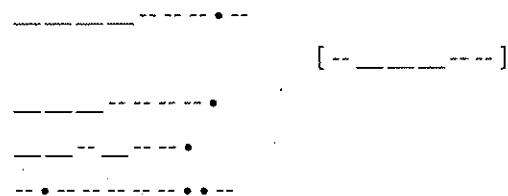
looking for the nuance that would give them the edge. . . . Again she tried to sleep, but now it was only the zeros that spun before her, symmetrical and unchanging. *Shunya shunya shunya*, the words came to her in her father's high voice teaching her some forgotten childhood lesson: *shunya* is zero and zero is *shunya*. She felt very tired.

The final and most important still-spot comes at the end of the story. Sheila behaves nastily toward Ganga; she acts just like Dolly. But she apologizes, and Ganga both forgives her and tells her a secret that will let her destroy the Boatwallas. After this Sheila sits on her rooftop until dawn, pondering a powerful memory of her father and his awful losses during Partition. This is the turning moment, when not action but reflection brings change, a move from fighting and toward reconciliation: a petty battle gains humanity and depth.

Chandra controls the energies of the narrative in a way that feels riverine: a stream rushes over rapids, stills in a pool of reflection, flows slowly in a deeper channel until rushing again, and so on. You could draw this as a sequence of lines and dots. Here's a version page by page, in which—

— = summary / -- = scene / • = still-spot

The passage between brackets, below, is a side-plot about Ganga, which I'm putting aside because it works with different dynamics; boldface passages are the key moments of change:



It feels like a river—yet looks like a design.