

# MRS. TURPIN READS THE STARS

Creating Characters Who  
Walk off the Page

*As if they were our own handiwork, we place a high  
value on our characters.*

—EPICURUS, "Vatican Sayings,"  
third century BC

AS A READER I have no trouble identifying vivid characters. I recognize them the moment they appear on the page. Oh, here she comes, I say, as Becky Sharp hurls a book from the carriage window or Miss Havisham, in her bridal gear, commands Pip and Estella to play cards. Becky and Miss Havisham don't stay on the page; they walk right off it, and take up residence in their readers' imaginations. Vivid characters are not necessarily the sine qua non of memorable fiction, but they are certainly a significant part of it and an enormous part of all fiction. The ordinary reader, E. M. Forster's passenger on the Clapham omnibus (insofar as he or she survives these days), still persists in flying in the face of literary theory and discussing characters in novels and stories as if they were real people. Writers tend to do the same. In a letter to a friend, the Russian novelist Pushkin wrote of one of his characters, "My

Stella has run off and got married. I never would have thought it of her."

So it seems decidedly odd to be deficient in such a major aspect of making fiction—like a golfer who can't putt, or a drummer with no sense of rhythm—but such, I have to confess, is my situation. I am character handicapped. Rereading my early drafts, I discover that I introduce almost every character in terms of eyes (color, shape, glasses/no glasses) and hair (color, length, texture). Of course the range is fairly small, brown or blue, dark or fair, with an occasional Scottish redhead. Then I allow my flimsy beings four gestures:

they look  
they turn  
they nod  
they shrug

These characters, lacking nearly all necessities of life, remain—not surprisingly—adamantly one-dimensional. They are barely on the page, so how can they leave it?

The more complex and engaging characters that do appear in my later drafts are largely the result of craft and of some measure of that writerly good luck we always need as we approach our work. I used to feel that the effort I put into creating my characters

was an embarrassing secret, something to be concealed at all costs. Weren't they a little less vivid, a little less credible, if they hadn't sprung fully formed onto the page? But here's the odd thing. Teaching in graduate programs, and exchanging work with other writers, I've come to realize that I am far from alone in my difficulties. Some authors do have an instinctive feel for character, but many, if not most, have to work hard to people their fictions. To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor's famous remark about story, everyone knows what a character is until she or he sits down to create one.

What does craft consist of? And what makes a reader believe that these little black marks—you are reading them now—in some mysterious way designate a being about whom she can care and argue and have opinions? One of the main obstacles to answering these questions is the way in which successful characters spring to life so quickly, and obscure the artistry by which they're made. Before we examine some lasting characters, let us look at a few of those admirable books of criticism that have accompanied writers over the centuries to see what guidance they offer in this tricky business.

To begin at the beginning: Aristotle's *Poetics*. When I turned back to this seminal work, I was surprised to discover that Aristotle devotes only one of his twenty-six sections to character, and he was almost certainly not

using the term in quite the way we do now. He is much more concerned with questions of poetry and plot, comedy and tragedy. In section fifteen, he at last turns to character and offers his usual succinct opinions:

In respect of character there are four things to be aimed at. First, and most important, it must be good. Now any speech or action that manifests moral purpose of any kind will be expressive of character: the character will be good if the purpose is good. This rule is relative to each class. Even a woman may be good, and also a slave; though the woman may be said to be an inferior being, and the slave quite worthless. The second thing to aim at is propriety. There is a type of manly valor; but valor in a woman, or unscrupulous cleverness, is inappropriate. Thirdly, character must be true to life: for this is a distinct thing from goodness and propriety, as here described. The fourth point is consistency, for though the subject of the imitation, who suggested the type be inconsistent, still he must be consistently inconsistent.

Most of us nowadays would take issue with Aristotle's notions of propriety and repudiate his class system, but much of what he says still makes admirable sense. Although we might think these demands somewhat contradictory—to be good and true to life, to have propriety and be true to life—what emerges is that, for Aristotle, characters in literature are measured against humans and, like humans, are judged by their actions. "All human happiness and misery," he claims, "takes the form of action," an opinion that now echoes through the workshops of America in the form of the oft-repeated, occasionally disputed admonition "Show don't tell." The famously supine Oblomov, hero of the eponymous Russian novel, would have been carried off the stage in act one of any Aristotelian drama; so, I fear, would Bartleby the poor, forlorn scrivener. Aristotle goes on to urge that both plot and character should "aim either at the necessary or the probable," a deft way of describing the fiction writer's endless task of seeming to mirror reality (in most cases) while actually building her or his own world.

I read Aristotle's trenchant words with admiration and with the pleasing sense of getting a brief glimpse behind the veil of time—across twenty-four centuries I can see a man's mind at work—but I cannot say that I find them immediately useful when I sit down to

write. Yes, of course our fictions need to be expressive of moral purpose, our characters to be consistently inconsistent. Yet here I am, beginning a new story, and here is Martine with her straight mousy hair and her narrow brown eyes. She shrugs; she turns. When is the rest of her going to show up?

Skipping over Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* and whatever wisdom Ruskin, Pater, and the Romantics have to offer, I went next to one of our best loved critical books, Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (first published in 1927 and based on the lectures he delivered that spring at Trinity College, Cambridge). Forster by this time had written and published five novels, culminating in *A Passage to India* in 1924. He was writing as a critic, a reader, and a practitioner of fiction. Unlike his famous predecessor, he treats characters as being of paramount importance and devotes two of his ten chapters to them. "The main facts in human life," he tells us, "are five: birth, food, sleep, love and death . . . Let us briefly ask ourselves what part they play in our lives, and what in novels." We read along, nodding, feeling confident that we know how to answer his question. Yes, most authors spend more time on love than sleep, more time on death than food. Characters, Forster claims, "are real not because they are like ourselves . . . but because they are convincing." And,

very important, "explicable." Although they may have secrets, the novelist knows everything about them. Whereas "[i]n daily life," he writes, "we never understand each other."

He goes on to give his famous account of round and flat characters. These definitions have so thoroughly entered our vocabulary, and are so frequently invoked, that to reread his original discussion is a startling experience. "The test of a round character," he writes, "is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way." His main example is Daniel Defoe's spirited adventuress, Moll Flanders, whom he describes as being like a single tree standing in the middle of a field. She fills the novel that bears her name in a very different way than, say, Emma Bovary or Anna Karenina.

The term "flat" nowadays is almost invariably disparaging, but this was not how Forster defined it. Indeed he takes issue with a critic who claims that flat characters, because they can be summed up in a single sentence, are a falsification of *homo fictus*. Forster agrees about the single sentence but goes on to argue that flat characters can achieve surprising depth. They have their antecedents, he explains, in the caricatures and humors of the seventeenth century and are created around a single idea:

It is a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him, since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere—little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars; most satisfactory.

What Forster does not precisely say, but makes clear through this description, is that creating a good flat character is not conspicuously easier than creating a good round one. Look at all the things he wants a flat character to do: be instantly recognizable, be available at all times, provide their own atmosphere. Hackneyed details and dull prose are not going to metamorphose into a little luminous disk.

As an example he offers his splendid analysis of Lady Bertram, who appears in Jane Austen's third novel, *Mansfield Park*. Lady Bertram, he argues, is a very successful flat character, but when her two daughters get into trouble—the unmarried Julia elopes; the married Maria runs off with a lover—Lady Bertram rises to the occasion: "the disk has suddenly extended and become

a little globe." And this, Forster explains, is part of Austen's genius; her flat characters are never conceived of as simply flat; they are always capable of reaching toward roundness. In conclusion, he offers an illuminating comparison between Austen and Dickens:

Why do the characters in Jane Austen give us a slightly new pleasure each time they come in, as opposed to the merely repetitive pleasure that is caused by a character in Dickens? . . . the best reply is that her characters though smaller than his are more highly organized. They function all round, and even if her plot made greater demands on them than it does, they would still be adequate.

And here is the most crucial of Forster's demands for good flat characters. They should, if necessary, be able to respond to an emergency. We may be seeing them from only one angle, but nonetheless we have the pleasing sense that there are other angles, a more complicated history, just beyond the page.

I note too Forster's use of the word "organized." It is not the first word that most readers reach for in praise of character. "Vivid," "complex," "engaging," "lifelike,"

“poignant,” “richly imagined”—these are the terms we use when we describe those characters who have taken up residence in our imaginations. But as writers facing the open page, none of these kindly descriptions is particularly useful in helping us to generate characters. “Organize” comes from the Greek word for “tool,” and that is what our characters are: tools in the little laboratories of our stories. We make them and, ideally, they help us to make something else.

Searching my bookshelves, I found another author also using the term “organize” when referring to characters. Here is William H. Gass’s beautiful and bracing close reading of a sentence from Henry James’s *The Awkward Age*:

“Mr. Cashmore, who would have been very redheaded if he had not been very bald, showed a single eyeglass and a long upperlip; he was large and jaunty with little petulant movements and intense ejaculations that were not in the line of his type.”

We can imagine any number of other sentences about Mr. Cashmore added to this one. Now the question is: what is Mr. Cashmore? Here is the answer I shall give:

Mr. Cashmore is (1) a noise, (2) a proper name, (3) a complex system of ideas, (4) a controlling conception, (5) an instrument of verbal organization, (6) a pretended mode of referring, and (7) a source of verbal energy. But Mr. Cashmore is not a person. He is not an object of perception, and nothing whatever that is appropriate to persons can be correctly said of him.

In the paragraphs that follow, Gass makes three persuasive points. First, Mr. Cashmore has the attributes that have been given to him, but he also has many others that have not been precisely ascribed. From what James tells us—the eyeglass, the baldness—we invent the rest. This is a crucial and complicated aspect of the relationship between readers and characters, and it is an aspect that authors are always seeking to manipulate in appropriate ways. How much, or how little, do we need to put on the page to persuade the reader to fill in the rest? Second, characters are those primary substances to which everything else in the novel is attached. And third, Gass argues for the importance of naming. Proper names, he says, are the only part of our prose whose meaning we invent for ourselves. “Character,” he writes, “has a special excitement for a writer

(apart from its organizing value) because it offers him a chance to give fresh meaning to new words." When I name a character Gemma, I am inventing the meaning of the word "Gemma."

I am not suggesting that we abandon *homo fictus*; indeed even Gass is unable to abandon him and soon lapses into gossiping about characters as if they were people—"What an unlikely couple"; "Who would have thought she'd end up being a car mechanic." But I do think something about this rather abstract discussion is both suggestive and helpful with regard to our difficulties in creating characters. Gass reminds us, on the one hand, how artificial characters are—they are constructs, not organic beings—and on the other, how rapidly, as readers, we respond to the right kind of verbal energy. Forster may think that Dickens's flat characters do not measure up to Austen's, but he remarks admiringly on Dickens's ability to "bounce" the reader into accepting even the most preposterous situations.

And Gass's emphasis on the importance of names also speaks to one of our more pervasive failures of imagination. At the beginning of a recent semester I compared my students' names to those of their characters. I was struck by how much more colorful, awkward, and memorable their own names were than those they bestowed on their characters. Looking through

the pages of their fictions, I encountered Sarah after Rebecca, John after David. Of course there were exceptions, but many authors do tend to be remarkably conservative in their choice of names (which is not to say that every fictional world should be populated by characters named Twilight and Dogface).

We are, Gass insists, fully responsible for our characters—both for what Mr. Cashmore has been given and for what he hasn't—and when we create a new character we are inventing a new language. As lexicographers, we cannot take too much for granted. It is up to us to provide both connotation and denotation. In stories where the character is unnamed readers still count on the author to create their own definition for whichever pronoun identifies the protagonist: she, he, we, they, you, and, over and over again, I.

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These venerable works offer many insights but few practical suggestions. Happily, recent decades have seen the publication of dozens of how-to and advice books, which deal with creating characters in a more pragmatic fashion. Lists of specific suggestions and questions are offered—Does your character have a nickname? What is her or his horoscope? Does she or he have a job? Or

hobbies?—and strategies are recommended. Yes, yes, I think as I read these sensible remarks, written by and for writers, but when I close the book and try to apply the suggestions, my own characters still seem to divide not into the desirable round and flat, but the barely breathing and roadkill (to borrow some categories from Francine Prose). Perhaps the real difficulty is that the first readers for whom we need to bring our characters to life are ourselves, and these lists and strategies, although very helpful with the later stages of creation, may not help to ignite that first vital spark. We have a hard time believing that simply declaring that Ted, often known as Lefty, is a Leo who has recently taken up salsa dancing and enjoys his job working as a railway brakeman can result in a vivid, well-organized character.

Still, there is something irresistible about lists and, over the years, I have come up with my own collection of prompts, rules, and admonitions for creating characters:

#### PROMPTS

- Name the character.
- Use myself, or someone I know.
- Borrow from a newspaper story.
- Give the character a house/flat/doorway/car that I know well.
- Send her to a career counselor.

#### THE HIDDEN MACHINERY

- Let her talk.
- Make her act (n.b. Aristotle).
- Give a sense of her role and position in her family, and in society.
- Show her relationships—we may all die alone but hardly anyone lives alone.
- Describe her appearance, insofar as it's relevant.

#### RULES

- “Good” characters must have some failure or vice: bad handwriting, a hatred of violets.
- “Bad” characters must have some strength or virtue: perfect pitch, the ability to recognize edible mushrooms.
- Every character should have something she shares with me: a landscape, a habit, a taste.
- Every character should have something I absolutely do not share: perfect pitch, the ability to recognize edible mushrooms.
- If the character is a stereotype—the bad sister, the absentminded professor—be sure to make her not *only* a stereotype.

## ADMONITIONS

When creating a character very different from myself I often need to create her or him from the outside. I give the character a house, a job, activities, friends, clothes, and, in the course of doing so, I gradually figure out her or his inner life.

Clones and doppelgangers, those characters who stand in for me, or who I want the reader to believe do so, I create from the inside out. I know her desires, her dislikes, her dreams, and gradually I figure out where she lives and whether she has a bank balance.

The rules about having something in common with me and something I absolutely do not share are ones I find especially helpful. I need solid ground to stand on while I invent a character. But for that character to really come to life, my imagination must be engaged, so I give the character something—a taste, an activity, a relationship, a phobia—quite foreign to me so that I can imagine them into being. What would it be like to hate violets?

In an interview about his novel *Independence Day*, Richard Ford made a passionate claim for the virtues

of the imagination. Frank Bascombe, the narrator of Ford's novel, is to a large extent defined by the death of his son and his subsequent divorce. Ford, who has never had a child or been divorced, when pressed about his relationship to Bascombe's life, said the following:

Invented it. That's my job, I think. I didn't do these things and yet I try to write vividly about them. That in itself is a testament to the vitality, the immense possibility of imaginative fiction. I am sometimes vexed by people wanting to trace back something that I write to some fact in my autobiography. It sells short something that I so believe in, something that is so important a resource to human nature, namely an ability to invent something better than you know.

I love this praise of the imagination, yet, as a matter of craft, I would point out that Ford and Bascombe do share some aspects of autobiography. Bascombe lives in New Jersey, a landscape Ford knows well, and he used to earn his living as a sportswriter, a job Ford held in his late thirties.

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While these helpful lists may guide us in discovering our characters, the question remains: What brings a character to life for a reader? Let us look at how a number of authors introduce their characters. Here is the opening of O'Connor's masterful story "Revelation":

The doctor's waiting room, which was very small, was almost full when the Turpins entered and Mrs. Turpin, who was very large, made it look even smaller by her presence. She stood looming at the head of the magazine table set in the center of it, a living demonstration that the room was inadequate and ridiculous. Her little bright black eyes took in all the patients as she sized up the seating situation. There was one vacant chair and a place on the sofa occupied by a blond child in a dirty blue romper. . . .

Like Mr. Cashmore, Mrs. Turpin has only a few physical attributes: her size, her little bright black eyes. She has a wonderful proper name; she has a ruling conception; she is an instrument of verbal organization and a source of verbal energy. She also has, and I think we can glean this even from a few sentences,

what she *hasn't* been given. We amplify her size; we guess her wardrobe. From the moment Mrs. Turpin is introduced, in that beautifully cadenced first sentence, we know that her job is to make the world seem smaller; she marches into that waiting room and the reader's imagination. The crucial thing that brings Mrs. Turpin to life, though, is no single attribute or detail, no action or remark, but the overwhelming sense we get, as we read these lines, of how Mrs. Turpin regards herself and the world: her attitude.

This seems the key to creating memorable characters. It is also, I think, the reason why doing so can prove such a tricky task. No amount of detail—eyes, teeth, hair, jobs, dreams, relationship to mother, history of dog ownership, horoscope—will avail unless it conveys attitude. Indeed, long lists of detail without affect may simply make the task of imagining the character harder, for both writer and reader. What one needs are the right details, the so-called *telling* details—and what those details *tell* is attitude.

O'Connor sets a splendid example in these endeavors. Her characters, especially her three great archetypes—the older woman who knows where she stands, e.g., Mrs. Turpin and the mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge"; the righteous younger person, e.g., Hulga in "Good Country People"; and the

n'er-do-well young man, e.g., The Misfit in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"—are brimming with attitude. We always know how she or he would enter a room.

But I am not sure that O'Connor is an entirely helpful model, perhaps because her characters, playing their parts in her melodramatic plots, tend toward the extreme. Her accomplishment is clear, but not one that most writers should seek to emulate. Picture, for instance, Mrs. Turpin showing up in one of Alice Munro's wonderful stories. She would not just fill the room, but empty it.

In looking for a more helpful model, I turned to "Polly Ongle," a novella by the Canadian writer John Metcalf:

Paul was enraged by his son's appearance, manners, attitudes, reflex hostility, hobbies and habits. He was reduced to incoherent anger by the boy's having mutilated all his clothes by inserting zippers in legs and sleeves, zippers which were secured by bicycle padlocks, so that he looked like an emaciated scarecrow constructed by a sexual deviant . . . by his bleached hair which he coloured at weekends with purple food-dye, by his ruminant of a girlfriend . . . by

his intense ignorance of everything that had happened prior to 1970, by his inexplicable and seemingly inexhaustible supply of ready cash . . .

And on and on, as the narrator offers Paul's seemingly inexhaustible list of things he finds aggravating about his son. The sharply specific, mostly trivial details reveal the attitudes of both characters toward a whole range of things: clothes, money, history, themselves, and each other.

For me a useful aspect of Metcalf's characterization is Paul's grumpiness. A number of writers I know write monologues as a way to bring a character to life, but often I have some difficulty in getting my characters to hold forth. Even my chattiest teenager, my most eloquent carpenter, grows oddly speechless, as if she or he were suddenly being forced to make conversation on a bare stage before a hostile audience. "Polly Ongle," however, provides a fruitful model. When I set my characters on each other, allow them not simply to talk but to rant about each other's shortcomings. I tend to get much better results. What Flora couldn't stand about Edward, I write, was his too-short trousers, the way he was always apologizing for the weather, his insistence on using a fork in a Chinese restaurant, his inability to decide to

see a film the same day he read a review, etc. Maybe it's a sign of my own bad nature that grumpiness generates more energy than affection, at least on the page.

But affection *can* generate energy, as Truman Capote shows in "A Christmas Memory." Like O'Connor and Metcalf, Capote is a master of the telling detail. Here is the narrator describing his elderly cousin. "In addition to never having seen a movie, she has never: eaten in a restaurant, traveled more than five miles from home, received or sent a telegram, read anything except funny pages and the Bible, worn cosmetics, cursed, wished someone harm." A vivid picture of the cousin emerges from this list of all the things she has never done. Perhaps in part because of that convention by which readers understand that more of a character is implied than stated—Mrs. Turpin notices the child's dirty blue romper; we guess that she herself is nicely dressed—it can be particularly powerful to spell out, as Capote does, what a character would never own, or do, or say, or dream. Such statements, whether made by or on behalf of our characters, almost invariably convey attitude.

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Implicitly I have been discussing the creation of round characters, but the successful flat character is also

endowed with attitude. Remember Lady Bertram grieving over her daughters' behavior? Those little luminous disks are disks with attitude; that's why the reader remembers them from one appearance to the next and instantly recognizes them. And precisely because of this a successful flat character can, if necessary, expand into roundness. If we stopped reading after the first paragraph of "Revelation," Mrs. Turpin would merely be a superb flat character, but if we continue, then we see O'Connor take her heroine's hopes and fears to an entirely new level. Mrs. Turpin's sense of self, which depends so much on her sense of where she stands in society, is deepened and complicated and finally enlarged to include her tremendous apocalyptic vision of heaven.

This consanguinity between round and flat is, I think, one reason why a story like John Cheever's "The Swimmer" works so well. As Cheever's main character, Neddy, swims home across the county through the swimming pools of various old friends, acquaintances, and neighbors, we are introduced to a stunning array of flat characters. My favorites are the Hallorans: "an elderly couple of enormous wealth who seemed to bask in the suspicion that they might be Communists. They were zealous reformers but they were not Communists, and . . . for reasons that had never been explained to him [they] did not wear bathing suits."

As the protagonist of the story, Neddy ought to be a round character, but I am not sure that he is, or at least not in the conventional sense. Apart from his relentless swimming and his snobbishness, Neddy is largely lacking in attitude. Instead what brings him to life are the reactions of the many flat characters he encounters on his journey and also, it is worth noting, Cheever's remarkable descriptions of the swimming pools. But Neddy himself remains curiously blank. The triumph of the story is to circumnavigate that blankness, like a black hole, as it drives toward its famous conclusion.

Perhaps what Neddy most fully embodies is Aristotle's dictum that character is action. From the opening page of the story, he is *in* action, and what he does both delights and intrigues us. There's a wonderful comic pleasure in the idea, and the actuality (if I may use such a word in connection with "The Swimmer"), of Neddy's journey across his home state. He comes to life for us not only because of his telling relationships with his neighbors but also because of the unusual task in which we find him engaged. Of course not every story can be organized around a single activity; still there is something to be learned about the degree to which our vision of a major character can be governed by the attitudes of minor characters. We might call this "the Great Gatsby effect."

Thinking more about attitude, on behalf of both round and flat characters, I realized that it can be conveyed in different ways. Here is Chekhov introducing his protagonist Gurov in the story "The Lady with the Dog":

He was not yet forty, but he had a twelve-year-old daughter and two sons in school.

He had married young, while still a second-year student, and now his wife seemed half again his age. She was a tall woman with dark eyebrows, erect, imposing, dignified, and a thinking person, as she called herself. . . . He secretly considered her none too bright, narrow-minded, graceless, was afraid of her, and disliked being home. He had begun to be unfaithful long ago, was unfaithful often, and, probably for that reason, almost always spoke ill of women, and when they were discussed in his presence, he would say of them:

"An inferior race!"

We learn a good deal in this paragraph about Gurov and how he sees himself and the world; in the process of conveying this information, the prose takes a back seat. The writing has a quiet confidence and authority

but it does not draw attention to itself. The details, although precise and subtle, are not distinctively different from those that many other writers might offer in such a description.

Here, in a very different vein, is the opening of the "Autumn" section in Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye*:

Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men with sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel. Rosemary Villanucci, our next-door friend who lives above her father's café, sits in a 1939 Buick eating bread and butter. She rolls down the window to tell my sister Frieda and me that we can't come in. We stare at her, wanting her bread, but more than that wanting to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth. When she comes out of the car we will beat her up, make red marks on her white skin, and she will cry and ask us do we want her to pull her pants down.

From the first sentence, with its startling juxtapositions—nuns and lust, drunken men and sober

eyes—we recognize a torqued poetry. The prose is stepping forward, demanding our attention. As we continue reading, we understand, both through the details and the syntax, that we are in the presence of a young narrator who is creating her world through unmediated experiences. She is going to invite us to share them, rather than analyze them.

Also important to note is how Morrison announces her narrator's race. By and large at the moment, in North America, readers tend to assume that unless otherwise stated characters are white and/or share the race of their authors. Morrison, writing in the late sixties, uses the phrase "her white skin" to alert her readers to the fact that her narrator is not white. Deeper into the novel, many other details confirm that Claudia is black. In my most recent novel I have two characters of color. I indicate that Merrie is black only once—readers might miss it—but I hope they won't miss her moral insight. A second character was, in my imagination, Korean, but he appears so briefly that my attempts to describe his race came across as merely racist. Now his race isn't mentioned and so, by default—see both assumptions above—he is white in the minds of most readers. If there is ever a film of the novel, I will plead for him to appear as his true self. The assumptions around these issues are shifting all the time. Writing forty years after Morrison,

Teju Cole, in his novel *Open City*, confirms the race of his narrator almost in an aside after thirty pages. "It was an anger that, I couldn't help feeling, was partly directed at me, the only other African in the room." He then adds that he was Nigerian.

Morrison's prose demonstrates what I would call "embodied attitude": a combination of her details, her diction, and her syntax. I would ascribe this same quality to other voice-driven writers: Sandra Cisneros, Lydia Davis, Junot Díaz, William Faulkner, Leonard Michaels, and Grace Paley come to mind. In "A Conversation with My Father," Paley writes: "My father is eighty-six years old and in bed. His heart, that bloody motor, is equally old and will not do certain jobs anymore. It still floods his head with brainy light. But it won't let his legs carry the weight of his body around the house." The details may be commonplace yet her choice of adjectives—"bloody," "brainy"—makes us immediately aware that here, as Forster said about the Alexandrian poet C. P. Cavafy, is someone standing at a slight angle to the universe. Whether a writer chooses to foreground voice, or to convey attitude in other ways, seems to be one of those choices that writers make so instinctively that it doesn't feel like a choice. The task remains the same: to give, show, create, describe, embody *attitude*.

My characters are still showing up in my early drafts with their brown hair and blue eyes. Fully aware of how uninformative these traits are, I let them stand as place markers until I can find the right details, the telling details. And as I search for them, I try to be attentive to both what the real world of constantly changing secrets and the world of fiction can teach me. What writers need to get on the page is how their characters feel about themselves and about their family, friends, coworkers, strangers, and enemies; what matters to them and what doesn't. Seen in that light all those lists—phobias, favorite food, astrological sign, hobbies, political beliefs—can be immensely helpful. In "Revelation" Mrs. Turpin never does consult her horoscope, but somehow I feel I know precisely what it would be like if she were to do so.