Gylphi

Five ANALOGIES for FICTION writing

SAM NORTH

Man Booker longlisted novelist of *The Velvet Rooms* and *The Unnumbered*

Five
ANALOGIES
for
FICTION
writing

Sam North

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Introduction

We want to write a novel and we desire passionately the object itself, our book, whether its cover will be red-and-black with a gold embossed title, or a tasteful apricot with a sepia print of an old townscape, or maybe it will have no physical covers or pages and be an eBook; whichever is the case we *will* write it, for the glory, and the chance to make a killing, and because we have a *theory* of some description. We are here, at this moment: you and I want to be a novelist, or a novelist again.

In my case, I have a head start — or perhaps it is a false start — because I composed a sequence in a previous novel that I cut out; it had queered the story. Red lines were scored through twenty or more pages, but even as I took the chunk of A4 paper, neatly dented by my thumb, and inserted it into the pink-rimmed, painted metal bucket that seems to serve as the waste for all my most beautiful phrases and powerful ideas, I became determined not to throw it away, but instead to grow it into a novel on its own account. Block on, cut, new document, paste. This is what I start with now, a file named *What The Children Saw*.

The big questions arise immediately. How shall we write — or *make* — our novels beautifully? Which are the levers to pull, where are the trapdoors?

Writing exercise no. 1: 'Wurge'

Don't think about your book or your writing. Merely write a 'wurge' — that is, a splurge of words — but in this case, make all of them concrete nouns.

Concrete nouns (desk, motor car, rabbit) are powerful words because they describe objects that are tangible to all our senses; most especially they conjure images which can be observed by our primary sense — sight. It's pertinent that the word 'image' is contained in the word 'imagination'. If we were asked to write a novel that was to be read only by moles, we would concentrate primarily on scent not image.

Take a familiar routine that you don't have to think about, like driving to work or feeding your pet cat or arriving home. Set an alarm and write without stopping and without thinking for one whole minute, but *using only concrete nouns*. You won't have to think about composition, but you will have to inhabit your mind's eye and live the sequence of events and deliver that vision directly and precisely to the page.

To begin with, we might have an empty sheet of paper waiting under the stiff cover of a notebook, and we might write by hand; or we might head straight for the computer keyboard. One novelist I know composes the outlines of his novels while standing at an easel. We have some early thoughts and ideas, and a more or less ongoing piece of time … and, most of all, we have ambition. In addition, we have other writers to look to: we write on the proverbial school desk, scratched with the names of those who have written before us.

E.M. Forster, in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), conjured an image of all novelists, throughout time, writing in the same room while he looked over their shoulders to read their compositions. He invited H.G. Wells to sit next to Dickens, Samuel Richardson to be near Henry James, and he advised them — you are alike, in a way.

Many more writers have entered Forster's room-of-all-writers since he first suggested it in 1927, and many have been examined and written about. I want to use some of them to cut a swathe through this process of novel-writing and understand how it is done.

In order to do so, it turned out that I extended and thoroughly beat out five analogies: The Burn, The Alchemist, The Invasion, The

Donkey's Head and The Constant Gardener. Analogies can be an imperfect way of describing concepts: they might be picturesque or entertaining but they possess a hallucinatory quality that can be misleading, and to stick within the confines of an analogy will restrict what is permitted.

However, I believe the form proved itself. The analogies created an exploratory method; it was a way of travelling, and in that sense (as Seamus Heaney describes poetic form), it was 'both the ship and the anchor' (Heaney, 1996: 29).

1. The Burn

On entering Forster's room-of-all-writers, one thing is immediately evident: the inhabitants have an abundance of intellectual energy. They need it. To write a novel is an exercise in concentration. If we are going to deploy such effort over many months or years, the prerequisite is a sufficiently strong desire to complete the task — motivation-as-fuel. Pick up a good book and weigh it in your hand. You can smell the exhaust trail of the distinct types of fuel used in writing it. The reader is typically able to detect the root of the writer's motivation, where it started, and how it kept going.

In any event, the fuel must be burned to good effect. My cousin by marriage, Mike McHugh Junior, recently fitted out a floating oil rig in the Teesside ship-building yards. It was an enormous structure. Our task should be as spectacular and as large-scale an operation. But first we need to find fuel, pump it ashore and store it, because we have a long and arduous task in front of us burning up the word count, writing this novel.

The word 'burn' calls to mind the acceleration of a rocket, or muscles strained in exertion. However, there are slow burns as well: a candle, and the hand-warmer I was given during a childhood ski-trip that smouldered in a drawstring velvet pouch in my pocket. Most works of fiction accelerate into the literary firmament using a variety of fuels. This means that if we think of a book as having a single engine, the

analogy immediately risks not making sense. It is necessary to think instead of the novel as more akin to a hybrid car, something that contains at least two types of engine.

My ambition is to write a story called *What The Children Saw* and it would help me to wander through Forster's room and group these other writers according to what type of fuel is burning in them. If, in other words, I analyse their various motivations (beyond the three motivations common to all writers: glory, money and that *theory*) and ask myself which group or groups would welcome me? In whose company would I find myself most comfortable?

1. The political motive

Most writers have a world view — a theory — that is embedded in their writing; and in that sense most writers are political with a small 'p'. The kind of writer I will be discussing in the next few pages goes beyond that; they want to change the political map.

While running a finger along my bookshelves, I stop because Lara Santoro is next to George Orwell. It is precisely how Forster would have placed them. Orwell claimed it was history that turned him into a political writer; he felt that he lived in an age which, in its political violence, prescribed such a course for him. Lara Santoro, in her novel *Mercy* (2007), also writes with a political agenda.

With Orwell and Lara Santoro already in hand, I pull out Bertolt Brecht and then Indra Sinha from the shelves, because all are burning the same type of fuel: their work has been motivated by a desire to foster political change.

They stare out at the reader from their author photographs with courage, but they are also hurt. They have a passionate, yearning look. Their work is urgent too, purposeful and directed at every man, woman and child. You can hear the roar of right and wrong. Lara Santoro's novel, *Mercy*, calls for that eponymous virtue to be the guiding sponsor in our dealings with AIDS sufferers in Nairobi and she pins the whole extent of her novel to the lines from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which she quotes at the very end, by which time we are

on our knees with agreement. ‘*Though I have mastered the tongues of men and angels, and have not mercy, I am like sounding brass or crashing cymbal. … And though I give all my goods to feed the poor, and my body to be burned, and have not mercy, I am nothing*’ (Santoro, 2007: 277). Yes. We will and should change.

Santoro signals her motivation in a significant twist she gives to her translation of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians. The passage — as quoted in her pages — reads: ‘ … and have not mercy … ’. English translations of the New Testament have typically translated the original Greek word used by Paul in this epistle, ‘*charitas*’, as ‘love’. Others (including the King James version of 1611) have diluted the force of Paul’s original words by less accurately translating the word as ‘charity’.

Santoro’s slight but careful alteration from ‘love’ or ‘charity’ to ‘mercy’ reveals a telling change of emphasis. The novel *Mercy* is itself a work that passionately sets out to show its readers that the quality of mercy — a quality that is embodied in the narrative in the larger-than-life figure of the woman named Mercy — can be defined as love made evident in *action*. The urgency of Santoro’s message insists that what is called for, when faced with the scale of such catastrophes as AIDS, be they natural or man-made, is neither outrage, nor disgust, nor unproductive anger, nor even some abstract principle or simple attitude of love; rather, such catastrophes must be met with love in the form of its lived and embodied human capacity for active and transformative compassion.

By means of a single, subtle change in her closing epigraph, the novel’s emphasis is made all the more clear. We too can and must change our ways if we are ever to begin to meet such crises. The quality of our own mercy, itself ‘an attribute of God’, as Shakespeare reminded us through the character of Portia centuries before, must not ever be strained in a world such as ours.

The authorial motive that is powered by raw political passion is a fuel that has not burned all that brightly among those writers who have worked within the Anglophone traditions of fiction. One reason might be that the kinds of issues that these novels tend to confront have been dealt with in the still-strong and muscular forms of non-

fiction, journalism, and reportage that have developed side-by-side with those of fiction in the patterns and traditions of narrative in the western world. It is no accident, therefore, that all my chosen novelists were or are engaged to a greater or lesser extent with journalism.

Orwell's rough tweed jacket and trousers were perfectly the style in Orwell's own lifetime, when populist forms of Socialism and Communism flourished throughout Britain. Movements of the British Left that embraced everyone from Clement Attlee to the likes of Stephen Spender, J. B. S. Haldane, and Orwell himself, and that were embodied in left-wing institutions such as the Left Book Club (which provides for Orwell a perfect setting for one of the key scenes in his novel, *Coming Up for Air* [1939]) found themselves massed on one side of an ideological divide, pitted against a monolithic and exploitative Capitalism. In the picture that sits in front of me, Orwell has been caught by the camera in the homely act of lighting his pipe, yet the horrors of the Great War lie just beyond the edge of historical memory, and, just beyond the living borders of the picture's frame, even more inconceivable atrocities are still to come. Such awareness gilds the photo, for the modern viewer, with an unpreventable sense of loss. With such awareness, with such knowledge, comes the horror that Joseph Conrad had glimpsed, as if by flashes of lightning, in *Heart of Darkness*; the horror of the kind that Orwell himself was to experience and to capture so well not by the flash of lightning, but by something more comparable to the torment of a looped film clip that is destined to repeat without end.

Orwell made his own list of writerly motivations in 'Why I Write' (1946/2000). He defines his own motivation unequivocally: 'Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism as I understand it' (Orwell, 1946/2000: 5). It is obvious in photographs, in articles and essays, in the happenstance of his life, in his books, and that is why he burned.

My desire to be among this group is powerful because the books are important; they aim to affect the surge and sway of events. Can I stay here, among this group? I even have a jacket like Orwell's, and trousers similar, and the sensible shoes. I never wear them. I would

like to have gone to such lengths as he did to purify his ambition. He was born into the English ruling class but disliked their manners, and his dismay was sharpened by Eton, class of 1917. I also disliked the public school to which I won a bursary and left for the local comprehensive. Orwell deliberately descended into poverty for two years in Paris in order to explore the conditions faced by an enslaved working class (*Down and Out in Paris and London* [1933]). In my case, it was rather out of necessity than an ambition to experience the deprivations of the proletariat that I worked on building sites and in factories from the age of 16 to 28. Orwell's desire was to immerse himself in the political lot of man. Mine was to escape it.

I went on to work for television companies and literary agencies and grew to weigh thirteen stone; Orwell was part of the left-wing volunteer exodus to fight against Franco in Spain, became so thin his ribs showed, and was shot in the neck. He became editor of *Tribune,* the socialist magazine, and wrote in its pages for years. I latched onto the coat tails of two famous men to ghostwrite bestsellers.

Orwell's factual writings were a prelude to the great works of fiction when he came off the ramparts to warn us of how communism transmogrified into totalitarianism in *Animal Farm*, a fable that castigates the Russian revolution and the factional in-fighting that he witnessed in Barcelona when he had to hide, and run for his life, from his own side. He invented a model of what a totalitarian state might look like in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. His disillusionment in foretelling the rise of Fascism and the Second World War and in witnessing the totalitarianism that infected the Socialist cause harked back to his original finding in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, that 'All government is evil …that the punishment' (Orwell, 1937/2001: 107). In the end Orwell entered an asylum, burnt out.

My novels (while I am inspired to make them compelling to others) are personal explorations of ideas that seem important to me, but they are not political ideas. I wish to better myself more than I wish to improve the lot of my fellow man; I live in a lovely house with a wife and children; I cultivate sanity and wish to amass happiness, develop it, turn it to my account.

I do not think I belong here. Next to Orwell stands instead Indra Sinha, living and working in France in the present day; or, rather he crouches, because he has with him his dog, Holly, an old English sheepdog. Sinha's silver, bouffant hair and kindly but determined eyes give him a similar look to Holly's.

Sinha gave a sustained commitment over a period of many years to the town of Bhopal, and wrote a novel, *Animal's People* (2007), which sprang from it. The novel has a passionate, sensual connection with language and emotion that suggests it will not be only here, in this group with Orwell, that I will find Sinha. Nevertheless, he can hold his head up in this company.

He was born in India, educated in England, and significantly (after the BBC had turned him down as a documentary film-maker) worked in advertising. The pattern is similar to that of Salman Rushdie's life. He happened to write an advertisement for Amnesty and consequently, since 1993, has campaigned to help the citizens of Bhopal, the town which in 1984 was poisoned by a gas escape from a chemical factory owned by the US corporate giant Union Carbide. The leak killed between 8,000 and 15,000 people. Union Carbide refused to clean up. Citizens were offered 500 dollars each in compensation. Sinha left his job, and for two years he fought 18 hours a day to save the life of a friend he feared would die on a hunger strike undergone for the sake of their shared initiative: they were trying to force Union Carbide to pay, and to make good.

On his website (http://www.indrasinha.com/books/animals-people) Sinha describes his ambition for the novel: he hopes that it 'can make a difference to the Bhopalis and help them in their campaign'. The Bhopal Medical Clinic, which he founded — writing an appeal for funds in the *Guardian* — has helped 30,000 people since 1994 and a percentage of the cover price of *Animal's People* contributes to that appeal. Even as I scrolled through the greetings on his website, his first concern was to make sure I knew how to sign up to the DEC's appeal for the victims of the 2009 war in Gaza, an appeal that the BBC refused to broadcast.

The dramatist Bertolt Brecht is also in this group of politically motivated writers. I do not just have his photograph but also his voice:

sonorous, clear and steady, with its sinister, villainous German accent, recorded by the GDR on the 30 October 1947 when he was asked to attend the House Un-American Activities Committee and answer claims that he was a Communist agitator (the recording is currently in a private collection). The interrogator is pressing him on the translation of a line from a song he had written, *Solidaritätslied,* claiming that the lyric, 'You must be ready to take over' is evidence of a plot to undermine American democracy and install a communist state. The translator of the lyric is called on behalf of the defence and explains that, 'You must be ready to take over' is a wrong translation from the German; a more accurate reading would have been, 'You must be ready to take the lead', and, Brecht insists, it refers not to the takeover of the American political machine, but to the education of the poor. The interrogation drags on for hours. This lyric is torn to pieces. You can hear the stiffness of the tension in the room. Brecht was the only foreigner among a group of successful screenwriters, directors and producers; he was anxious to catch his return flight to Europe the next day.

This group is not for me. The book I am writing now is for children, complete with talking animals, and *Animal Farm* might be described in similar words, but unlike Orwell's novella there is not a political motive in it. This is not to say that children's writers in our time are all without political agendas and motives. Philip Pullman's trilogy, *His Dark Materials,* among other things seeks to deflate Christianity, and the critic Michael Chabon's great love for the work is threatened by the element of Pullman's motive that is in this way political:

> My heart sank as it began to dawn on me, around the time that the first angels begin to show up in *The Subtle Knife,* that there was some devil in Pullman, pitchfork-prodding him into adjusting his story to suit … the shape of his anti-Church argument (with which I largely sympathize). (Chabon, 2010: 70)

Venturing even further into the realm of politics and children's fiction, Janet Evans, delivering a paper at the University of Exeter, showed startling images from a children's picture book, *The Camp,* which depicted scenes from the holocaust. The author of the book,

Oscar K, and the illustrator, Dorte Karrebaek, are politically motivated in the sense that they want to change the way we think about children, and about children's books. Looking forward to the time when he would write *The Camp*, Oscar K said (on his website http://www.oscar-k.dk/text.php), 'If I could depict the holocaust with such gentle grace as Roberto Benigni does in his comedy "Life Is Beautiful," I wouldn't hesitate ... it's not about provoking or offending someone … books should not necessarily be understood but elicit a desire to understand'.

A similar idea of leading children to understand is discussed by Tess Cosslett (2006) in her *Talking Animals In British Children's Fiction, 1786-1914*. She describes how writers such as Thomas Day, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charles Kingsley, and Anna Barbauld and John Aitkin, in their different ways, composed talking-animal stories in order to steer the minds of children towards a sympathetic identification with animals and, thereby, an understanding of God's work — what was understood as Natural Theology.

I love these books and their writers, but I am not among them. I have no wish to change (or form) anyone's mind. I am writing my book about my own children, and how they played their games … I want to invoke and make use of the part of having children that was delightful, in order to entertain other children. Ask me to talk about such a piece of work in the company of Lara Santoro, George Orwell or Oscar K and the words would snag or die in the air. Their political motive is not in me, gratifying though it would be to claim it.

Writing exercise no. 2: 'Fragments of sensibility'

Imagine you have finished writing your book and that it's published, and in your hands. Imagine opening it and … imagine the printed text on the page. Write out any old paragraph, a fragment. Carelessly tap into the feeling of it, or tap into a character, or a moment of action — it doesn't matter. Whatever's in your head, concerning your conception of the book — write that. Imagine that you are not composing it, but copying it down from the finished text. Try and identify its effect, the motivation that lies behind it.

A writer's motivation is a component of his or her integrity. We must look at our author photographs, we must check our wardrobes. It is when a writer's character, writing ability and motivation are all three correctly aligned that a forceful literary career is created. We must try and feel the texture of our writing between our fingers, like a tobacco dealer feels the quality of the leaf in the tobacco warehouse, to judge what kind of thing it is — where are its pleasures, what is its burn? And it must be integral to us, not borrowed from writers we admire.

When I think of my own book, *What The Children Saw*, I know it is going to be about someone brought back from the dead; an Easter story. So I have in mind a graveyard, and on either side of the graveyard stand two houses:

> An unearthly quiet hung over both houses — no running feet, no slamming doors — as if the disused church and its graveyard had temporarily reached out on both sides and spread its atmosphere of calm into them ...

I must now rub my own writing between my fingers and find out what it is made of — what is the fuel that is going to enable me to finish it?

2. The sensual motive — the writer as musician

We are in a gloomy corner of Forster's room-of-all-writers. All sorts of drugs are available even if they are vehemently refused; sexual proclivities are of particular interest even if they are to be kept private. Police raids have been known and through the opium smoke we can make out Wilde, Proust, Nicholson Baker, Alan Hollinghurst ... Carol Shields is here. Most of the author photographs show men and women with protuberant, gleaming eyes and soft, un-worked flesh. There is attention to detail in their attire even if it is determinedly plain. There is a tendency for the men to wear feminine clothes and the women to wear masculine ones. For each of these writers, sensual pleasure is their fuel, and they might describe it as a drug. They are concerned particularly with syntax, vocabulary and punctuation. The

fall of one word after another is conceived by them with such facility as to inspire in the reader a shiver of nerves. I think of them as writers-as-musicians. Milan Kundera is sometimes here, and writes comprehensively about the relationship between his writing and music in *The Art of the Novel* (1986/2005). These writers are engaged in the stroking of language. They want to seduce. They do not want to explain, exhort, change our ways. The Utopia they seek is a personal, sensual paradise.

As with music, it is in the intelligence of the arrangement as well as in the melody itself that the beauty of the text is to be found. An intelligence that must not only be evident in the sound, the tonality of the text, but also in the delicacy and refinement of its meaning.

The German scholar Sigurd Burckhardt, in an essay titled 'The Poet as Fool and Priest' (1956), supplies an entertaining anecdote, which features a rare glimpse of Goethe as a sculptor, on why writers must orchestrate meaning as a component within the music of the text:

> We know of Goethe that he was prompted to resume work on his 'tragedy of the poet' — *Torquato Tasso* — while he was modelling a foot in a sculptor's studio in Rome. Following this evidently potent impulse, he recast the unfinished play into blank verse and painfully completed it, with what he called 'scarcely justifiable transfusions of my own blood.' What the connection was between modelling and the decision to take up again a long abandoned and extraordinarily difficult project, he did not say; but perhaps one may speculate. While his hands shaped the formless, malleable clay, may he not have wondered about the radical and dismaying difference between the sculptor's medium and his own: between clay, marble, pigment, tones — and words?
>
> For the difference is radical. All other artists have for their medium what Aristotle called a material cause: more or less shapeless, always meaningless, matter, upon which they can imprint form and meaning. Their media become media proper only under their hands; through shaping they communicate. As artists they are uniquely sovereign, minting unminted bullion into currency, stamping their image upon it. The poet is denied this creative sovereignty. His 'material cause' is a medium before he starts to fashion it; he must deal in an already current and largely defaced coinage. In fact, it is not even a coinage,

> but rather a paper currency. Words, as the poet finds them, are tokens for 'real' things, which they are supposed to signify — drafts upon a hoard of reality which it would be too cumbersome to put into circulation. Not merely is the poet denied the privilege of coining his own medium; his medium lacks all corporeality, is a system of signs which have only a secondary, referential substance. (Burckhardt, 1968: 22)

Already I am happier; I am more attuned to this group. My finger moves along the bookshelves and stops at Carol Shields. In *The Stone Diaries* (1993/2008), Shields provides us with a description of a boy called Warren, and she dwells for a moment on his eating habits: 'What he especially loves is to take a slice of boiled ham and fold it over and over in his fingers and then stuff it in his mouth so that the soft sweet meat feels part of his own tongue and inner cheeks' (Shields, 1993/2008: 158). The accuracy in sensation mounts in the music of the text, note by note. Power is given to us in our shared recognition, shared measurement, of this pleasure and we agree with the author, 'That's exactly how it is … ' .

Oscar Wilde took a similar pleasure in creating a gorgeous fall of one word after another, and the sensual achievement, in dramatic terms, of an emotional release. With his frock coats, canes and cravats he dressed as a dandy. In his letters, as well, this compulsion to indulge in the pleasures of the senses can be seen to have been written through his character.

Strangely — so odd! — there is also a glimpse of Orwell in this group: a wistful, ghostly image; impossible to believe it can be true. 'In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books' (Orwell, 1946/2000: 4).

Alan Hollinghurst was nominated for the Man-Booker prize in 2004 for *The Line of Beauty* (2004). The title comes from a particular double curve, the ogee, an architectural term described by Hogarth as The Line of Beauty. It is also a slang term for cocaine, or it might be the line drawn from the spine around the buttocks; it also refers to the written line. I started to read the novel, and was enchanted. In an article entitled 'The Observer Profile: Alan Hollinghurst', published in the *Observer* (17 October 2004), journalist Geraldine Bedell quotes

one of Hollinghurst's close friends, Andrew Motion, as saying about him, 'I can't think of anyone who writes better, line by line'. The 'line by line' part of the judgement was significant, I thought. Hollinghurst won the Newdigate prize for poetry; he cultivates each line for poetic sensibility. It took him six yearss to write the book; for that long he stroked the language to brilliant effect. Like the poet that he is, Hollinghurst writes and rewrites 'at a walking pace' (Geraldine Bedell citing him in the same *Observer* article), a few hundred words per day, worked over and over. His central ambition as a writer is to invoke the musical effect of language. His novels seduce the reader as Andrew Motion said, line by line, and his clever stitching of scenes — which in this novel put love and politics and money and philistinism and madness side by side — result in a series of set-pieces that are rendered with experienced sensuality.

This motivation for the writer, this ambition towards the sensual, is the product of a particular way of thinking. The artistic expression of the novel's meaning is the very point of the subject's existence. 'It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance,' wrote Henry James in a letter to H. G. Wells on 10 July 1915, ' … and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process' (James, 1915/1984: 770).

Hollinghurst signals his debt to Henry James all the way through *The Line Of Beauty*, at one point having his hero, Nick Guest, snort cocaine from the cover of one of James' novels.

In an epigraph to *The Line of Beauty*, Hollinghurst chooses to tease himself concerning the nature of word-by-word, sensual writing. He quotes *Alice in Wonderland*, where the King must choose between two words, 'important — unimportant — unimportant — important.' The King is not guided by their very different meanings. He only wants to find out 'which word sounded best' (Lewis Carroll cited in Hollinghurst, 2004: epigraph).

The story is framed between two general elections, both of which were won by Margaret Thatcher. However, I believe that if a proportion of Hollinghurst's motive was political — to show us the 1980s in all its brutal acquisitiveness — it is a flicker more than a flame. When it appeared, the novel was described as a satire on Thatcherism or a