

5 Imagining worlds: imagery and detail in conversation and other genres

The artist's life nourishes itself on the particular, the concrete: that came to me last night as I despaired about writing poems on the concept of the seven deadly sins and told myself to get rid of the killing idea: this must be a great work of philosophy. Start with the mat-green fungus in the pine woods yesterday: words about it, describing it, and a poem will come. Daily, simply, and then it won't lower in the distance, an untouchable object. Write about the cow, Mrs. Spaulding's heavy eyelids, the smell of vanilla flavouring in a brown bottle. That's where the magic mountains begin.

Sylvia Plath, *Journals*¹

"I wish you were here to see the sweet peas coming up."

A line of a poem? It could become one. But as it was, it was just a fragment of conversation, words uttered by a friend on one coast to a friend on the other. But these words have something in common with a poem: They spark a flash of feeling. They make us not just think about, but feel, the distance of the American continent separating two people, the longing to be in the presence of someone loved, to report not important events, but small ones, small perceptions.

"I wish you were here to see the sweet peas coming up."

Why is this more moving than the simple, "I wish you were here"? Partly because "Wish you were here" is a fixed expression, a cliché. But mostly, I think, it is because of the sweet peas – small and ordinary and particular. The sweet peas coming up provide a detail of everyday life that brings everyday life to life. The sweet peas create an image – a picture of some-thing, whereas "Wish you were here" suggests only the abstract idea of absence. And the sound of "sweet peas" is moving: the repeated high front vowel, /i/, suggests something small and tender, and this impression is intensified because it echoes the same sound in "here" and "see." Similarly, the repeated, symmetrically bounding sibilants /s/ and /z/ in /switpiz/, almost adjacent to the /s/ of "see," are soothing and alluring. And semantic associations are at work as well: One is moved by the "sweet" of "sweet

peas," the word "sweet" having gathered meaning associated with people, their character and their relationships. It would not have been quite as moving to say, "I wish you were here to see the geraniums coming up," or "the tomatoes," or "the asparagus."²

In thinking about why I had an emotional response when my friend said, "I wish you were here to see the sweet peas coming up," I was reminded of the line from a poem by T. S. Eliot: "I am moved by fancies that are curled around these images and cling." My concern in this chapter is the way and the why that fancies curl around and cling to images. More specifically (and more prosaically), I explore how details create images, images create scenes, and scenes spark emotions, making possible both understanding and involvement.

The role of details and images in creating involvement

I have argued that involvement is created by the simultaneous forces of music (sound and rhythm), on the one hand, and meaning through mutual participation in sensemaking, on the other. A major form of mutual participation in sensemaking is creating images: both by the speaker who describes or suggests an image in words, and the hearer or reader who creates an image based on that description or suggestion. Furthermore, as discussed in chapter 1, the power of images to communicate meaning and emotions resides in their ability to evoke scenes. Images, like dialogue, evoke scenes, and understanding is derived from scenes because they are composed of people in relation to each other, doing things that are culturally and personally recognizable and meaningful.

Through images created in part by details, a hearer or reader imagines a scene. I use the term "imagine" both in relation to "images" and in relation to Friedreich's (1986) sense of the individual imagination. On one hand, "imagine" refers to creating images in the mind. The particularity and familiarity of details make it possible for both speakers and hearers to refer to their memories and construct images of scenes: people in relation to each other engaged in recognizable activities. And the construction of a scene in comprehension by hearers and readers constitutes mutual participation in sensemaking. On the other hand, details, as I have argued for dialogue and repetition, are poetic, in Friedreich's sense, in that they fire the individual imagination. Involvement strategies do not decorate communication, like frosting a cake, by adding something to the exchange of information. Rather, they constitute communication: They are the ingredients that make the cake. It is in large part through the creation of a shared world of images that ideas are communicated and understanding is achieved.

Before launching this chapter, I present, without comment, a story-within-a-story from Hymes (1973:14–15), the full excerpt cited by Rosen (1988:69–70) of which I cited the last lines in the preceding chapter. I beg readers' indulgence, for I am breaking the rules of academic (but not literary) discourse by presenting a text without revealing (yet) my reason for doing so.

- (1) Let me mention here Mrs. Blanche Tohet, who in the summer of 1951 had David and Kay French and myself wait for a story until she had finished fixing eels. A tub of them had been caught the night before near Oregon City. Each had to be slit, the white cord within removed, and the spread skin cut in each of its four corners, held apart by sticks. The lot were then strung up on a line between poles, like so many shrunken infants' overalls, to dry. Mrs. Tohet stepped back, hands on hips, looking at the line of eels, and said: "Ain't that beautiful!" (The sentence in its setting has been a touchstone for aesthetic theory for me ever since.) All then went in, and she told the story of Skunk, when his musk sac was stolen and carried down river, how he travelled down river in search of his "golden thing," asking each shrub, plant and tree in turn, and being answered civilly or curtly; how down the river he found boys playing shinny-ball with his sac, entered the game, got to the "ball," popped it back in, and headed back up river; how, returning, he rewarded and punished, appointing those that had been nice to a useful role for the people who were soon to come into the land, denying usefulness to those who had been rude. All this in detail, with voices for different actors, gestures for the actions, and always, animation.

I will comment on this text later.

Details in conversation

Before presenting transcribed conversational examples, I will discuss three examples of details used to create images in conversation that I observed but did not tape record.

A Finnish colleague was telling me about his mother's experience as a member of a tourist group in the Soviet Union. Aging and having little use for tact, she publicly challenged an Intourist guide on the official story of the Russo-Finnish war. Upon returning to Finland, she was held up at the border by a prolonged search of her belongings. My colleague dramatized the extremity of the search by telling the detail that the Soviet border guards squeezed the paste out of her tube of toothpaste.³

A woman was telling me how inappropriately prepared her elderly mother was when she arrived by plane for a winter-long visit. That the mother did not bring sufficient clothing was dramatized by the detail that she had with her only the single brassiere she was wearing. That the items she did bring were inappropriate was dramatized by the detail that her

hand-held luggage was heavy because it was full of potatoes and onions which she did not want to throw out when she left home.

A friend was describing his meeting with a married couple, both artists, in an art museum: "She was standing in front of some Francis Bacons, exclaiming, 'That's painting!' He was in another part of the museum, looking intently at some obscure German expressionists." By referring to a specific painter (Bacon) and style of painting ("obscure German expressionists"), by using a graphic verb ("exclaiming") and adverb ("looking intently") to depict their actions, and by animating her dialogue which contrasts with his silence, the speaker created two contrasting scenes and, through these scenes, instant summaries of their contrasting personalities: hers, expansive and expressive; his, intense and brooding. Had he described their personalities in evaluative statements, his evaluation would have remained abstract and might even have been questioned. By creating images of the scenes in which he encountered them, he led the hearers (I was one) to draw conclusions about the artists' personalities, as if from direct observation.

The images of the artists in the museum, the old woman traveling by plane with potatoes and onions in her hand luggage, and the Russian border guards squeezing out toothpaste have remained with me, though the images I have constructed and kept must necessarily differ from those in the minds of the speakers who created them. Images, I am suggesting, are more convincing and more memorable than abstract propositions.

Put another way, images provide internal evaluation: They lead hearers and readers to draw the conclusion favored by the speaker or writer. I hope, with these and the following examples, to demonstrate why internal evaluation is more persuasive than external evaluation, as Labov (1972) noted it is when he introduced the concept. My claim is that this is so because internal evaluation is more involving. Hearers and readers who provide interpretations of events based on such story-internal evidence as dialogue and images are convinced by their own interpretations (for example, "all the other patients are like, 'Ugh. Ugh.' They're bleeding everywhere yknow"). In contrast, external evaluation seeks to convince hearers or readers by providing interpretations in the storyteller's voice, from outside the story (hypothetically, "This is the best part – the other patients were disgusted by the sight of the boy's blood"). In the former case, the meaning is dramatized, and the hearer does the work of supplying it. In the latter, the meaning is stated, and handed to the hearer ready-made.

Images and details in narrative

What are details doing in stories?

Almost any conversational narrative provides examples of details and images that create scenes and hence involvement. The conversational stories told by Greek women about having been molested by men yield innumerable instances. For example, a woman describes the American who came to her rescue when a strange man attacked her in Paris:

- (2) kai ekeini tin ora
bainei,
bainei san apo michanis theos,
enas Amerikanos
yiro sta evdhominda,
dhen tha xechaso pote
ena, forouse ena me megalala karro poukamiso

- (2) and at that time,
(there) enters
enters like an act of God,
an American
about seventy years old,
I'll never forget
a, he was wearing a shirt with large checks

If communication were only a matter of conveying information, then the visual pattern on the American's shirt would not add materially to the story. Indeed, the fact that he was American might be deemed irrelevant. And yet these details do contribute to the story; they *make* the story.

In terms of Chafe's (1985:116) three types of involvement (self-involvement of the speaker, interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer, and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about), the pattern on the American's shirt is a sign of the speaker's involvement with her memory. Furthermore, in keeping with Chafe's (1991) discussion of what details are remembered over time, the checkered shirt may have been memorable to the Greek woman because it was unusual in Paris: a typically American fashion. But the detail of the checkered shirt also works to create interpersonal involvement: the rapport that is being created between the speaker and her audience by means of this story. In addition to involving me, an American listener, describing the shirt the man wore (and his age) helps all the hearers to imagine a man, a particular man dressed in a particular way. Finally, emphasizing that she remembers what he wore – indeed, that she will never forget what he wore – reinforces the hearer's sense of the vividness of the memory, and therefore its reportability and authenticity.

Throughout their stories, the Greek women I recorded told details of where they were going and what they were doing when they were molested. Some of these details include:

- The speaker was making a telephone call from a public phone; she tells whom she was calling and why
- The speaker was visiting a famous writer; she names him, tells what she was delivering, and for whom
- The speaker was on her way to bookstores in the Latin Quarter
- The speaker had seen the man who molested her, shortly before the time of telling, at a particular event which she names
- The speaker's niece, whom she was sponsoring at seamstress school, was staying with her at the time when she was receiving sexually harassing telephone calls at home
- The speaker was about to meet friends that night; she names the friends
- The speaker had gone to Piraeus, the port city near Athens, to accompany a friend who was seeing someone off; she names her friend, and tells where his friend was going and why

These are just a few examples taken from the Greek women's stories. They show that the details create images that serve multiple purposes. First, they set a scene during which the recounted events took place. Second, they provide a sense of authenticity, both by testifying that the speaker recalls them and by naming recognizable people, places, and activities. Further, they contribute to the point of the story and play a role in the speaker's presentation of self. The preceding examples show that many of the speakers, in telling about being molested, establish their own innocence and seriousness of purpose at the same time that they give relevant background information leading up to the molestation event. Thus Chafe's three types of involvement, along with others, are intertwined in context, each entailing the others to a degree.

Where do details appear in stories?

Narrative is a genre particularly given to the use of details since it is by definition devoted to describing events that take place in scenes. Within narrative, details are especially frequent in what Labov (1972) calls the orientation sections of conversational narratives: the part that provides background information. Such common orientational material as names, dates, and names of places are details. In conversation, speakers often make an observable effort to get these details right. For example, in beginning the story about having fainted on the New York subway excerpted early in chapter 3, the speaker said:

- (3) It was back in . . . what '66? '67?

In a way, such mental scavenging seems to be more for the speaker's satisfaction than for the hearer's. It is unlikely to make a difference to the hearer whether the event took place in 1966 or 1967. Yet retrieving the correct year, or feeling that one has retrieved it, seems to give satisfaction to a speaker. However, such evidence of struggle to retrieve correct details is not only a matter of the speaker's self-involvement: It also gives an impression of verisimilitude to a hearer. In addition to the verisimilitude of the recognizable details, the process of searching one's memory to fix a name or date or place is in itself a familiar, recognizable process which gives a listener a sense that true details about true events are being retrieved.⁴

Sometimes details cluster at the climax of a story, contributing to its main point. For example, in the conversational narrative from which Example (12) in chapter 4 was taken, about the experience of an American tourist in a Japanese bath, the main action is brought into focus partly by the marked use of details. In other words, the detailed level of description functions as a sort of internal evaluation signalling, "This is the important action right here" without explicitly stating so:

- (4) Anyway, what was I say-
 Oh we were at the Japanese bath
 and um they didn't tell us,
 first of all,
 that we were going into the bath,
 so we were standing in the room,
 and they said "Okay, take your clothes off."
 We're like "What?!"
 and um
 [listener: It's prison]
 they gave us these kimono
 and we put the kimono on,
 they brought us to this other room,
 and they said, "Okay take the kimono off."
 And we're like "What are you talking about?"
 So then the the teacher left.
 We were kind of wandering around,
 we saw the bath,
 so we figure out the deal,
 so we went down,
 got in the bath,
 and sitting there,
 this 74 year old man
 who was in our group
 from Austria
 jumped over our heads.

into a three foot bath, splashed all over the place and started doing the back-backstroke in the tub.

So the teacher's back at this time and he's going "Oyogena! kudasai." "Don't swim!"

The key action in the story, highlighted in the transcript by underlining, is described and made vivid by details. The age of the man (74), the country he was from (Austria), the graphic verbs "jumped" and "splashed" as well as the depiction of his actions ("jumped over our heads" and "splashed all over the place"), the measurement of the bath ("three foot"), the name of the stroke he was swimming ("backstroke") – all create an image of a scene that stands out in the otherwise relatively Spartan narration.⁵

Another part of narrative that is highly likely to be marked by detail is description. Descriptive detail can be directly representational or metaphorical. There is often an association between detail and metaphor. In 1985, when Halley's Comet was expected, I was intrigued by an issue of a small magazine called *Guideposts* (40:9, November 1985) that I found in a motel room. In it, Joseph Hufham, 83, identified as "the local storyteller" of Delco, North Carolina and a columnist for a Whiteville, North Carolina newspaper, presented his own and others' accounts of the previous appearance of Halley's Comet in 1910. The accounts of the other townspeople who are old enough to remember events in 1910 are vague about what the comet looked like. One man, who was 7 when he saw it, is quoted as saying, "It looked like a big old star, real bright, with a tail behind" (7). Hufham himself was only a year older at the time, but his description is rich with detail and simile:

The comet was yellow like the moon and it bulged like an onion. The tail on it looked like an old dollar sweep broom, not much longer than the body; I could just see it swooping down and scrubbing on mountains. (4)

Furthermore, Hufham set the description of the comet in a scene ("I remember standing on the big broad porch of Papa's store and looking up"), and the scene is set within a story about the events of the day. Hufham's account, in contrast to the snippets of interviews with others, seemed to demonstrate the skills and strategies that made him a storyteller and a writer.

Listing and naming

Thus stories are composed of scenes which are composed of images that are suggested by details. Details are associated not only with particular structural parts of narratives, such as orientation and climax, or particular functional

parts, such as description or action, but also with particular strategies such as listing and naming. Chatwin (1987) writes of an Aboriginal view of the Australian landscape as a series of events "on one or other of the Songlines: The land itself may be read as a musical score" (47). Depicting a fictionalized conversation with a Russian companion he names Arkady and four elderly Aborigines, Chatwin has Arkady ask one of them, "So what's the story of this place, old man?" The old Aboriginal responds with a story about Lizard and his wife. His storytelling is a performance, including mime and song, in which the teller becomes each of the characters. After the Aborigines have gone to sleep, Arkady tells the fictionalized Chatwin that the Aborigines must have liked him, since they offered him the song. If they had been performing the song for their own people, however, it "would have named each waterhole the Lizard Man drank from, each tree he cut a spear from, each cave he slept in, covering the whole long distance of the way" (47).⁶

Nonnarrative or quasinnarrative conversational discourse

Details and images are pervasive in nonnarrative or quasinnarrative as well as narrative conversational discourse, since all conversation is intended, to some degree, to be persuasive, that is, to be understood in the way that the speaker intends it.

Like struggling to recall specific names, dates, and places, speakers are often specific about other details that might seem irrelevant to hearers if only information counted. For example, in the following excerpt from the Thanksgiving dinner conversation, Peter recites a childhood address. At this point in the interchange, as already seen in Example 18 in chapter 3, it has emerged that Steve and Peter (who are brothers) had lived in quonset huts as children after the Second World War. As a participant in the conversation, I was intrigued to learn that friends I had known for years had actually lived in what for me had been exotic and strange clusters of buildings viewed from the highway on childhood excursions. I asked how long they had lived in them. Peter answered, "Three years." Then:

- (5) DEBORAH It's a LONG TIME.
STEVE Yeah. From the time I was ONE . . . to the time I was four and a half.
DEBORAH Did you go to school?
PETER Yeah I went to kindergarten and first grade.
DEBORAH Wow! . . . So it was a whole community with other people living in them too.
PETER It was great!
STEVE It was a really close community cause everybody was []
DEBORAH [] Would've been nice

STEVE /?/
 PETER We all moved in at the same time,
 and j- just had to remember your address.
 → Ours was... 1418 F.

How is the audience helped by knowing the specific address of the quonset hut in which Peter and Steve lived? In an information-focused way, not at all. And yet, as suggested earlier in connection with narrative detail, one recognizes the urge, in telling of a past time, to recall and utter a precise address or telephone number or name. Because of the familiarity of the urge to remind oneself of addresses, telephone numbers, and names of people and places, specifying the address contributes something to the hearer's involvement with the speaker and with the recalled image. It also lends a sense of authenticity, of vivid recall. Furthermore, by reciting his childhood address, Peter demonstrates that he had memorized it. Moreover, hearing "1418 F," one gets an image of a large number of identical buildings, each differing from the others only by letter and number designation, whereas previously one had only the idea of multiple dwellings.

Similarly, Steve's addition of his precise ages at the time he lived in the quonset huts ("From the time I was ONE . . . to the time I was four and a half."), like Peter's naming of the grades he was in ("I went to kindergarten and first grade"), does not contribute anything substantive to the answer that they lived in a quonset hut for three years. And yet it contributes to the communication. It creates a picture of a child of one to four and a half, of Steve as a child of one to four and a half.

Another example from the Thanksgiving conversation is found in the discussion of cartoons from which Examples 6, 14, and 20 in chapter 3 were taken: the conversation about cartoons in which three men maintained that they had enjoyed cartoons as children, whereas the two women recalled having been disturbed by the violence in cartoons. Steve claimed that the women, as children, responded as they did because "You took them literally," whereas his own response was sanguine because he knew that cartoons weren't real. He explained,

It wasn't like there were hearts and liver.

This example illustrates my argument both in its form and in its meaning. Steve is claiming that he didn't have an emotional response to cartoon characters getting hurt because the cartoons didn't show the detailed images of body parts that would have made the characters seem real. At the same time, he makes his point in the conversation by naming the specific body parts, "hearts and liver," rather than by making an abstract statement like, "It wasn't like they had human body parts."

Listing

In a casual brunch conversation among four adult friends (two couples), the conversation turned to languages, since one of the party is a graduate student in linguistics.⁷ This speaker told of having overheard a conversation in a foreign language that she tried to identify:

- (6) And on top of sounding nasal
 it's a Northern European language
 it's obviously Germanic based,
 okay, that much I KNOW.
 But THEN . . . is it . . . uh Flemish?
 You know, is it - is it a Dutch derivative?
 Is it Belgian?
 And then I said "No
 maybe it's /?/Deutsch
 cause it
 it sounds like German but it's NOT High German
 so what is it.
 It's obvious-
 it's got to be something like that in it."
 I said "What could it be, Norwegian?"
 I'm hearing the Tyrolean "ja" [yaw].
 I'm hearing the rolling accent
 of what sounds like Swedish.
 Yeah and you know
 the little hippity-hoppity sing-songy-
 But that's also uh
Bavarian German has a lot of that too,
 and Swiss-Deutsch has that so
 uh . . . maybe it's Afrikaans.
 I haven't heard it in so long,
 you know, maybe it's something like that.

The pleasure this speaker seemed to be deriving from listing Germanic languages is reminiscent of a segment of the Thanksgiving dinner conversation in which I named the titles of books by Erving Goffman:

- (7) CHAD: I read his books . . . a book . . . Asylums.
 First but that's all because [I didn't
 read Asylums
 but I know it's one of the brilliant ones.
 CHAD: And I just . . . [read another one
 DEBORAH: Did you read Stigma?
 CHAD: No but I've got [It's wonderful.
 DEBORAH:

CHAD: I've got . . . three or four other ones that are like that.

DEBORAH: Presentation of Self in Everyday Life
CHAD: Presentation of Self in Everyday Life

DEBORAH: and uh Relations in Public,
and Interactions in Public,
Right, Interactional Ritual.

CHAD: Right, Interactional Ritual.
DEBORAH: I never read that one.

This interchange also exemplifies the power/solidarity paradox:

The symbols that display power (unequal status) and solidarity (human connection) are often the same, so every utterance is potentially ambiguous as to whether it is establishing power of solidarity. (In reality, I believe, every utterance displays both, in varying proportions.) Chad told me afterwards, during playback, that he was intimidated by my display of knowledge: how well I knew Goffman's work. From his point of view I was exercising power, making myself look good. I also said, however, in the course of listing the book titles, that I had not *read* most of these books; I simply knew of them. (As a matter of fact, I got the name of one title, *Interaction Ritual*, slightly wrong.) So from my point of view, I was not making myself look good, a point of view that was shared by Goffman who, after reading my dissertation, admonished me to read his books. I hope (and believe) it is not merely self-serving to claim that my intention in listing the names of Goffman's books was not to impress or overwhelm Chad. I simply got carried away with the aesthetic pleasure of listing book titles and felt driven to include as many as possible, for a certain aesthetic satisfaction. Operating on the assumption of solidarity, I saw myself as matching and feeding, not topping, Chad's interest in Goffman. (For his part, Chad seems to be experiencing the pleasure of repetition when he repeats many of the book titles I name.) A similar inherent ambiguity applies to the graduate student listing names of Germanic languages. She could be seen as trying to show off, to impress her husband and friends with her expertise (and with her worldly experience, since she speaks as if she had heard all these language varieties). But my instinctive interpretation is in terms of what I myself had done: she was primarily carried away by the delight of naming related languages. The effect of such a listing strategy, like that of any conversational strategy, will depend upon the personal and cultural styles of co-conversationalists. They might enjoy such a list too, or be intimidated or bored. The result of such a strategy can be either enhanced or threatened rapport, depending on the interaction of the styles of participants.

"I had a little ham, I had a little cheese": Rapport through telling details

As discussed earlier, repetition and dialogue are highly valued in literary analysis but devalued in conventional wisdom applied to conversation. Similarly, the use of details is most frequently considered a conversational liability, as in "Let's skip the details and get down to business." "Tell me all the gory details" is heard as a marked request. A *New Yorker* article that gives a portrait of a middle American quotes him as preferring to read *U.S. News & World Report* because he "had found its articles admirably 'short and to the point.'" In negative contrast, "he had tried *Newsweek* but had found its articles too long and detailed" (58).⁸ Here "detailed" is assumed to be "boring."

The assumption that details are boring seems also at the heart of an instance of private language reported to me by a woman whose family refers to Grandmother as "I had a little ham, I had a little cheese." This cryptic representation of her conversation captured, for them, the boring way that Grandmother reports insignificant details such as what she had for lunch. They wish she gave fewer details, or did not report her lunch at all, since they regard the topic as not worth telling about.

My Great-Aunt Mary had a love affair when she was in her 70's. Obese, balding, her hands and legs misshapen by arthritis, she did not fit the stereotype of a woman romantically loved. But she was – by a man, also in his seventies, who lived in a nursing home but occasionally spent weekends with her in her apartment. In trying to tell me what this relationship meant to her, my aunt told of a conversation. One evening she had had dinner at the home of friends. When she returned to her home that evening, her man friend called. In the course of their conversation, he asked her, "What did you wear?" When she told me this, she began to cry: "Do you know how many years it's been since anyone asked me what I wore?"

In a book concerned with everyday conversations (Tannen 1986a), I observe that women are more inclined than men to report details of daily events and conversations to friends and intimates. When talking about conversational style in groups of women and men as well as on radio talk shows, I find that this observation sparks strong recognition and agreement. For example, after reading this book, a colleague wrote, "My wife and I could relate especially to my inability to relate in sufficient detail (for her) the conversations of others. It's been a topic of our conversations for our whole marriage."⁹ This remark is interesting too in that it suggests dialogue can be a kind of detail.

That women are more inclined than men to value the telling of details about their daily lives and about other people (but also that not all men are

not) is supported by novelist Marge Piercy. In *Fly away home*, a divorced woman is amazed to learn that her new partner, Tom, is different in this respect from her former husband, Ross:

- (8) It surprised her what he knew about the people around him. Ross would never have known that Gretta disliked her son's teacher, or that Fay had just given walking papers to her boyfriend because he drank too much in front of her boys. For a man, Tom had an uncommon interest in the details of people's lives. Gossip, Ross would call it, but she thought it was just being interested in people. (218)

In depicting Tom's interest in the details of people's lives, Piercy recounts some of those details – specifically, with names: that “Gretta disliked her son's teacher, or that Fay had just given walking papers to her boyfriend because he drank too much in front of her boys.” These details convey not just the idea of Tom's conversation but a brief experience of it.

Piercy's character Ross is not alone in disparaging an interest in the details of people's lives as “gossip.” This was the attitude of Eudora Welty's mother, who wanted to keep the young Eudora from hearing the stories about people that the child loved, the very stories she credits with inspiring her to become a writer. The parallel between gossip and literature has been observed by many, including James Britton (1982).¹⁰

The intimacy of details

When my great-aunt told me it had been years since anyone had asked her what she wore, she was saying that it had been years since anyone had cared deeply about her. The exchange of relatively insignificant details about daily life is valued for its metacommentary of rapport, of caring. It can also be a sign of romantic involvement, of sexual interest or intimacy. In the novel *Household words* (see Appendix I), when Rhoda is attracted to a man, her attraction is made evident in attention to the details of his body:

- (9) Eddie Lederbach's hands were long and graceful, with soft, sparse hairs growing tenderly about the knuckles. She was not prepared for a complexity of emotions . . . His lips moved wetly in nervous speech. (101)

The other man that is remembered in such physical detail is Rhoda's dead husband, and it is the recollection of details about him that makes his memory painful. Furthermore, it is through details of description that the author leads the reader to experience a sense of Rhoda's feelings of loss at her husband's death. Waking up after having fallen asleep in her clothes following the funeral,

- (10) She thought . . . of his body's outline, the particular barrel-shape of his ribs, and the chest, bifurcated and hard under the coating of light brown hairs. The

absence of his form under the covers of the bed next to her engendered in her a sudden rage, as though she'd been robbed in the night. His bed was undisturbed, the chenille spread tucked properly around the pillow. She felt panicked and afraid – an actual physical shudder came over her, and then she had a dreadful urge to beat at the covers of his bed, to make him come out. (85–6)

To say that “His bed was undisturbed” conveys the idea of her husband's absence. But the detailed description: “the chenille spread tucked properly around the pillow,” conveys the image of the bed, not just the idea of it. “She felt panicked and afraid” tells what Rhoda felt, but that “an actual physical shudder came over her” and that she had an “urge to beat at the covers of his bed” convey images that prompt the reader to imagine how she felt. For Rhoda, and for readers, specific details trigger memories that trigger emotions.

Spoken literary discourse

I give one final example of spoken discourse to illustrate how it makes use of details to create an emotional response and understanding of the speaker's point. It is conversational, but not exactly conversational. The following excerpt comes from a relatively formal conversational genre: a radio talk show.¹¹ The guest, Vic Sussman, a writer who had left Washington DC to homestead in rural Vermont, had recently resumed residence in Washington. In answer to a question by the show's host, Diane Rehm, he explained how he reached the decision to move back to the city. His explanation depicts what James Joyce called an epiphany: a moment of sudden insight which Joyce saw as the basis for the fictional short story. Sussman leads listeners to understand his epiphany, an internal intellectual and emotional experience, by providing details which depict an image of the scene that sparked and situated the epiphany. The emotional impact of the image created (together with the musical qualities of his oral delivery) is attested by the host's spontaneous response.

Immediately prior to the following excerpt, Sussman explained that he reached his decision to move back to Washington during a Thanksgiving visit to the city. He had delivered a piece of writing to *The Washington Post*, which is located in the midst of downtown DC. (Implicit in his discourse is the information that he had recently separated from his wife.)

- (11) 1 And I remember stepping out,
2 I think this was November,
3 and I stepped out onto
4 somewhere around 18th and M,
5 or 18th and L,
6 at lunchtime,

7 and it was one of those warm, clear days in November.
 8 And there was a lunchtime press of people.
 9 tremendous crowds, ...
 10 and I stood there,
 11 and for the first time
 12 I stood there,
 13 not as a member of uh of A marriage.
 14 I stood there alone.
 15 And, ... the traffic was there,
 16 the noise was there,
 17 the swirl of people, ...
 18 and I suddenly looked at it,
 19 for the first time,
 20 through MY eyes. ...
 21 And I loved it.

Host: Hm.

22 And I've always had a dichotomous feeling
 23 about the city.
 24 I grew up in New York,
 25 and moved to Washington in the 50's,
 26 but THAT was the first time I stood there,
 27 And I had HAD the experiences
 28 that I had set out to have,
 29 IN the country.
 30 I didn't need to do it anymore.
 31 And very few people,
 32 I mean I'm very fortunate.
 33 Very few people get to really live their fantasies.
 34 It was over.
 35 I-I wrote a piece for NPR,
 36 in which I-I used the line,
 37 I said,
 38 (This actually happened.)
 39 I said, "An elegant woman brushed past me,
 40 and the smell, the aroma of her perfume
 41 mingled with the musk of asphalt."
 42 And I just felt like,
 43 "This is where I belong."

Host: [chuckle] hmmmmmm

The transcription of the host's responses ("hm," [chuckle] hmmmmmm" following lines 21 and 42) are inadequate to capture their vocal quality: They are moans of appreciation having the character of what Goffman (1981) called "response cries," spontaneous expressions of sudden feeling.

There are many poetic aspects of Sussman's account that contribute to the emotional impact of his discourse: repetition and variation (for

example, "I stood there" in lines 10, 12, and 14, and "for the first time" in lines 11 and 19); a compelling rhythm, created in part by the repetitions and also strategic pauses (note, for example, the building of suspense by delaying introducing the key image by uttering lines 37-9: "I said, (This actually happened.) I said,"; words with literary connotations ("press" and "swirl of people" in lines 8 and 17, "aroma" - important enough to be self-corrected from "smell" - in line 40, and "mingled" in line 41). Moreover, Sussman's voice takes on a breathy, emotionally tinged quality beginning in line 17 with "the swirl of people" and building to the climax to which the host responds with her first "hm" following line 21. In addition to these and other poetic qualities, Sussman uses details, as highlighted by underlining. As observed in earlier examples, many of these details cluster in the opening orientation section. He tells the specific street corner he was on: lines 4-5 "somewhere around 18th and M, or 18th and L" (as was seen earlier with respect to dates, the difference between L and M Streets is insignificant but the display of effort to recall provides a sense of verisimilitude); the time: line 6 "at lunchtime"; the season and weather: line 7 "one of those warm, clear days in November"; and the scene: line 8 "a lunchtime press of people, tremendous crowds."

The final image that evokes a strong response from the host is especially interesting because it is identified as a quotation from a "commentary" Sussman wrote for delivery on National Public Radio (line 35 "a piece for NPR"). Thus it is an oral repetition of a text previously performed orally but originally written for oral delivery.¹² In these lines (39-41), the words are carefully chosen to capture the moment of epiphany in a combination of visual impressions ("an elegant woman," "the asphalt") and olfactory impressions ("the aroma of her perfume," "the musk of asphalt") which combine two seemingly incompatible worlds: one beautiful (the woman) and one ugly (the city street with its "traffic," "noise," and "asphalt"). The result is that the ugly city became infused with beauty and drew him to it. The host's response is overlapped with the verbal coda to the guest's story ("and I just felt 'This is where I belong,'"), evidence that her response is to the immediately preceding image rather than the evaluative coda.¹³

Written discourse

The preceding examples from *Household words* demonstrate strategic use of detail in fiction. Book reviewers frequently comment on writers' use of details (indeed, I have yet to read an issue of *The New York Times Book Review* that does not contain numerous remarks on use of details). In some cases, the authors' use of details is the basis for praise, in others for criticism. In both types of cases, the evaluations reveal the assumption that

management of detail is a crucial part of writing. They also reveal specific ways that the critics believe details work.

A reviewer (Shapiro 1987) praises the use of details in a novel by saying the author "doesn't skimp, and she uses details of food and clothing to refine a scene rather than sum it up." Another reviewer (Humphreys 1985) refers to details in criticizing a novel by May Sarton written in the voice of a character named Cam, who is writing her first novel about another character named Jane:

- (12) Jane was full of life, extraordinary, glamorous, innocent. But Jane isn't shown with the sort of detail that enlivens.

Cam thought that in writing a novel she would be free from the struggle with detail. But a novel should be one long struggle with detail, not of dates and facts but of difficult scenes, of character caught off guard. Words like "passionate" and "glamorous" are the opposite of detail. They become in a novel almost useless, the vocabulary of eulogy.

Both these excerpts show that the critics regard details as elements used in the creation of characters moving in scenes, and scenes involving characters in relation to each other as the basic material of fiction.

Reviewers commenting on works of nonfiction rather than fiction also frequently cite the handling of details. A negative view of details is found in a review (Geiger 1987) of a book about the AIDS epidemic by Randy Shilts (1987).

- (13) The reader drowns in detail. The book jacket says that Mr. Shilts – in addition to his years of daily coverage of the epidemic – conducted more than 900 interviews in 12 nations and dug out thousands of pages of Government documents. He seems to have used every one of them.

It is interesting to note that the reviewer gives specific numbers: "900 interviews," "12 nations," "thousands of pages of Government documents." By being thus specific, he creates a sense of the voluminousness of the detail in Shilts's book, but not the nature of it. He did not give many specific examples of the details that he felt drowned readers. (Perhaps he wished to avoid the affective fallacy of convincing readers the book is boring by boring them in the review.) I found more affecting, and more memorable, than Geiger's review a shorter one by Miller (1987) which conveyed one of the main points of Shilts's book by recounting a specific instance of government negligence in dealing with AIDS.

In writing this section, I had to decide whether to end my discussion with the preceding paragraph, having stated my perception of the difference between the two reviews of Shilts's book, or whether to provide a specific example of detail from Miller's review. I decided to provide it:

- (14) As so often in Shilts's book, one small incident is used to drive his point home. On July 27, 1982, officials convened in Washington, D.C., to debate screening

all blood donors in an effort to stem the spread of the virus through the nation's blood supply. Despite urgent pleas from researchers at the Centers for Disease Control, other officials were skeptical. Underfunded and open, as always, to the special pleading of special interests, the FDA deferred any decision on imposing a potentially expensive blood-screening test. This bit of waffling pleased both gay militants worried about discrimination and cost-conscious blood bankers. But delaying testing, Shilts argues, contributed, by the estimates of doctors at the CDC, to thousands of needless deaths. (91)

I invite readers to consider whether they had a more emotional response to this specific illustration than to the general reference to the government's negligence in the preceding paragraph, and, eventually, if they remember my reference to the book about AIDS and, if so, what they remember about it.

Reviewers differ, then, in finding the details in particular books effective or not. But they agree that managing details, finding the right ones and the right amount, is a crucial part of writing. It was seen earlier that at least one family finds it boring when Grandmother tells what she ate for lunch. Yet works of fiction frequently report what people eat, if they report that they eat at all. Why, for example, is it moving to be told what Rhoda ate for lunch in *Household words*?

- (15) She sat in the kitchen eating her usual lunch, a mound of cottage cheese piled over lettuce (no eating from the container: like a colonist in an outpost, she was strict about keeping proprieties even when no one was looking).

The effectiveness of this passage comes from many linguistic strategies, including the simile that associates Rhoda with a colonist at an outpost: an association that aptly suggests her feelings of isolation and abandonment on being suddenly widowed. But this simile is enhanced, indeed triggered, by the image of Rhoda sitting down to a frugal (by some standards), solitary, yet properly laid out lunch of cottage cheese on lettuce.

Similarly, why does the narrator of a short story (Lipsky 1985:46) report, "I unload the rest of the groceries. There is a box of spaghetti, Tropicana orange juice, brown rice, pita bread, a few plain Dannon yogurts"? The brand names will trigger in the minds of those familiar with these brands images of the packages. Furthermore, the specific items and the adjectives describing them suggest a kind of frugality ("plain Dannon yogurt," "spaghetti"), a concern with health (*brown rice*), and even perhaps an alternative life style represented by "alternative" food (*pita bread*).

There is a cinematic analogue to verbal mention in fiction. The camera in the film *Hannah and her sisters* shows Woody Allen, newly (and temporarily) converted to Catholicism, unloading a grocery bag. The audience in attendance when I saw this film laughed when the camera focused on Allen withdrawing from the bag a loaf of Wonder Bread and a jar of Hellman's

mayonnaise. I have asked numerous people why they laughed at these details, and have received a wide range of answers. Some familiar with Jewish custom and other Woody Allen movies think it suggests a scene Allen used humorously in *Manhattan* and elsewhere: a Christian orders a corned beef or pastrami sandwich (typical Jewish food) and asks to have it with mayonnaise on white bread. This is a violation of Jewish dietary custom and preference which prescribe that corned beef be eaten on rye bread with mustard. I found the scene funny partly because whereas Jews would never eat Wonder Bread, Hellman's is the brand of mayonnaise preferred by New York Jews. (I discovered that this was a cultural rather than a personal preference by reading as much in an amusing essay by Nora Ephron.) Thus, though the character played by Allen has converted his religion and attempted to change his eating habits, he cannot help but remain fundamentally a New York Jew. Still others, the majority of Americans no doubt, must have laughed for other reasons. Although individuals may have different responses to the specific details of what Allen bought, it is the depiction of details that makes possible varied meaningful responses.

Listing

Woody Allen's unloading of items from a grocery bag can be seen as a visual list. *Household words* includes lists of details as well. For example, when guests flock to Rhoda's house following her husband's funeral, they

- (16) arrived with boxes of candy in their hands. Chocolates mostly: dark 'n' light assortments, cherries with cordial centers, butter creams. (83)

Not only does this detailed list of types of chocolate give a sense of verisimilitude (all details and images do this), but they also contribute to the impression that a great many different people came bearing chocolates. This helps the reader understand why Rhoda feels overwhelmed by the crush of people in the house and their irrelevant gifts.

Feeling thus overwhelmed, Rhoda excuses herself and goes upstairs to her room where she lies down on her bed and falls asleep. She awakes to an empty house, the feeling of which is conveyed in a scene depicted by a list of the foods the guests left behind:

- (17) Food remained, piled on the dining room and cocktail tables – a catered turkey half picked over, platters of cold cuts, and an untouched steamship basket of fruit in cellophane. (85)

The "half picked over" turkey suggests the forlornness Rhoda feels. The "untouched steamship basket of fruit in cellophane" suggests the unlikely frivolity of the fruit's packaging and its irrelevance. The list structure implies that there are more foods "piled" around than are named.

As time passes, Rhoda's father spends increasing amounts of time in her house, filling in the slot left empty by her husband's death. His presence is both comforting and irritating, as conveyed by the depiction of his typical conversation in a list:

- (18) Her father liked to tell her things from the newspaper – Marines returning from Korea with bizarre injuries remedied by miraculous prostheses, mothers throwing their children from burning buildings, flood victims finding their family heirlooms floating intact down-river. (89–90)

The specific list of her father's unrelated topics of conversation conveys the irrelevance of his presence.

A final example of a list comes from an informal written genre, a personal letter. A Greek mother accompanied her daughter to the United States and helped her get set up to begin graduate studies. Upon returning to Greece alone, the mother began her correspondence with her daughter while still on the airplane headed for Athens. At two points, her letter includes lists of the foods she ate on the plane:

- (19) Ora 10 1/2. Molis efaga ryzi, souvlaki, mia bira, salata kai garidhes mikres, glyko kafe.

It's 10:30. I have just eaten rice, beef, a beer, salad with small shrimps, sweet coffee.

Alla i ora einai 4 to proi. . . . Molis fagame to proino, kafe, gala, marmeladha, voutyro, tyri, psomi, portokaladha kai krouasan.

But it's 4 o'clock in the morning. . . . We have just eaten breakfast, coffee, milk, marmalade, butter, cheese, bread, orange juice and croissant.

By providing her daughter with a detailed account of her trip, the mother gives her a sense of being present with her, softening the pain of their separation (and, in a way, heightening it, by giving a poignant and pointed impression of where she is and what she is doing).

All but one of the lists I have cited are of food: food eaten, offered as gifts, bought at the store. Perhaps this is simply because eating is a mundane, daily, but universal and personal activity. If eating together is a sign of intimacy, perhaps telling about eating is a way of signalling intimacy between people who are not co-present to eat together.

A detail may refer to a level of perception rather than a description. For example, the following observation is made in a novel by Celia Fremlin (1985:16–17).¹⁴ A woman has sent her husband, Geoffrey, next door to extend a generous dinner invitation to a neighbor who has moved in that day. Geoffrey returns full of excitement, bubbling with admiration for and details about the new neighbor. He announces, starchy-eyed, that the neighbor has invited *them* to dinner in her not-yet furnished home, and he asks his wife if she has a red ribbon for Shang Low, the neighbor's Pekinese. The

wife responds with irony, but Geoffrey is slow to join in her ironic denigration of the neighbor's airs in ribboning her dog:

- (20) She giggled in terrible solitude for a fraction of a second; and then Geoffrey joined in, a tiny bit too late and a tiny bit too loud. And the joke did not lead to another joke. Murmuring something about "having promised . . .," Geoffrey hurried away out of the kitchen and out of the house, without any red ribbon. And this piece of red ribbon, which they didn't look for, didn't find, and probably hadn't got, became the very first of the objects which couldn't ever again be mentioned between them.

There are innumerable linguistic strategies at work in this passage which beg for analysis, including, of course, repetition and dialogue. But I wish to draw attention only to the detailed level of perception of the delicate balance of irony and shared laughter, precisely timed, that would establish solidarity between the narrator and her husband, in alliance against the outside world in the form of another person. By failing to perform his part in expected sequence, timing, and manner, Geoffrey launches a betrayal of his wife: He is beginning to align himself instead with the attractive new neighbor. Fremlin leads the reader to understand the wife's jealousy by resenting the fleeting betrayal, and the wife's experience of it, in slow-motion detail. Moreover, the husband's romantic interest in the new neighbor leaks in his enthusiastic, uncritical recounting of details about her, such as the name and breed of her dog.¹⁵

Attention to details associated with a person can be (and is in this novel) a sign of romantic interest.¹⁶ That the red ribbon became an object "which couldn't ever again be mentioned between them" illustrates the way that feelings become associated with objects (or images, or details). Mentioning the ribbon would remind both husband and wife of the moment in which it had figured and hence of the beginning of his betrayal.

High-involvement writing

The following example is from a written genre but also one that cannot easily be categorized as literary or nonliterary. Rather than identifying the source at the outset, I would like to invite readers to ask themselves what kind of text the following opening sentences come from.

- (21) Charles and Jeanne Atchison live near the Cowboy City dance bar on a gravel street in a peeling white and gold mobile home. Weeds sway in the breeze out front. It's a street with a melancholy down-on-one's-luck feel about it. The town is Azle, Tex., a tiny speck on the periphery of Fort Worth.

A few years ago, the picture was a far prettier one. Charles (Chuck) Atchison was all set. He made good money – more than \$1000 a week – enough to pay for a cozy house, new cars, fanciful trips. But all that is gone.

He's six months behind on rent for his land, and don't even ask about the legal bills.

"It's sort of like I was barreling along and I suddenly shifted into reverse," Mr. Atchison said with a rueful smile. "Well, welcome to whistle blower country."

Chuck Atchison is 44, with a stony face and a sparse mustache. (Kleinfield 1986:1)

These lines are not from a short story or magazine article. The excerpt is from the front page of the Business section of *The New York Times* – that soberest section of the soberest of American newspapers.

The article begun by these lines, about a man whose career was ruined because he "blew the whistle" (made public his employer's improper activities) contains all the literary strategies I have been investigating. Note the use of dialogue ("It's sort of like I was barreling along and I suddenly shifted into reverse," Mr. Atchison said with a rueful smile. "Well, welcome to whistle blower country."') and figures of speech ("Mr. Atchison wound up out of a job and *spinning* in debt. He's working again, in another industry, slowly trying to patch the leaks in his life"). But most striking, I think, is the reporting of details of scene and character that are not just literary-like encasements for information but have no informational value at all. How can a journalist writing for the business section of the American "newspaper of record" justify "reporting" the name of the dance bar near which the subject lives, the colors of his mobile home, that his face was "stony" and his mustache "sparse"? When did journalism begin to sound like literary writing?

According to columnist Bob Greene, journalists turned their attention to everyday details in 1963, when Jimmy Breslin wrote a column entitled "A death in Emergency Room One" detailing the last moments of John Kennedy's life. According to Greene, Breslin's column "literally took his readers into the corridors and operating rooms of Parkland Hospital on that day." Greene calls it "the most vivid piece of writing to come out of the assassination of John F. Kennedy." Even the concern with "vivid" writing (rather than accurate, clear, or informative writing) seems out of place in reference to journalism. It is reminiscent of what Jakobson (1960) called the "poetic function" of language: "the set toward the message," that is, use of language in which it is the language itself that counts most.¹⁷

Greene observes, "Journalists today are trained to get those telling details quickly." He suggests that this style of reporting satisfies the public's curiosity. But why is the public curious about such details? I believe the key is to be found in Greene's observation that Breslin "literally [i.e. figuratively] took his readers into the . . . rooms." What purpose is served by feeling one had been in the rooms where an event occurred, if not the pleasurable sense of involvement?

When details don't work or work for ill

All of the examples I have adduced are illustrative of the effective use of details. But like any linguistic phenomenon (or nonlinguistic one), what can be used effectively can also be used ineffectively or effectively for ill. One can fabricate details to make a false story sound true, or pile on details about irrelevant topics to de-fuse, diffuse, or avoid a relevant topic. Lakoff and Tannen (1984) show that this strategy is used by the wife, Marianne, to avoid confronting the breakdown of her marriage in Ingmar Bergman's screenplay, *Scenes from a marriage*. Whereas hyperattention to the details associated with a person or subject can be positive, for example in love relationships or doing an important job or developing a skill or art, such attention is considered inappropriate, even obsessive, when the object of attention is deemed unworthy. It is perhaps for this reason that love is frequently considered an obsession, and has frequently been so depicted in art.

The effectiveness of attention to details can be manipulated, for example by pretending attention to the details of a person's appearance or discourse for purposes of seduction. I observed a benign, probably common fabrication of details when I overheard someone saying, "Yesterday I got five messages from him. I'm not exaggerating. I counted them." I happened to know that the speaker had gotten one message the day before from the person in question. Perhaps she had gotten more on another day. But what counts, I think, is that the speaker knew that being specific about a large number of messages would make her point more graphically than would a general or abstract statement.

The inappropriate use of details can be the basis for humor. For example, a list that is too detailed for its context can be comic, as in a cartoon showing a priest delivering a eulogy: "He was a man of simple tastes – baked macaroni, steamed cabbage, wax beans, boiled onions, and corn fritters." The cartoon is funny because the level of detail is inappropriate to the occasion (and also because of the banality of the items in the list).

If specific details spark an emotional response, the response they spark can be negative as well as positive. A painter was asked by an acquaintance to paint four small pictures of the city in which he lived. He did so, and mailed them to her. When they talked on the phone, she said that she and her husband liked three of the paintings but not the fourth. Had she stopped there, everything would have been fine. The painter was not insulted and did not mind her returning one painting. But she went on to explain what they didn't like about it: "It's cold. The blue is cold. And it's naive." These specific points of criticism engaged the painter emotionally; they made him feel rejected, defensive, and hurt. It was the specific details of criticism that were hurtful whereas the general fact of it was not.

If attention to detail is a sign of intimacy, as has been shown, then its appearance will be unpleasant if intimacy is not appropriate or not wanted. In a passage from *Household words*, for example, which was cited in another context at the beginning of chapter 4, a prospective buyer of Rhoda's husband's pharmacy tries to convince her that he can only afford a low price:

(22) In Southern California he had run a thriving drug and stationery center in a shopping mall, but his wife had left him for a blond beach bum with a tattoo, and he had come east to make a new start. He had a lovely new wife, a baby on the way, and he could go no higher in price.

Rhoda was not pleased to hear the sordid minutiae of his personal history . . . (93)

The "drug and stationery center" is made imageable by being set "in a shopping mall," and the "blond beach bum" is made imageable by the addition of "a tattoo," as well as the suggestion of dialogue in such phrases as "beach bum," "lovely new wife," and "baby on the way." For Rhoda, however, the details of the man's "personal history" are unwanted because she does not want intimacy with him.

Rhoda similarly resists intimacy invoked by details in another scene, this time uttered by a man who is a different sort of prospect: Friends have invited him to dinner along with Rhoda as a prospective love interest. The man, Eddie Lederbach, whose "long and graceful" hands were seen in (9), talks incessantly of his unfair blacklisting during the McCarthy era:

(23) "When I get up in the morning now, the first thing I think of is, *it's not fair*. Sometimes I wake up shouting it in my sleep."

There was an awkward silence. Nobody wanted to know what he did in his sleep. (101)

Everyone has had the experience of being the recipient of unwanted details – details that seem pointless or excessive or demanding more or longer or more intimate attention than one wants to give. Many of the examples I have collected of people piling on details in conversation involve old people. I can think of many possible explanations for this. It may be that old people often want more involvement with young people than young people want with them, or that old people frequently cannot hear well and exercise the option of telling detailed stories to maintain interaction, or simply that old people are more inclined to reminisce about the past, consequently telling stories that are likely to include details.

It is a tenet of contemporary American psychology that mental health requires psychological separation from one's parents. One way of resisting overinvolvement, for some people at least, is resisting telling details. A middle-aged woman who is a psychotherapist was telling me that her sister

is overly involved with their mother. As evidence of this overinvolvement, she said, "It's amazing, the details of Jane's life my mother knows." Later in the same conversation, she was explaining that she herself resists her mother's attempts to get overly involved in her life. As evidence of the mother's attempts to draw her into unhealthy involvement, the woman commented, "She's hungry for details." To give me an example of the obviously inappropriate questions her mother asks, she said, "If I tell her I went somewhere, she asks, 'What did you wear?'" I was struck because this was the same question that brought my Great-Aunt Mary such happiness. The difference is that my great-aunt was seeking involvement with the man who asked her what she wore; this psychotherapist was resisting what she perceived as the excessive involvement her mother sought with her.

Presumably, however, when the speaker's sister talks to their mother, she does not feel that her asking "What did you wear?" is inappropriate. Perhaps, like my great-aunt, she values the show of caring and resulting involvement. Individuals differ with respect to the proportions of independence and involvement that seem appropriate, as well as what manifestations of those values – what ways of honoring independence and involvement – seem appropriate. Hence, individuals differ with respect to how many and which details seem appropriate to request or offer in a given context (where context is broadly defined to include the setting, the speech activity being engaged in, the interlocutors, and the relationship among them, perceived or sought).

In addition to individual differences, there are also, of course, cultural differences. Is it, perhaps, not by chance that the letter from the mother in (19) telling exactly what she ate on the airplane was written by a Greek mother? Would an American of Anglo-Saxon background be as likely to offer that level of detail in correspondence? (I am not saying the answer is no, only that the question is worth asking.) A review of a Japanese comic book translated into English notes, "It is . . . a Japanese convention to devote more attention to illustrative detail than clever dialogue" (Haberman 1988). Watanabe (1990) found, in a comparative study of small group discussions among Japanese, on the one hand, and Americans, on the other, that, in discussing topics set by the experimenter, the Japanese speakers tended to give more detailed accounts of reasons for making decisions. These disparate kinds of evidence support the frequently-made observation that Japanese culture pays more attention to detail than do Western cultures.

Similar differences obtain for literature. Literatures of different cultures and different genres differ with respect to how many and what details are included. And readers, like critics, differ in whether or not they find the level of details provided to be effective or not. Some love the exorbitant details of

New Yorker articles; others lose patience with them. When one feels that a written work of art or persuasion is demanding too much involvement – trying to "pull" at one's "heart strings" – one resists (like the daughter who does not want her mother to be too involved in her life) and labels that work manipulative or sentimental (just as a daughter who resists involvement may label her mother with such contemporary psychological terms as manipulative, enmeshed, or neurotic).

Conclusion

I return now to the story-within-a-story from Hymes (1973) that I quoted at the outset. I would like to ask readers to ask themselves whether they recall Hymes's narrative as a story about Skunk, or a story about eels. I am intrigued by this text because after having read it a number of times in the process of editing the article by Rosen (1988) in which it is cited, I had ample opportunity to observe that it is a story about collecting from a native American informant a tale about Skunk. And yet I cannot stop thinking of it as Hymes's story about eels. Indeed, at the point at which I began composing this paragraph, I had to flip back to the text to remind myself which animal the tale is about. But the image of Mrs. Tohet cleaning and spreading the eels, and of the eels hanging up to dry "like so many shrunken infants' overalls," is with me forever. The reason, I suggest, is that that part of the story comes alive as a scene because of the specific concrete details of Mrs. Tohet's actions, a smile, and resultant images ("the white cord within removed, and the spread skin cut in each of its four corners, held apart by sticks," the eels "strung up on a line between poles, like so many shrunken infants' overalls"). Significant too is the detailed description of action introducing her dialogue, which heightens the drama of the dialogue by delaying its appearance ("Mrs. Tohet stepped back, hands on hips, looking at the line of eels, and said: 'Ain't that beautiful!'"). In contrast, the story of Skunk remains fuzzy for me because it is presented in paraphrase and summary¹⁸.

A woman is raped and tortured in John Barth's novel *Sabbatical*. When the woman's sister tells a man the details of what was done to her, the man tells her to stop, saying, "The details are just dreadfulness, even between ourselves" (65). But the sister disagrees, saying, "Rape and Torture and Terror are just words; the details are what's real." She is right, if what is real is what is experienced and felt. Reading or hearing that a woman was raped and tortured is distressing, and ultimately forgettable; reading or hearing a detailed description of what was done to her (I will not recount here the detailed account provided in this novel, even though it would forcefully dramatize its emotional impact) is harrowing, nauseating, nightmare-making, and often unforgettable: a little closer to the experience.

Hymes (1981:314) notes that his examination of an American Indian (Clackamas) narrative, applying "a dialectic method proposed by Lévi-Strauss showed further pattern, not of cognitive categories, but of sensory imagery and expressive detail . . ." Hymes advocates a view of discourse as simultaneously cognitive and aesthetic: communicating ideas and feelings at the same time, not only by the meanings of words but also by their form and the pattern they establish of constants and contrasts.

Returning to the terms of Friedrich, images work through the individual imagination to create involvement. The invoking of details – specific, concrete, familiar – makes it possible for an individual to recall and a hearer to recreate a scene in which people are in relation to each other and to objects in the world. In this way, and by a kind of paradox, the individual imagination is a key to interpersonal involvement, and interpersonal involvement is a key to understanding language.

6 Involvement strategies in consort: literary nonfiction and political oratory

Each of the preceding three chapters focuses on a single involvement strategy. In this chapter, I show how the three strategies examined: repetition, constructed dialogue, and details and imagery, work together with each other and with other strategies to create involvement. Furthermore, there has been a movement, within each chapter and across the chapters, from conversation to more deliberately composed genres, both written and spoken discourse types that combine involvement strategies in a variety of ways. This chapter is concerned exclusively with nonconversational genres. It analyzes, first, an example of academic writing that uses involvement strategies more commonly found in fiction, and then examines in detail a formal spoken genre: a political speech modeled on the African-American sermon. Throughout, I emphasize again the inseparability of emotion and thought.

Thinking with feeling

In her memoir of her parents, Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Mary Catherine Bateson (1984) returns repeatedly to the inseparability of emotion and cognition. She notes that Gregory Bateson "genuinely rejected the notion of a separation between thought and feeling" (173). Similarly, Mead's "prose echoes with the lines of memorized poetry" and with gospel (for example, "with references to women 'great with child' rather than pregnant"). Mead used such "evocative language," Bateson observes, "to make it possible for readers to respond emotionally as well as intellectually" (200–1).

The conviction that no discourse could, or should try to, be emotion-free became crucial to Mary Catherine Bateson when she confronted the task of communicating ideas that evolved in scholarly interaction. Appointed rapporteur for a conference her father organized on cybernetics, she "reached the conclusion that my book would be true to the event only if it followed some of the conventions of fiction" because the "conventions of academic reporting . . . would mean editing out emotions that seemed to me essential to the process" (180).