MODULAR
DESIGN

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I SEE TWO DIFFERENT WAYS, quite distinct if not opposed, of thinking about the raw material of which narratives are made—two ways of contemplating the original experience, whether real, imagined, or some blend of the two, to which the work will give form. You may think of this primary experience as a single amorphous mass of information. Or you may conceive of it as a grab-bag of unassembled components—something like a jumble of unsnapped Legos, say.

In the first case, the task of the writer is to shape the material. The writer models a unitary mass of information in the same way that a sculptor models a blob of clay or carves a block of stone. Perhaps there is something in the mass to begin with that suggests the form the artist will give it. In that case, form is indwelling, inherent in experience, in the block. Michelangelo, at any rate, seemed to believe something of the sort when he spoke of his *discovery* of figures within masses of marble. For the writer, the discovery of innate forms underlying the superficially amorphous flux of experience is closely related to the discovery of meanings inherent in experience—if the writer is inclined to believe that the meaning of experience is intrinsic instead of being arbitrarily superimposed.

An artist with this attitude toward the raw material sees the artifact singly, as an integrated whole. Most often the work will be shaped by subtraction: only those elements which properly express the essential form are allowed to remain. That, quite literally, is the method of the woodcarver or stonecarver. Writers are less likely to think of their craft as subtractive, since in the beginning the words must always be piled up, not carved away. Still, the decisions about what to say and what not to say accomplish many exclusions, so that the mass of primary experiential material is in fact shaped by being reduced.

In narrative art, linear design provides the closest analogy to this kind of sculptural model (despite the fact that in plastic art, you really can't say that sculpture is linear). Both the carver and the writer of linear narratives are first concerned with the form of the work in its entirety. The carver thinks of the seamless smooth movement of the shape to be chiseled out. The writer thinks of the overall movement of the principal narrative vector from its start to its finish, all other issues being subordinated to this overarching concern.

In the second case, the task of the artist is not to discover the essential form of the work by whittling away the dross, but to assemble the work out of small component parts. This breed of artist is not so much a sculptor as mosaicist, assembling fragments of glass and tile to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image. In narrative art, this mosaic method is the basis for modular design.

If linear design can be understood as somehow subtractive, a process of

removing the less essential material so as to reveal the movement of narrative vectors more cleanly and clearly, then modular design is additive. The writer adds and arranges more and more modular units which may be attractive in themselves for all sorts of different reasons, but which also must serve the purpose of clarifying the overall design of the text as a whole. In linear design, the integrity of the finished work is obviously the first concern, since the writer is thinking of the work holistically to begin with. In the case of modular design, the writer will, at the outset, approach the raw material in a more fragmentary way. A sense of integrity in the work as a whole must be achieved by symmetrical arrangement of the modular parts. In a modular narrative design, narrative elements are balanced in symmetry as shapes are balanced in a symmetrical geometric figure, or as weights are balanced on a scale.

Of course, this symmetry need not be perfectly exact. Different kinds of symmetry are found in nature, and only the lowest organisms are radially symmetrical, so that any dividing line that passes through the center will produce two halves which reflect one another perfectly. Higher organisms, from flatworms to human beings, are *bilaterally* symmetrical, meaning that only one bisecting line will produce two precisely reflecting halves. In the case of an isosceles triangle, such as the Freitag triangle of a linear design, the symmetry will be exact. In living organisms, this bilateral symmetry will be rather more rough and approximate (as evidenced by the indubitable fact that one of my ears is even larger than the other one).

Manmade objects tend to follow similar rules. An architecture based on perfect circles or perfect squares may strangle on the constraints of its own symmetry. So the symmetry of most buildings is bilateral, not radial. This principle also extends itself to modular design. By following organic rules of order, modular design makes for a more lifelike narrative.

The units, modules, of modular design may be defined for narratives in all sorts of different ways, depending partially upon scale. At the page-by-page level, the modular unit will most probably look like a text block, separated from its fellows by space breaks. We have already seen how in linear narratives these insignificant-looking space breaks can be used to signal jump cuts from one point in a narrative forward to another, to indicate other shifts in chronology, to shift scenes or to accomplish other sorts of transitions, in a style which has been very much influenced by the movies. In modular design, this semicinematic mode of transition can be used to accomplish more complicated changes. From text block to text block, a modular design may change storyline, switch from character to character, switch between first-, second- or third-person narration in the treatment of the *same* character, make radical divergences in tone and voice, and in fact do almost anything you can imagine. All these shifts and rearrangements are held back from the brink of total anarchy by observing certain basic principles of order, symmetry, and balance.

Complex modular designs are more frequent in long fiction than short fiction. The use of modular design at the level of the short story is almost exclusively a late-twentieth-century phenomenon (with *Maldoror*, the work of the earlier French writer Lautréamont, providing at least one interesting exception to this rule). The influence of film narratives on prose narratives looks to be a likely explanation for that situation.

But at longer lengths, the modular concept may be as old as storytelling itself. Within cycles of mythology, whether Greek, Roman, or Stone Age primitive, individual tales can be and often are rearranged and reordered with respect to one another, in ways that may alter the total effect of the whole body of the narrative to which they belong. Single-author story cycles also have an ancient lineage, going back at least as far as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, where the overarching conceit—twelve people telling tales to one another as they proceed on their pilgrimage—allows for considerable internal flexibility and the possibility of more than one arrangement. The case is much the same with *The Arabian Nights* and with another masterpiece of the Islamic tradition, Farid ud-din Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*.

In twentieth-century American literature, the first really powerful example of a story cycle is Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*. Though Anderson wrote other novels, this modular work is his best known and best appreciated and the only book-length work of his still widely read outside of scholarly circles. The linear form of the novel was not well-suited to his gifts; modular design provided him with a better solution. Anderson's one-time apprentice Ernest Hemingway published a story cycle of sorts (*In Our Time*) as his first book; this group is not so coherently worked out as *Winesburg*, but the influence of the modular conception is quite clear. No one could claim that Faulkner was incapable of writing a linear novel, but three of his books—*Go Down, Moses*; *The Unvanquished*; and *As I Lay Dying*—are excellent (and quite different) examples of modular design.

More recently (from the 1970s on up) the story cycle, or episodic novel, has been a popular resort both for nonnovelists—story writers working at book length—and for novelists interested in trying a new form. Generally popular examples of this modular design–based genre include Louise Erdrich's first book, *Love Medicine*; Harriet Doerr's *Stones for Ibarra* (a winner of the National Book Award); and Carolyn Chute's *The Beans of Egypt, Maine*. Less well-known but equally admirable are Russell Banks's *Trailerpark*, Fred Chappell's *I Am One of You Forever*, and William Vollmann's *The Rainbow Stories*.

What modular design can do is liberate the writer from linear logic, those chains of cause and effect, strings of dominoes always falling forward. Modular design replaces the domino theory of narrative with other principles which have less to do with motion (the story as a process) and more to do with overall shapeliness (the story as a fixed geometric form). The geometry

of a modular design, especially one that has been well worked out in advance of composition, will be defining and confining to some degree. But the gain can be more than worth the sacrifice. The very fixity of the substructure can give the writer more latitude to improvise freely around the hidden armature with plot, character, and voice.

Of course a linear design may also show great internal diversity—in plot complication; character; shifts of point of view; shifts from one mode of narration to another; changes in voicing, tone and style. But all this diversity must be incorporated into the forward linear movement of the whole, as if the writer had taken a number of strands to make a braid. In modular design, all these ingredients can be treated less like strands and more like bricks. They can be managed as if they were discrete, particulate—capable of being assembled in more than a single way.

Time is a tyrant over all narratives: some events must always precede and others always follow. Modular design allows the writer to throw off the burden of chronology as much as is possible. It is always there, somewhere, but you may be able to proceed as if it didn't affect you. Modular design is an attractive way to show relationships between events or people or motifs or themes which are not generated by sequences of cause and effect and so are somehow atemporal, perhaps even timeless.

The sorts of problems which a modular design can solve are more likely to crop up at book length than at story length. That's partly because most writers can grasp the whole length of a story intuitively, without really thinking about it very explicitly, so that there is no real need to break it down into its components. But for most writers, a book-length work surpasses intuitive structural capacity. To try to intuit your way through a whole novel as if it were just a big story (which perhaps it is) will most likely be too overwhelming a prospect. There's a great incentive to organize it formally in advance to some degree, whether by preparing an abstract of its singular linear movement or by disassembling it into elementary component parts. And for many writers, often for the strongest and most intuitive story writers, the second, modular option will be the most appealing.

Because the composition of short stories usually doesn't require a great deal of formal advance planning, not too many writers resort to full-fledged modular designs at the length of the short story. But this rule is exceedingly well-distinguished with exceptions. The writers of the stories that follow have often adopted modular designs less for convenience than out of inevitable necessity. The modular form of such a story becomes quite inseparable from its meaning.