Proximity

What is making me or my reader feel distant from my narrative?

I.

Suppose that you have written a poem about an intensely traumatic encounter, but the reader experiences the poem essentially as a detached observer. Understandably, you find this response not only disappointing but also puzzling. You could blame the reader, but this is rarely where the problem lies. Often the underlying issue is what I call "errors in proximity."

> A graphic metaphor I often use when discussing proximity is a burning house. Imagine the difference between a sound byte being told by a television reporter on the sidewalk and an account by the woman who almost failed to find her way out of the burning house. You can sense how different these two narratives would be. Each narrator's proximity and version — which is what is at stake — is radically different. The apparent same story is not the same story.
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> To experience two very different proximities in the same narrative, select an unfinished piece of prose or poetry and write two new versions, one in which the narrator is located entirely inside the narrative and the other in which the narrator is observing and commenting on the narrative action. As you read them, what do the different proximities evoke? Reveal?
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> One way to think about proximity is to think of it cinematically, to equate where the camera locates you in a film with

> where you locate the reader at any given time in your narrative. Then develop the habit of routinely asking yourself: At this point, should the camera (the reader) be in close-up, mid-range, or panorama? Does the camera jump around? Does it remain pretty much in the same position? The more precise proximity is, the more the reader notices the subtleties in all forms of relationships as they shift, unfold, and find some kind of resolution.

When we receive the feedback "tell me more," this may point to a gap in the narrative, but far more often it points to inaccurate use of proximity. It is a question of giving the right signal. The language itself may be the problem. For example, it may be too formal and distancing when the narrative's content is drawing the reader close. This double message confuses readers, places them outside the narrative by making them observers. It also distracts them. They get caught in an eddy of confusion, just as we are confused in a conversation when someone smiles warmly while using abrasive words or distancing tones.

Proximity shapes meaning. Imagine someone saying to you "I am here," in these two different proximities: leaning down and whis-pering it in your ear; shouting it from a room away. The different proximities of this identical sentence convey disparate meanings.

In the English language, this embedded distancing is in the pronouns themselves. Moving from close proximity to increasingly distant proximity, the number of letters in each pronoun increases: I, me, we, he, she, you, our, they, them, those, and (the noun) people.

II.

Another way to understand proximity is to think of viewing paintings in an art gallery. Do you maintain the same proximity to each paint-ing? Do you mechanically advance in a straight line down each wall, stopping for the same amount of time as you look at each painting?

Typically, we draw closer to examine a detail in a painting, back away to review it in its larger context, glance across the room at another image that suddenly resonates with this one, move on to the next painting, and then, a few paintings later, return to the first painting that magnetized us to compare the artist's use of similar and dissimilar strategies, or how the artist's paintings are "in conversation" with one another.

Almost all narratives coalesce with the passage of time; they take shape incrementally, even erratically. Perception also builds incrementally, whether emotional, intellectual, or spiritual. We may think we have an utterly surprising flash of insight, but the groundwork to understand this insight was laid prior to our recognition. The very structure of perception involves a cyclical process that I call "Approach — Retreat — Return." Sometimes this cycle repeats a few times; sometimes it repeats countless times. Sometimes per-ception is stuck for a while in one mode: Retreat — Retreat — Retreat. The cycle depends on the nature of each narrative. It also depends on our ability, as well as our readiness, to grasp the precise nature of each narrative. The narratives that have a profound impact on readers utilize Approach — Retreat — Return, evoking the telling nuances and shifts in proximity that shape and enable perception.

III.

Inaccurate proximity occurs for a number of reasons. In a line of a poem or sentence, one word can shift the proximity: “the stubble cutting my bare feet” compared with “stubble cutting my bare feet.”

Proximity problems may also occur when we overlook the underlying significance of an encounter. Let’s look at an excerpt from a short story in which a writer revises her rendering of proximity for more exactitude.

“When We Sat Down to Dinner” (original draft)
by Anne Souther

When we sat down to dinner, I looked at their faces, and imagined holding my hands against their contours, my fingers framing their features like parentheses.

I imagined holding between my hands their thoughts, their fears, the hopes and dreams of each of them, so entirely private that I was overwhelmed by the intimacy of it and by reflex I put my hands to my own face, framing my cheekbones and chin.

“You all right, Connie?” Ben asked. Tony and Joey stopped chewing and watched me.

“When We Sat Down to Dinner” (revised with closer attention to proximity)

When we sit down to dinner, I look at their faces, and imagine

holding my hands against their contours, my fingers framing their features like parentheses. *I imagine touching their skin, feeling the tissue and the bones underneath, feeling even the blood coursing through capillaries and veins and arteries far below the expressions of concern and confusion that I see on their faces*.

I imagine holding between my hands their thoughts, their fears, the hopes and dreams of each of them, so entirely private that I am overwhelmed by the intimacy of it, and by reflex I put my hands to my own face, framing my cheekbones and chin, *daring my own mind to seep out and be revealed*.

"You all right, Connie?" Ben asks. Tony and Joey stop chewing and watch me. *They hide behind restrained expressions, but I can see the alarm in their eyes*.

Note the change in tense from the original excerpt to the revised proximity excerpt. This change from past to present tense intensifies the scene. The writer has cued the reader more accur-ately to the struggle between simultaneous proximities by splicing in segments of her inner monologue.

Proximity problems may also occur when spatial relationships between content and narrator change from first person to second or third person, or vice versa. I encountered such shifting of points of view while writing *only this blue*. The narrator's proximity to her subject veers from intimate encounters with herself (first person) to observation of, and sometimes disassociation with, herself (third person) to an inclusive "you" (second person).

If a narrative is overwhelming to read; if it keeps the reader unintentionally at a distance; if the voice seems to be obscuring itself

or foregrounding itself inappropriately, the narrative may be set in the wrong voice. Some narratives require intentional juxtapositions of proximities to track their unpredictable paths, actions, and insights. Note how Ingrid Rose enacts this in the excerpt from her lyric prose novel below.

"In the thick of it"
by Ingrid Rose

he edges his way out of the sofa is
up pushing his narrow feet more
firmly into his wine red slippers
shuffles over to me
his thin arms round
me a moment quick
peck on cheek
hand remains on
shoulder as if to protect
or hold me back turns
to his seat again
stepping on the paper
I spy under my lashes
my mother's back
straight eyes ahead
to the next hurdle

morris look what you're doing to that paper

the quick of her voice mettled

my father raises his foot
sweeps the sheets into an untidy
heap his nervous fingers tapping
the edges to line them up

An excellent example of using proximity seamlessly in the first page of a book is Anne Stone's novel *delible*. The opening scene on the first page is entrancing, yet disturbing. Stone conveys her confidence in the narrative (which assures our confidence) by beginning with a close-up, then moving to mid-range, then pan, then close-up, then back to mid-range, then pan within the first five sentences.

The most common reasons why we neglect to check for correct proximity are our unwillingness to allow our narrative to become more complex or our failure to remove first draft scaffolding that helped us build the narrative. To be true to the story often requires considerably more writing or revision than we had imagined — or want to undertake. But when proximity is faulty, the narrative's state of consciousness becomes derailed, and our reader rightfully loses interest. Errors in proximity occur too when we are so concerned about writing the narrative that we unthinkingly revert to our habitual methods of inscription. Or when we may be uneasy about the effect of accurate proximity. If we fear our narrative may over-whelm our readers, cause them to disengage, or make us too vulnerable, we may opt for a reductive approach.

With this book I encountered proximity questions in selecting the titles of the essays. Many of them, such as this essay's title, do not automatically signal what the essay is about. Yet, the title is

accurate. Eventually I came up with the idea of a hook question placed immediately below the title, a question that addresses what the essay is about. The title is more formal and distant, but the question, which may be one that engages writers, is close-up.

When reviewing appropriate use of proximity, check the follow-ing methods of inscription:

- tone
- pacing
- use of first/second/third person
- rhythmic and structural movement of the line;
- specific language of the line; spatial/contextual relationships between the lines, paragraphs, stanzas, characters, or subjects
- correspondences between discrete yet interrelated pieces (poems in a suite, sections of an essay, sections or chapters of a book)

Throughout our inscription and composition process, it is useful to routinely ask ourselves three proximity questions:

- What is the exact proximity of the characters/people in this encounter?
- What is the narrating voice's particular relationship to this subject at this point?
- What is the appropriate proximity of these subjects (topics) to one another right now?

On a basic structural level, I use the Four Ps — predicament, proximity, pacing, pattern — to assist me in determining each narrative's focus and form. Although these can occur in a different order, most often they follow this sequence. First, we identify and evoke the predicament that instigates the narrative and brings it into focus. Second, we intuit proximities that correspond with the narrative's unfolding. Third, after a period of inscription, we begin to assess if the pacing of the narrative's unfolding is accurate. Fourth, after a longer period of inscription, we evaluate what recurring patterns of images, key words/phrases, ideas, gestures/actions, or sounds build and move the narrative forward, and then work more consciously with these patterns.

Proximity shifts are true to lived experience. They are our narra-tive's body language, and as such they can convey far more than words. Thus, it is our job as writers to recognize the inherent choreography of each narrative and the specific way it occupies its space — then recreate it on the page.