CHAPTER 3

Constraints for Creativity in Literature

What can we learn from Proust? What can we learn from Calvino? What can we learn from Kundera? What can we learn from Byatt? What can we learn from Dillard? What can we learn from Styron? What can we learn from Woolf?

What constraints, including first choruses, help structure the creativity problem in literature?

Novelists, essayists, journalists, writers of prose or poetry are subject to a shared, general set of *task constraints:* audience, organization, grammatical conventions. The idiosyncratic ways in which these are met and modified generate what is called the individual's "voice." Three recognized and recognizable voices—those of Marcel Proust, Milan Kundera, and Italo Calvino—considered, each in his singular way, the same motif, memory. We will see how this *subject constraint* generated a remarkably varied trio of self-imposed specialized *task constraints* that are clearly structural. To do this, Proust, Kundera, and Calvino *precluded* the novel's traditional structure in order to *promote* a trio of novel scaffolds.

The traditional structure is linear, a coherent story line moves forward in time logically progressing from introduction to climax to denouement. For example, for the first sentence, which announces its theme ("Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,"

Tolstoi (2003, p. 5), *Anna Karenina*—book and title character—presses inexorably toward its climax in chapter XXXI when Anna "thought of the man crushed by the train the day she had first met Vronsky, and she knew what she had to do. With a rapid, light step she went down the steps that led from the tank to the rails and stopped quite near the approaching train (p. 706). Tolstoi brings closure to the novel with Levin's monologue, a quasi-sermon suggesting that survival—of the individual and the family—depends not on happiness, but on goodness.

Precluding the linear promoted novel scaffoldings based on *first choruses* outside the novel and outside the entire domain. We start with the first chorus shared by Proust, Kundera, and Calvino.

The Common First Chorus: Memory

Memory is the product of learning. What does learning produce? Associations, between things in the world, between neurons in the brain. A picture can help. Figure 3.1 represents represents a real apple in the world and its associative network in the brain (McClelland, 2000; McClelland & Rummelhart, 1986).

The visual aspects of our apple are represented by feature detectors, which fire when we see something that's red, round, smooth, and shiny. The same red-round-smooth-shiny pattern lights up in our brains every time we view a real apple or a picture of an apple, and every time we think about

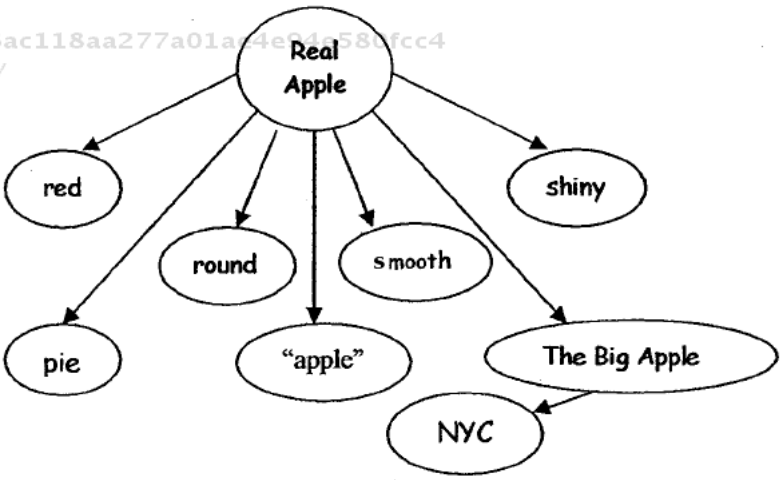

FIGURE 3.1. Apple network.

what an apple looks like. Other things that we learn to associate with apples—such as the word "apple," apple pie or cobbler, caramel or candied apples, Eve and the expulsion from Eden, the Big Apple or New York City expand the network.

Memory is recognizing or calling up (imagining) the apple pattern. This kind of memory is called *semantic*. It stores factual information about the world, which means its accuracy can be checked against the world.

The other kinds of memories, which are also acquired via associations, can't be checked so easily. *Procedural* memory involves the physical—skills like playing an instrument, riding a bike or a skateboard; habits like writing your name, tying your shoelaces—in short, procedures that run off automatically. When you sign your name, do you have to think about how to do it? Do you actually know how you do it?

Emotional memory involves feeling, arousal—what psychologists call "affect." (If you were Snow White, there would be a *big* emotional link in your apple network.)

There are two important things to remember about emotional memory. One is that your current mood affects what you remember (from the past) and what you notice (in the present). Happy moods make enjoyed events more accessible in your memory or more salient and noticeable in the world than sad ones, and vice versa. The other is that things with the same set of features have the same affect. We've all instantly liked or disliked someone. This happens when someone new reminds us—by activating a familiar set of features—of someone else whom we have or had strong feelings about; along with the shared features come the same feelings.

The final kind of memory is *episodic*, memory for personal events. This is (alas!) the least checkable memory of all, and for several reasons. First, like objects, events share features and thus patterns of activation. Repeated events become, as Roger Shank (1990) calls them, "scripts" or models into which different people or places can be slotted. What comes to mind when you think "wedding"? A bride, a groom, a white dress, a bouquet, a march (dum, da, da, da . . . yes, Mendelssohn). You can fill in the rest. After being at or being in many weddings, they merge in memory.

Another reason for the fickleness of personal memories is that every time we retell or elaborate a story about ourselves, the new story becomes part of the associative network, and there is no way to separate the latest version from the original. Even worse, many of our memories are actually other people's stories. What silly stuff did you do at your first birthday party? Mom or Dad can tell you. You can look at photos in the family album. What do *you* remember?

What does this all mean? That memory is both very dependable (we do recognize most things in the world correctly) and very unreliable (we don't get our own pasts right, or even the same way every time). It also explains why it's so hard to understand or "see" anything that's truly new—we don't have the associative networks necessary to recognize, much less to evaluate, the novelty.

TELL ME A STORY: FICTIONS

Providing evidence for the argument that constraints help solve the creativity problem, each of our authors used a different set of *task constraints* to probe and provide scaffolding for different aspects of memory, the shared *subject constraint*. In the following pages we'll explore how Proust's elaborate and endlessly detailed observations are both content and cause of what he called involuntary memory; how Calvino's fracturing of a single experience demonstrates how memory modulates perception, nostalgia, imagination, desire; and how Kundera's musically derived organization details the mechanisms of memory and forgetting.

Proust: Involuntary Memory and the Structure of Myth

À la recherche du temps perdu is usually translated as *The Remembrance of Things Past*. An alternative, and more literal translation, which I find closer to my reading of the novel, is *The Search for Lost Time*. The *subject constraint* is memory, but memory of a new kind that the narrator, Marcel, names "involuntary." Thinking about this in problem-solving terms is interesting. Since the kind of memory is new, realizing it, expressing it in writing, represents a new *goal constraint*. To capture (via novel task constraints), and know that he had captured it (the new goal criterion) meant working in (at least initially) an ill-structured problem space.

Proust's involuntary memory cannot be conjured up at will, but is activated when an immediate sensory experience is so closely identifiable (but not identical with—this is not *déjà vu*) with a past one that the past is *re-experienced* (not, as with voluntary memory simply recalled). The famous incident of the petites madeleines is the first of the narrator's re-experiences. Tasting the tea-soaked cake,

> "A shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin" (Vol. I, p. 48).

The source of the pleasure, he discovers, lies not in the cup at hand, but rather in *sensory memory,* the taste and smell, of Aunt Leonie's equally tea-infused madeleines tasted in his youth, at Combray, on Sunday mornings.

Involuntary memory of this kind precludes simplification, generalization, and promotes elaboration, precision. As *The Search* demonstrates, involuntary memories contain far more specific sensory detail than our apple network.

The other possibility is simpler: many novel things occur. Novelty is important because we only note what surprises us, what is unknown. It takes time, Proust correctly writes, for habit to soften novelty. For example, when the narrator (Marcel) arrives for the first time at Balbec, habit has not yet had time to muffle the percussion of the clock, subdue the violent violet of the drapes, dim the fierce reflections on the glass-fronted bookcases, or soften the stiffness of the starched towel. The sharpness, the harshness, of the not-yet-habitual is obsessed over, elaborated, retained. (Remember that starched towel!)

Proust's attempt to access involuntary memory imposes a novel scaffolding on the *Recherche.* Related, but not identical, events are required. The narrator searches for similarities, for patterns, *and* for specific sensory details that differentiate the repetitions. The scaffolding comes from myth, a literary *first chorus* that predates the novel. The structure of myth is repetitive, reiterative; a story varied in its details is told and retold (Calasso, 1994).

The major Proustian myth involves the tragedy of the human relationship doomed to failure. This relationship, which repeats itself throughout the novel, conjoins two sets of almost interchangeable characters. The first includes M. Swann, the Marquis de St. Loup, the Baron Charlus, and the narrator. Each suffers the same obsessive jealousy over his Odette, Rachel, Albertine, or Morel, all of whose affections are entirely selfish, dependent on the satisfaction of their needs. When the narrator speaks of Swann's "anxious, tormenting need, whose object is the person alone, an absurd, irrational need, which the laws of this world make impossible to satisfy and difficult to assuage—the insensate, agonizing need to possess exclusively" (Proust, 1871/1982, Vol. I, p. 252), he is also speaking of himself, his friend Robert, and his friend's uncle. The relationship is experienced in succession by everyone, at different points in time (the pattern)—and the book—swells with the specifics of each recurrence (the variants).

Habit ultimately provides (successive) respite for the jealous protagonists. Just as Swann ceases loving Odette, and Robert ceases to love Rachel, the narrator knows he will no longer love Albertine once he has become habituated to her absence.

Figure 3.2 diagrams the involuntary, sensory memory that both concludes—and Proust tells us at the end, instigated—the book. Notice that there is a towel and a napkin.

You already know about that towel. What of the napkin? Sharing "the same degree of stiffness and starchedness as the towel with which I had found it so awkward to dry my face as I stood in front of the window on the first day of my arrival at Balbec . . .", it evokes a complete sensory, completely involuntary memory, including "the plumage of an ocean green and blue like the tail of a peacock. And . . . not merely those colours, but the whole instant of my life on whose summit they rested . . ." (Proust, 1871/1982, Vol. III, p. 901)

What Can We Learn From Proust?

The way a novel *goal constraint* precludes traditional task constraints and promotes novel ones, includes *first choruses* outside the genre in which a writer works. The scaffolding for a new conception of memory was mythic in origin. Repetition with intensely detailed variation produced the networks that evoked, made possible, the experience of involuntary memory, the actual recovery, the reliving of *temps perdu*.

Calvino and Kundera: Memory and Modernism

Modernist fiction, like Cubist painting, draws our attention to surfaces, not depths; to patterns, not particulars; to structures, not sentiments. The world becomes a complex diagram, in which characters are types, neither central nor individual, more interesting intellectually than emotionally.

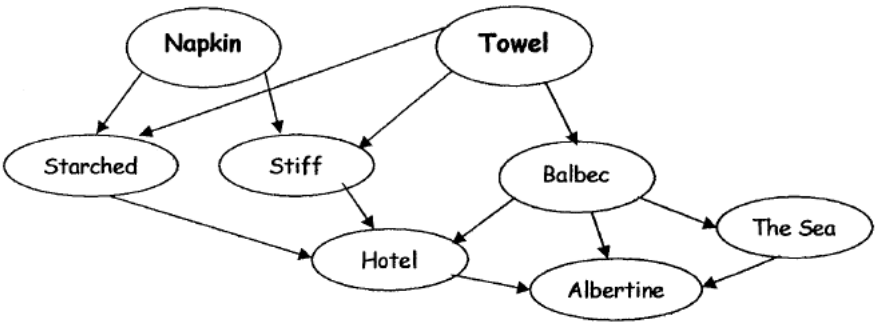

FIGURE 3.2. Proust's network.

Mentioning neither Calvino nor Kundera, Annie Dillard (1982) describes the difficulties that these shared constraints—surface, structure, pattern—present to the reader. Texts which "stress pattern over reference," she writes, "baffle a reader until he locates or composes a provisional dictionary, a set of terms defined internally by the text" (p. 52). What are these but new problem spaces?

Kundera (1988), in fact, tells us that his novels are searches for some evasive definitions. Each is "based on a set of fundamental words which are analyzed, studied, defined, redefined, and thus transformed into categories of existence" (p. 84). Memory, too, is categorical: red, round, smooth, and shiny are attributes/words that comprise the category "apple." Kundera's dictionary is organized musically; Calvino's visually.

Calvino: Visual Memory, Nostalgia, and Desire

Calvino (1993) explicitly concurred with the premise of this book. He wrote that "the construction of a novel according to strict rules, to *constraints* [italics added], by no means limits freedom as a storyteller, but stimulate it" (p. 123).

Calvino's *task constraints* arose from his fondness for *first choruses* outside literature—geometric form, symmetry, numbered series, combinations. The form that symbolizes combination best is the crystal.

> For me the main thing in a narrative is not the explanation of an extraordinary event, but the *order of things* that this extraordinary event produces in itself and around itself; the pattern, the symmetry, the network of images deposited around it, as in the formation of a crystal (Calvino, 1986, p. 73).

Order and pattern scaffold Calvino's stories. The extraordinary event in *Invisible Cities* is the extended visit of Marco Polo to China. Polo arrived in 1275 at the court of the Khan and stayed 16 years. During three of these years, he was the governor of the city of Yangzhou; during another three—the three on which Calvino focuses—he was in the Khan's diplomatic service, an agent sent to different parts of the empire.

The Khan and Polo have 18 conversations, all in the gardens of the palace, all ostensibly about the cities of the empire that Polo visits in order to describe them. Why this mission? Historically, because the empire is endless and formless: The Khan can only discern its pattern through his envoy's accounts, and fictionally, because the network of images arises from the brief, but fantastically detailed descriptions of 55 imperial cities.

The network, like all memories, is an associative one. Indeed, the Khan notices that "Marco Polo's cities resembled one another, as if the passage from one to another involved not a journey, but a change of elements" (p. 44), and Polo observes that in "traveling, you realize that all differences are lost: each city takes to resembling all cities, places exchange their form, order, distances . . ." (p. 137). Possible cities are combinations of these elements.

The pattern of the city, if not the empire, can be traced in the similarities of the 55 cities to each other and, more critically, to the one city never overtly described, but at the basis of each description, Venice. Venice is the crystal that is fractured and multiplied, because Polo can only notice, and the Khan can only imagine, things that are already known, already in the associative networks named memory.

What is the network around Venice? This is the 13th century. Venice is a Byzantine city, its architectural center the multiple arches and domes, the glittering mosaic and marbled surfaces, and the incense-shadowed recesses of St. Mark's. Venice is a maritime city, ringed by canals and bridges; a trading city, divided into specialized quarters; a city of pleasure, courtesans, and carnivals. The images are the dictionary that defines the know-able world.

Look at the network. It shows what Polo finally tells the Khan, "Every time I describe a city, I am saying something about Venice" (p. 86). Among the cities he describes are Diomira, with its 60 silver domes that resemble the golden ones of St. Mark's, and Dorethea, with its drawbridges and canals and quarters specializing in "goods that each family hold in monopoly—bergamot, sturgeon roes, astrolabes, amethysts" (p. 9). Anastasia too is watery, a city of concentric canals, rich in the trading of chalcedony, agate, and chrysoprase. In Phyliss, Polo tells the Khan, "You rejoice in observing all the bridges over the canals, each different from the others: cambered, covered, on pillars, on barges, suspended, with tracery balustrades" (p. 90).

The network (Figure 3.3) includes, from the Khan's atlas, one of the still-to-be-built cities, existing only in plan. These plans, too, resemble Venice: "the city in the shape of Amsterdam, a semicircle facing north, with concentric canals" and "the city in the shape of New Amsterdam . . . with streets like deep canals" (p. 139).

What Can We Learn From Calvino?

Two important things. First, that different *goal constraints* demand different task constraints. Proust's narrator saw the same relationship in every relationship; Calvino's, the same city in every city. The differences are somewhat paradoxical. Marcel's repetitions (Odette-Swann, Rachel-St.Loup,

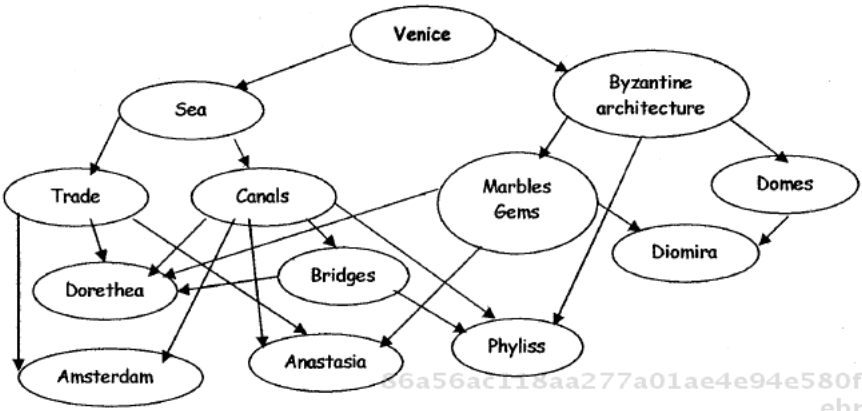

FIGURE 3.3. Calvino's network.

Albertine-Marcel; the napkin and towel) are emotional but orderly, following each other as they would in real time. Polo's are intellectual but unordered, following no logical sequence, providing instead "a network in which one can follow multiple routes and draw multiple, ramified conclusions" (Calvino, 1993, p. 71).

Second, that expertise from outside domains can provide critical *first choruses* to influence and expand the one in which you work.

Kundera: Music and the Mechanisms of Memory

Marcel and Marco Polo remember because they repeat and elaborate. Repetition and elaboration strengthen the connections between things remembered. In *Slowness,* Kundera (1996) constructs a dictionary, not of things remembered, but of *mechanisms* for remembering and forgetting.

Kundera's dictionary–definition of the novel—a search for some fugitive, evasive definitions—is itself a new *goal constraint.* The words in search of meaning he quite purposefully calls themes. The meaning of "theme" here is simultaneously literary and musical; Kundera's inquiry about a topic takes the form of a musical composition. *Slowness* interweaves two themes, defined by tales of dual seductions that take place at the same chateau, but in different centuries. The style in which one tale is told typifies the titular theme, slowness; the style of the other, its opposite, speed.

The primary *task constraint* here is polyphonic—the two independent, equally important themes are presented at the same time. This simultaneity is required because the meaning of each theme (slowness and speed)

depends on its interaction and contrast with the other theme. The major contrast in *slowness* is presented as a set of equations: "The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the speed of forgetting" (Kundera, 1996, p. 39). This will give us the first two nodes in our memory model—slowness and speed, with their respective links to remembering and forgetting (see Figure 3.4).

The two major themes are represented by fewer or more characters, in fewer or more chapters, with fewer or more incidents, and in sentences of fewer or more words. The number of words not only establishes different tempi, it is also directly related to memory. (Remember that capacity limit?) Another equation, this one from psychology: the more things experienced, the more likely the system will be overloaded, and the fewer things will be remembered.

There are only two actors to illuminate the slowness category. These are characters in a supposed 18th century novel, Madame de T. and the Young Chevalier. An elaborate, multi-phrase sentence structure slows the tempo both of their interaction and our attention.

We never hear Madame de T. speak, but we hear that her speech is artful . . . "the fruit of an art, the art of conversation, which lets no gesture pass without comment and works over its meaning" (p. 32). Hers is the voice of Epicurus, preaching—and practicing—hedonism, the philosophy of avoiding pain by moderating pleasure. This takes both planning and discretion. Madame de T. devises an architectonic structure to the sole night that she spends with the Chevalier,

> a night shaped like a triptych, a night as an excursion in three stages: first, they walk in the park; next, they make love in a pavilion; last, they continue the lovemaking in a secret chamber of the chateau. At daybreak they separate (p. 5).

Why this imposition of form on time? Both beauty and memory demand it, the narrator explains. "Conceiving their encounter as a form was especially precious for them, since their night was to have no tomorrow and could be repeated only through recollection" (p. 15).

Moderation, elaboration, structure, slowness, memory: an elegant, easy-to-recall category. The one for speed is too cluttered. There are too many "dancers," as the one 20th century Epicurean, Pontevin, calls them, seeking to take over the stage. They are gathered at Madame de T.'s chateau, now turned into a convention center. Since they are too many, they create too many, too short incidents, with too many interruptions. No one has a

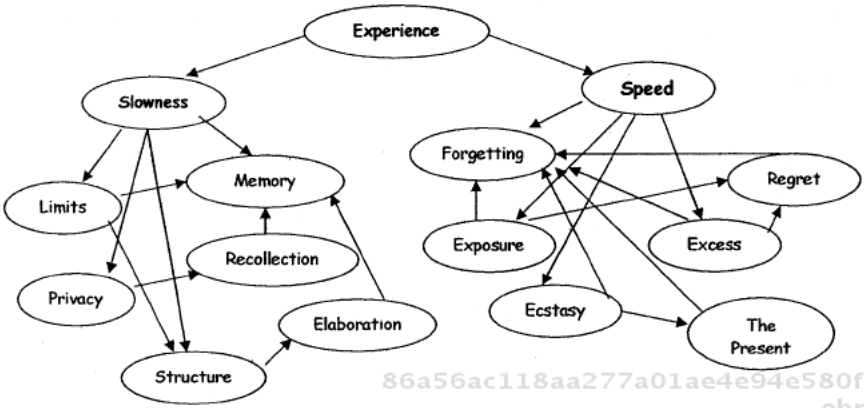

FIGURE 3.4. Kundera's network.

complete night to share. A diagram of this would quickly become daunting. To simplify, we will consider a single coupling.

In contrast to the Madame-Chevalier liaison, which is uninterrupted, private, sensual, memorable, Vincent and Julie's night is splintered, public, obscene, an embarrassment to be forgotten—and quickly. Since there is no privacy, a liaison is actually not possible; in public, on stage, a dancer's words and actions are directed at the audience, not the partner. But why the relation between publicity and obscenity? Again, the narrator explains:

> A word uttered in a small enclosed space has a different meaning from the same word resonating in an amphitheater. No longer is it a word for which he holds full responsibility and which is addressed exclusively to the partner, it is a word that other people demand to hear, people who are there, looking at them. True, the amphitheater is empty, but even though it is empty, the audience, imagined and imaginary, potential and virtual, is there, is with them (p. 16).

The Epicurean who avoids suffering by moderating pleasure enjoys the pleasure of nostalgia; the dancer—drawn to excess and exposure—escapes regret by forgetting. At the end of their respective nights, the Chevalier and Vincent both leave the Chateau. The first is carried off slowly in his chaise, with time enough and privacy enough to recollect his night. The second speeds off on his motorcycle, focusing solely on his moment of flight, alone, yes, but "cut off from both the past and the future . . . wrenched from the continuity of time" (p. 2), and from memory, which requires time for recollection, repetition, elaboration.

What Can We Learn From Kundera?

Something that we've seen both in Braque and Calvino, the importance of *first choruses* outside your working domain. The primary constraint for Kundera is his novel-as-dictionary idea. *Sans* Kundera's musical "first chorus," definition as a *goal constraint* might have created variations on literary structures: definitions in alphabetical order (a traditional dictionary), definition by relationship or replacement (a traditional thesaurus). With music in his repertoire, Kundera created *task constraints*—riffs and rhythmic scaffoldings from which—in time, in specific times—his elusive definitions emerge.

TELL ME YOUR STORY: MEMOIR

Domain-changing constraints, like Proust's, Calvino's or Kundera's "novel" scaffolds, are rare. Less rare are constraints that generate novelty in highly malleable forms like memoir writing.

Memoir has three basic constraints. The *subject constraint* precludes autobiography; a memoir is not a whole life. It's more like an album, a prose album, in which the writer places snapshots-in-words from his or her life. The snapshots are selected, edited, arranged by theme, by time, past or present. Memoir, like memory, is selective, its seductiveness dependent on the details selected.

There are two *task constraints.* One involves *sincerity* or degree of truthfulness. Memoirs involve episodic memories, which are notoriously unreliable. What *really* happened? To what extent is the writer reconstructing, reconstruing the facts? A. S. Byatt's (1993) answer is "a lot." Writing, she says, "does not eat up life, reality, truth, it rearranges it so that it is forever unrecognizable except in terms of the fixed form, the set arrangement" (p. 18).

Snapshots are descriptions; sincerity aims at, approximates, accuracy. Both lead to a second task constraint, on how *materials* (words) are used. One way involves *mimesis,* which aims directly at truths about things, using words that describe or denote them. Mimesis may be used almost exclusively (as in Virginia Woolf, Annie Dillard, or William Styron) or it can be mixed with metaphor (as in Byatt), which shows us indirect truths, relationships between a thing and another thing.

Snapshots of Time: Woolf and Dillard

The same task constraint, mimesis, produced vastly different effects in Woolf and Dillard. Woolf's descriptions are elegant and elaborate, painterly and plush with adjectives strung together by semi-colons. In Dillard, they seem simpler; there are semi-colons, but the voice is more active, immediate, American.

A Sketch of the Past, Woolf (1940/1970) tells us, begins with the first memory. She actually reports two memories, both consisting not of words, but of sensations—things seen, things heard, things felt. These are, in fact, the earliest possible memories.

The things seen included flowers. Some were reproductions, like the ones on her mother's dress, "red and purple flowers on a black ground . . . I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones" (p. 64). Others were real, like the ones outside her nursery, "passion flowers growing on the wall . . . great starry blossoms, with purple streaks, and large green buds, half empty, half full" (p. 66).

The things heard included

> "waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water on the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind . . . [and] the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out" (pp. 64–65).

Woolf goes on to characterize early memory exactly: "I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling. . . . Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength" (p. 67).

What Can We Learn From Woolf?

That the earliest memories are Proustian: sensory, primarily visual; when auditory, without words. If your *goal constraint* is to capture an early memory, Woolf's way with mimesis, her painterly prose—embellished, ornamented, baroque in its extravagance of detail—provides a rich model.

Annie Dillard recalled somewhat later memories, allowing her both to notice things and to note the categories or classes to which they belonged. For Dillard, a class can be as simple, and as large, as "things that are active and exciting." *An American Childhood* (1990) begins when Dillard was five.

Life was immediate and eventful, parsed by the author into piled-up phrases that mimic the movement. In the mornings,

> . . . men left in a rush: they flung on coats, they slid kisses at everybody's cheeks, they slammed car doors; they ground their car starters till the motors caught with a jump. And the Catholic schoolchildren left in a rush; I saw them from our dining-room windows. They burst into the street buttoning their jackets; they threw dry catalpa pods at the stop sign and at each other. They hugged their brown-and-tan workbooks to them, clumped and parted, and proceeded toward St. Bede's school almost by accident (pp. 285–286).

Mimesis is equally agile at probing unknowns, like the bogeyman-in-the-bedroom;

> When I was five . . . I would not go to bed willingly because something came into my room. This was a private matter between me and it. If I spoke of it, it would kill me. . . . It was a transparent, luminous oblong (p. 291).

or the rites of school passage.

> Whatever we needed in order to meet the future, it was located at the unthinkable juncture of Latin class and dancing school (p. 365).

What Can We Learn From Dillard?

That later memories can be caught in wider nets, grouped into categories. How Dillard's kind of mimesis captures her categorizing. Dillard (1982) refers to her style as plain prose. Plain prose easily presents and replicates rhythms.

Re-read the short quote about the early morning rush. Read it aloud. Notice how it rushes right along. Notice too how sparse and precise the sentences are. It is very difficult to write well in plain prose. There is no place to hide.

Snapshots With Themes: Byatt and Styron

Snapshots in time can spread wide nets. Snapshots with themes are both more compact and more elaborated, interconnected, patterned. The primary *task constraint* here is patterning. Parental deaths—Byatt's father, Styron's mother—fuse the immediate with the shared ways of speaking or acting that permeate and sustain family itself.

Byatt's scaffolding is metaphoric. The title identifies the metaphor, *Sugar* (1992). In the first sentence, Byatt tells us that her mother "had a

respect for truth, but she was not a truthful woman. . . . She lied in small matters, to tidy up embarrassments, and in larger matters, to avoid unpalatable truths" (p. 215). Metaphor enlarges on mimesis: her mother's accounts were "like pearls, or sugar-coated pills, grit and bitterness polished into roundness by comedy" (p. 229).

Sugar permeates, providing a path through, a pattern for, the story. It is the father's family's business. Byatt herself admits to selecting and confecting: "What is all this, all this story so far but a careful selection of things that can be told, things that can be arranged in the light of day?"(p. 241). Even her father, a judge, with a judge's great respect for evidence, truth, and justice, constructed "a tale, a myth, a satisfactory narrative of his life" (p. 251). But tales are necessities, because the actual moment is inaccessible, at least to words. Only "after things have happened, when we have taken a breath and a look, we begin to know what they are and were, we begin to tell them to ourselves" (p. 248).

What Can We Learn From Byatt?

How metaphor—a *task constraint*—can connect, clarify, and create memories. Create, not re-create, because the networks crafted by the metaphor, the common theme, are new and their connections newly experienced.

Styron shows us a different kind of connecting and supporting structure. His scaffoldings partition present and past, each with a distinct voice. This *task constraint* collapses his family history (escaping from each other) into a single day, *A Tidewater Morning* (1993).

The morning is reported in the boy's voice, in regular type:

> I recall that walk with the shine of reality . . . I recall the morning's headlines with the same clarity that I recall any of the major wars, assassinations, bombings . . . that were spread across the front pages as the century plunged onward . . . PRAGUE AWAITS HITLER ULTIMATUM (p. 126).

The history is revealed by the parental voices, in italics, in snippets of past arguments, prior escapes from each other's differences. One reveals the mother's regrets,

> *If I had married Charlie Winslow . . . I'm sure that he would have taken me to Paris . . . I might have even had one Chanel gown, as well as the father's stoicism, Then I'm sorry you settled for so little, Adelaide. I never promised you riches. . . . I've always admired much in you. But I can't admire your inability to understand that my own passions are not of tangible objects, but, if you'll pardon my saying so, of the spirit and the intellect (p. 100).*

As the pattern alternates (between the long-concluded conversations and the day's description), disjoints in the relationships reveal themselves. Father, mother, and son each experience the world in his or her own way. At the end, father and son escape, *each in his own way* (the repeated difference in the relatings), from the mother's death. The father repeats the biblical phrase that comforts *him*. The son distracts himself from father and mother with "other words. . . . "My name is Paul Whitehurst, it is the eleventh of September, 1938, when Prague Awaits Hilter Ultimatum" (p. 142).

What Can We Learn From Styron?

That patterns are powerful because they can reveal the associative maps that make up memories. Stryon's parsing of present and past in different voices is the scaffold that creates and sustains his pattern. Like Proust's, the pattern is recognizable because it is repetitive. Unlike Proust's, it is repeated by the same, rather than different, people. Repetition takes many literary forms.

A CONVERSATION: CONSTRAINTS CAN BE CRIMINAL

The mystery is a literary genre with a well-established set of *domain constraints* (see Figure 3.5). Paul Grescoe, a writer of detective novels, described some of these, as well as his ways of working *within* and *against* them. All words, phrases, sentences in quotation marks are from Paul's

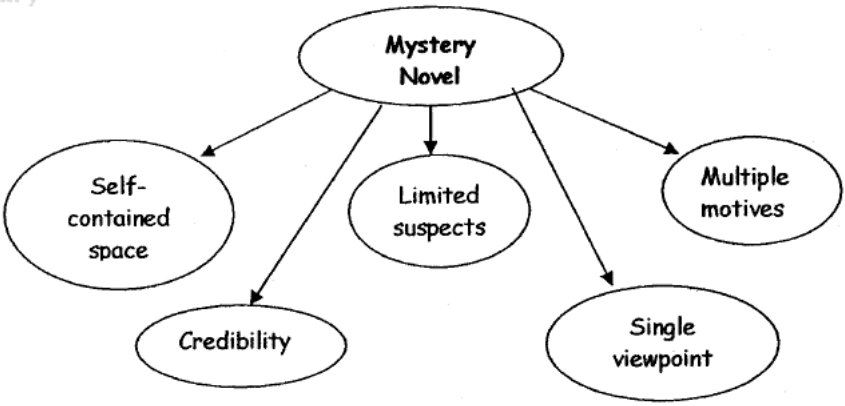

FIGURE 3.5. Criminal constraints.

very long and detailed e-mail response (June 27, 2001) to a request for his contribution to my book. The brackets inside the quotes are my additions.

> "From the first," he wrote, "I've accepted some of the conventions of the mystery, chief among them the concept *[subject constraint]* of having a selected group of characters interact in a contained universe. Classic examples are the country house where Londoners gather for a weekend or the express train rocketing across Europe with a cargo of passengers linked in some yet-to-be-determined way."

Oh yes, I said to myself, "Death on the Nile."

Working *within* the self-contained space constraint, Paul has confined his characters to a movie set in Vancouver (*Flesh Wound,* 1991), a Japanese ship cruising to Alaska (*Blood Vessel, 1993*). Working *against* the constraint in order to "stretch the confines of both realms," he's introduced "outsiders: local hookers and pimps to the visiting members of the movie company; environmentalists and business people to the usual cruise-ship passenger roll."

Another

> typical constraint of the detective novel is the first-person narrator who lets the reader see and know only what he/she observes. It's effective because the lone wolf's viewpoint tends to contain the amount and variety of information the reader is being offered at any one time. It's frustrating because it's difficult to communicate motivations (Grescoe).

One way around the constraint, which Paul calls "old and hoary," is having the detective discover another character's diary. Another, found in "Flesh Wound," is to "create a couple of sidekicks, a Hollywood stuntman and a woman reporter . . . who could go off on their own and return with fresh information" (Grescoe).

In a still-being-written book, (Grescoe, manuscript in preparation) Paul says he wants to

> push the envelope even further and have several third- or possibly first-person chapters describing the actions and thoughts of a villain, chapters that will sandwich between those written in the detective's voice and allow me to present a fuller portrait of the character whose motivations are usually explained only at the climax, when his/her identity is revealed.

A third subject constraint is the single villain. Working *against* this, Grescoe's books have more than a single killer, each with a different motive. "Of course," he wrote, "in *Murder on the Orient Express,* Agatha Christie took this multi-villainy to wonderfully absurd heights."

A final constraint, which all mystery writers must meet, is credibility. Unless the details are right, the "reader's suspension of disbelief would be strained." So when Grescoe was writing *Flesh Wound,* he "talked to transsexuals, read books by and about them, and passed the final manuscript to Canada's leading transgender surgeon for checking." (Interestingly, authenticating the details allows a writer to be inventive in other ways.)

> Held to account by insuring that the physical details were accurate, I let myself go in imagining the psychological pain that went along with the desire to change sex and invented a revealing diary for the man/woman I'd created. In many ways this was the most satisfying part of the novel for me and readers have commented on its creativity.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

How *first choruses* from different genres (myth for Proust) and from different domains (mathematics for Calvino, music for Kundera) can help change the one in which someone is working.

How, and how far, constraints help structure the creativity problem in literature. How far depends on the *goal constraint* (realizing novel concepts of memory) of the writer. We've seen how *task constraints* expand a domain by creating new kinds of scaffolds (Proust, Calvino, Kundera) to meet those goals. This is the kind of creativity we call "influential."

We've also looked at how novelty can be created using *task constraints* in well-established forms (Woolf, Dillard, Byatt, Styron). This is the kind of creativity we call "generative." It appears in the mystery as well as the memoir, and—as Paul Grescoe's communication with this writer shows—is generated by working *with,* and *against* a genre's current *first choruses.*