

# The Art of Restraint in Fiction

Randi Triant | October/November 2005



## NOTES

Lately, restraint as a quality is rarely praised in our society, or at least in literature. It seems as if fiction writers now strive to indulge in excess, especially when it comes to psychological unburdenings, or descriptions of sex. As readers, we are often told all the titillating details; the more the better supposedly. Yet, historically the art of restraint has had its practitioners, its advocates. On December 3, 1898, Chekhov wrote a letter to Maxim Gorky in which he gave his opinions on a few stories Gorky had sent him:

I will begin with what in my opinion is your lack of restraint. You are like a spectator in a theater who expresses his enthusiasm so unrestrainedly that he prevents himself and others from hearing. That lack of restraint is particularly noticeable in the descriptions of nature with which you interrupt dialogues: when one reads them, these descriptions, one wishes they were more compact, shorter, say two or three lines. Frequent mention of lassitude, whispering, velvety smoothness, and so on give these descriptions a certain rhetorical quality, a monotony, and

dampen the reader's ardor, almost make him weary. A lack of restraint is also noticeable in the description of women and love scenes. [1](#)

Or, consider Marianne Moore. As the editor of *The Dial*, the influential avant-garde monthly, Moore rejected an installment from *Finnegan's Wake* without substantial cuts, yet she called *Dubliners* "a masterpiece (because) 'it was the result of pruning and resistance rather than the result of throwing off the brakes and letting everything take its own course.'" [2](#) Moore's poem "Silence," informs us, "The deepest feeling always shows itself in silence; / not in silence, but restraint." [3](#)

Moore knew something that the talk-showesque writers of today do not: restraint attains a deeper level of emotional impact than gratuitous, lurid details. Furthermore, when done well, writing with restraint affords the writer a freedom to then use more indirect, suggestive imagery to greater effect. As Henk Romijn Meijer states in an essay about Moore, "One has to believe that she practiced self-discipline as a way to freedom. Without the 'restraint' her work might have become a liquid outpouring, like some of Allen Ginsberg's poetry." [4](#)

Selecting evidence of "liquid outpourings" from the bestseller list is as easy as listing the grammatical errors and tautological statements that our President makes on a daily basis. Here's a scene from the bestselling book, *The Bridges of Madison County*, by Robert James Waller. An Argentinian song is playing on the kitchen radio when the protagonist, a photographer named Kincaid, is thrown into turmoil at the sight of Francesca's legs:

He noticed all of her. He could have walked out on this earlier, could still walk. Rationality shrieked at him. "Let it go Kincaid, get back on the road. Shoot the bridges, go to India. Stop in Bangkok on the way and look up the silk merchant's daughter who knows every ecstatic secret the old ways can teach. Swim naked with her at dawn in jungle pools and listen to her scream as you turn her inside out at twilight. Let go of this"-the voice, was hissing now-"it's outrunning you."

But the slow street tango had begun. Somewhere it played; he could hear it, an old accordion. It was far back, or far ahead, he couldn't be sure. Yet it moved toward him steadily. And the sound of it blurred his criteria and funneled down his alternatives toward unity. [5](#)

And that's just the beginning. Most of the first paragraph is supposed to be the character's interior thoughts, but can we as readers believe that a man, *any* man, or woman for that matter, would have such lucid, stunningly visual thoughts about India and jungle pools and "ecstatic secret(s)" while he's ogling a woman's bare legs? It's overwritten for dramatic, romantic effect, but by doing so, Waller compromises the reliability of the narrator, whom the reader ends up not trusting. More about the reliable narrator and restraint later on in this essay, but for now, let's move on to that second paragraph: What does it really tell us? The diction used is a "liquid outpouring" of vagueness. "Somewhere" the music played, but Kincaid can't be sure if it's in front of him or behind. He's in the kitchen where the radio is also; surely he knows where the music is coming from. Or, maybe we're supposed to read that sentence-"It was far back, or far ahead, he couldn't be sure"-metaphorically. If that's the case, I'm with Kincaid: I can't "be sure" either; I can't be sure what the metaphor *is*. Finally, we come to that last line. The diction comes off as a strange combination of unclear scientific jargon and a peace plan for a war-fractured third world country. Why the excessive language? This is supposed to be a story about a woman who's tempted to have an affair, plain and simple.

Dissenters might contend that Waller didn't set out to write literary fiction, that restraint has no place on a

bestseller list for the general public. I would argue, Why not? I address below what fiction writing can gain from employing a hefty dose of restraint, but I think it's important to point out that a lack of restraint has shown up at times even in the work of our acclaimed literary fiction writers. Gorky is not alone. Take, for example, the description that Kathryn Harrison, one of my favorite writers in recent years, employs when we first meet May Cohen, a woman at a brothel, in Harrison's novel, *The Binding Chair; or, A Visit From the Foot Emancipation Society* (the length of the title alone is a tip-off that Harrison is not trolling her usual controlled territory):

Her abundant and absolutely black hair was coiled in a chignon. Pulled back, it accentuated a pretty widow's peak, a forehead as pale and smooth as paper. Her eyes were black and long, each brow a calligraphic slash; her full lips were painted red. She had a narrow nose with nervous, delicate nostril-impervious, excitable nostrils that seemed to have been formed with fanatical attention. But each part of May, her cuticles and wristbones and earlobes, the blue-white luminous hollow between her clavicles, inspired the same conclusion: that to assemble her had required more than the usual workaday genius of biology. At fifty, her beauty was still so extreme as to be an affront to any sensible soul. Her French, like her English, was impeccable. [6](#)

By Chekhov's count, this one description has eighteen adjectives. Her nose alone has six. This is a far cry from Harrison's unadorned, yet searing prose found in her sexually charged novel *The Seal Wife*.

So, where can we find role models for practicing the craft of restrained fiction? This essay explores three of them: Marguerite Duras, James Salter, and Edna O'Brien.

Restraint operates on two levels for these writers. On a simple level, restraint is visible in the language itself—especially in diction, syntax, and pacing. The language these authors use is as stripped down as an abandoned car in the Bronx. As Edmund White wrote in his review of *The Lover*, Duras's language is "pared down and dwells obsessively on a very few details." [7](#)

And yet, as spare as they are, the short stories and novels by these three authors still bristle with moments that are psychologically or emotionally charged. In the latter half of this essay I'll be talking about how these writers pull that off—how they exercise a more complicated kind of restraint when they convey information indirectly via lyrical images and actions, or gestures that are delivered without commentary. As the novelist Maria Flook told me once, these authors don't believe in "stooping to analyze the moment."

Let's tackle the more apparent level of restraint first, that is, the level at which the author's *language* is kept lean and obsessively focused on a few details. Like Chekhov, Duras, Salter, and O'Brien are fixed on selection and compaction. As O'Brien said in a *New York Times* interview, "I'm very obsessed with detail and particularly what Rilke calls 'the divine detail.'" [8](#) Salter puts it this way, "The general is uninteresting; it's the specific that's fascinating." [9](#) This is reflected in the precise, spare diction these authors are known for. For example, Duras's *The Lover* opens with this stark description by the narrator:

One day, I was already old, in the entrance of a public place a man came up to me. He introduced himself and said, "I've known you for years. Everyone says you were beautiful when you were young, but I want to tell you I think you're more beautiful now than then. Rather than your face as a young woman, I prefer your face as it is now. Ravaged." [10](#)

Duras gives us all the clues we need to know that this is going to be a very pared-down narrative voice. We know right from the start, when Duras's protagonist reports her observer's use of the word *ravaged* to

describe her appearance, that this narrator is not going to waste words or spell out every emotion or thought that flits across her heart or mind. This is an extremely held-in-check voice. Everything hinges on that one word, *ravaged*; it startles us, especially because it constitutes the entire last sentence of the opening paragraph. With one word—a word not her own, yet entirely belonging to her—the narrator is telling us that she has a face that has been destroyed, that she has lived a severely damaged life. Indirectly, we also learn that she'll tell us

how that has come to pass, as the narration continues:

I grew old at eighteen. I don't know if it's the same for everyone, I've never asked. But I believe I've heard of the way time can suddenly accelerate on people when they're going through even the most youthful and highly esteemed stages of life. My ageing was very sudden. I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final, leaving great creases in the forehead. But instead of being dismayed I watched this process with the same sort of interest I might have taken in reading a book. [11](#)

What is noteworthy about this description is its seeming lack of feeling. It's almost clinical in its accounting: "My ageing was very sudden. I saw it spread over my features one by one, changing the relationship between them, making the eyes larger, the expression sadder, the mouth more final" and so on. There's no wailing going on here, no bemoaning the loss of beauty or what has survived. There's a sense of controlled detachment that reinforces the narrator's unsentimental voice. It's as if we're hearing a plastic surgeon rattling off a patient's physical deterioration to a group of red-eyed, weary residents.

Chekhov wrote to another writer that "when you describe the miserable and unfortunate, and want to make the reader feel pity, try to be somewhat colder." [12](#) That's exactly what Duras is doing here. This is a story, as we come to find out, about a fifteen-year-old poor French girl who has a futureless and tragic love affair with an older, rich Chinese man. Yet, we feel pity for her almost immediately because of this opening scene in which we see the narrator aging at such a young age. And something else happens for us as readers: because the narrator details the physical aftermath with such brevity and directness, we immediately know she's not an exaggerator. We trust her as a narrator. We're on her side. Restraint, then, is also a device through which we can foster reader allegiance and trust.

The same quality of cool reflection and rejected sentimentality, along with the use of precise details, is also what we find in the opening description of the female protagonist Mrs. Chandler in Salter's short story about another love affair gone awry, "Dusk":

The small neon sign was very bright in the greyness, there was the cemetery across the street and her own car, a foreign one, kept very clean, parked near the door, facing in the wrong direction. She always did that. She was a woman who lived a certain life. She knew how to give dinner parties, take care of dogs, enter restaurants. She had her way of answering invitations, of dressing, of being herself. Incomparable habits, you might call them. She was a woman who read books, played golf, gone to weddings, whose legs were good, who had weathered storms, a fine woman whom no one wanted now. [13](#)

Amazingly, in this entire list of details there are very few adjectives ("The small neon sign was very bright," "whose legs were good," "a fine woman") and not one adverb. Yet we see this woman as if she were standing before us. Why? First, let's look at the descriptive language Salter has chosen. Each selected word is exactly what is called for. For example, we are immediately clued into this character's independent streak by the

detail that she "always" parks her car facing in the wrong direction. But it is the concluding clause of the paragraph's last sentence, "a fine woman whom no one wanted now," which is the clincher. That's when Salter pulls us in. Here is a woman who can do it all-she can take care of dogs, knows how to give parties, enters restaurants with a studied elegance, *has weathered storms*-yet no one wants her. With the precise word "now" we learn this wasn't always the case, but Salter resists from giving us more than that. We immediately feel compassion for her, but not in a sticky, saccharine way, for Salter's diction doesn't allow that. We are pulled into the story with that final sentence because now we *want* to know Mrs. Chandler's story-when and by whom she was desired, and why not *now*?

Furthermore, Salter's syntax, the way in which he puts his words together, propels us along at such a fast pace that we're forced to conjure up a very quick-and-dirty image of this woman-an image that's surprisingly accurate, as we find out later. We don't have much time to put it together, though-just one paragraph. It's like sizing someone up on a blind date. Which is another reason to use restraint in our fiction: to quickly give the reader important information about a character while still leaving room for a bit of mystery. With mystery, comes tension. What intrigues us is what we *don't* know about someone, *why* she is the way she is. Salter's fast syntax, moreover, keeps the reader engaged and again ratchets the tension. Spare language, in essence, has the opposite result of what many of my students think it will have: rather than slow down the pacing of the story, it speeds it up. Thus, we read Salter's paragraph at a good, compelling clip.

In her short story "Violets," Edna O'Brien writes about a woman who is well aware that she will eventually be rejected by her new lover, a married man. Like Salter's and Duras's, O'Brien's language is rife with significant details. As Mary Gordon wrote in a review of *A Fanatic Heart* (the second collection in which this story appeared), "Clothes, stuffs, food, medicines, in her hands turn into vessels brimming with meaning and value." [14](#)

*Brimming with meaning and value.* That means nothing extra, every word counting toward something. Notice the restraint O'Brien uses in the opening paragraph of "Violets":

In an hour he is due. In that hour I have tasks to perform and they, of course, revolve around him. I shall lay the fire. I shall lay it as I learned as a child. I shall put twists of paper, small pieces of coal, and last of all, a few dry logs. The kindling is a pale wooden chip basket delivered from the vegetable shop. It was full of clementines, and their smell lingers in it like a presence. Christmas is but a month gone. Then I did not know him; then I thought of myself as having passed those seesaw states, subject to a man, maybe loving a man, on tenterhooks because of a man. [15](#)

This, we are alerted right away, is a story about a woman who is going through exactly those "seesaw states" she thought she was impervious to. Yet this narrator is not hysterical, is not throwing herself on a bed, is not calling her shrink and analyzing whether this is a good move or not. She's *laying a fire*. And she's telling us precisely how she's going to do it, as if she's reading the instructions from a Boy Scout handbook-with "twists of paper, small pieces of coal, and, last of all, a few dry logs."

O'Brien goes a step further, though, than Salter in using such constrained details as a set-up for a larger surprise. As we read through that first paragraph, we imagine her narrator as methodical, as dry as the paper and logs she uses. Yet, this is not fully the case, as we come to find out in this brief but unexpected description of her narrator: "Soon I shall have to take off the cardigan, because I am wearing a new black dress. It fits me as if I were poured into it, as if I were molded to it." [16](#) *What?* This is not the get-up we'd envisioned while we pictured this character laying a fire. We begin to sense that the initial image we'd constructed of this woman is wrong. And further down the page we learn, "I have on black mesh stockings

and lace garters that I found in my mother's drawer after she had died. They were wrapped up in a bolster case along with other things-necklaces, veiling, and some velvet flowers. They shocked me, and yet I said, 'They will come in handy one day,' and put them in my suitcase."

In three pages, O'Brien takes us from a woman who is Eagle Scout precise regarding how a fire should be scaffolded to a woman dressed in her dead mother's rather risqué clothes, all the while waiting for her new lover, a married man! It's a wonderful example of O'Brien's trademark capacity for surprise, a surprise that is felt more acutely by the reader because of the restrained lead-up to it. Mary Gordon notes that such details "conjur(e) in the reader a response inexorably physical and true." Nowhere does O'Brien have her narrator try to examine or explain why she's wearing her mother's titillating stockings. All her narrator will say is the rather practical, "they shocked me, and yet I said, 'They will come in handy one day,' and put them in my suitcase." This is indeed a perfectly believable action for a woman who stacks a fire a certain way: *of course* she'd keep the stockings. But O'Brien leaves it up to us to reach this conclusion. She doesn't spell it out for us.

This giving the reader room to interpret or, conversely, restraining from spelling everything out for the reader is a strategy common to all three of these writers and is one of the major reasons for a writer to use a restrained voice. Duras once told an interviewer, "Balzac describes everything. It's exhausting. It's an inventory. His books are indigestible. There's no place for the reader." [17](#) While there may be a few readers who would disagree with her on that point, at least Duras follows her own advice: She trusts the reader. She selects the "divine details" that will tell her readers exactly what they need to know in order for them to figure out the rest. David Huddle in his essay entitled "On Restraint," calls it an "esthetic morality, an unwillingness of the artist to indulge in excess." [18](#) Huddle goes on to say, "I believe that restraint makes 'better' fiction because it involves-indeed it requires-more reader participation, more intense engagement with the world of fiction."

What happens when you don't trust your reader? Award-winning author Reginald McKnight, whose stories and novels take on the kudzu of race relations, and whose prose is normally stripped down, departs from that style momentarily in his story, "The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas." Here, the narrator describes why another African-American in his class embarrasses him: "He smelled bad, was at least two grades behind, was hostile, dark skinned, homely, close-mouthed. I feared him for his size, pitied him for his dress, watched him all the time. Marveled at him, mystified, astonished, uneasy." [19](#) It's that last sentence that sticks out, straining the reader's involvement. *Show, don't tell*, is something I tell my creative writing students practically every week that I return their stories. If you tell everything, what is left for us to figure out? In this story's case, I would have enjoyed it more, been involved more, if I had been shown a scene in which we see the narrator *being* "mystified, astonished, uneasy." Or better yet, if *I* had been the one to be "mystified, astonished, uneasy."

The restraint that writers may exercise in their language can do more, though, than reflect an unsentimental narrative voice, lend a certain mystery or surprise, or engage the reader more deeply. It also serves as the foundation for a more complicated level of restraint in which these authors can then deploy lyrical, suggestive imagery to portray real moments of psychological break-through or self-awareness. William Carlos Williams famously pronounced, "No ideas but in things," and Gordon Lish has said, "Just render the object." The three writers I'm discussing often render the object or image indirectly, suggestively, and in doing so, allow us to discover the psychological moment of lift-off for their characters without analyzing it to death.

The first time the young narrator has sex with the Chinese man in *The Lover*, we read this:

At first, pain. And then the pain is possessed in its turn, changed, slowly drawn away, borne toward pleasure, clasped to it. The sea, formless, simply beyond compare. [20](#)

That last image tells us, not directly but metaphorically-the sea as love itself-how this young girl, presumably a virgin, is feeling. However, here's the key: notice how brief the metaphor is. Duras also limits the number of such metaphorical passages, thereby increasing their intensity, when they do appear, for the reader. "I write about love, yes, but not about tenderness," Duras once said during a *New York Times* interview. [21](#) She believed that, as she put it, "tenderness supposes the exclusion of desire." Thus, her initial clinical descriptions set against the compressed, suggestive imagery we see in the above paragraph are perfectly suited for this story that focuses on volatile desire. The combination mimics the sexual push and pull between her two protagonists. We wouldn't feel such a bonfire-like intensity between these two if Duras had, for example, written the entire novel in a lyrical, unhurried voice. A slow burn, maybe, but a conflagration, no. Duras's spare language, therefore, reflects not only the narrator's unsentimental nature, but also the novel's *action*, what is happening between its characters. Restraint makes the reader feel pity, but it also makes the reader feel the heat building underneath the lid of a boiling pot. When the suggestive imagery arrives in *The Lover*-as brief as it is-the reader experiences what it's like to finally open up a Maserati on an empty road. The thrill is palpable.

Yet, my beginning fiction students often equate restraint with Puritanism as opposed to the lighting fluid it can be. Holding back something, I tell them, always ups the ante, the sexual energy of a story. It also allows for a grittier perspective. Duras is not telling us that these two will live happily ever after. That the pain is "borne toward pleasure, clasped to it" suggests first, that you can't have pleasure, even the pleasure of love, without pain and secondly, that the love between her two protagonists will pull them inexorably into disaster. Hardly a romantic viewpoint.

O'Brien uses a similar strategy (using constrained language as a portal to metaphorical imagery) in the next passage,

I know the mistake I am making. I see the exits in life. It will be six months or the proverbial nine months before it ends, and yet the foreknowledge is as clear as the first meeting. It is just like lifting a latch and seeing into the blazing fire at the far end of this room, with the passage in between, its carpet, its white rug, its chaise longue, its birdcage, and its many secular delights. One day I will come to the other end and I will perhaps get scorched. [22](#)

O'Brien uses terrifically economic images (that litany of furniture and objects following "the blazing fire") to show us indirectly, suggestively, what this narrator is really feeling-that she's fully aware that in the end she'll get burned, yet she'll nonetheless knowingly take steps toward that end.

In "Dusk," Salter similarly uses the image of a shot-down goose to point us toward the devastating moments after Mrs. Chandler is rejected by her former lover:

That night she heard the branches tapping against the house and window frames rattle. She sat alone and thought of the geese, she could hear them out there. It had gotten cold. The wind was blowing on their feathers. They lived a long time, ten or fifteen years, they said. The one they had seen on the lawn might still be alive, settled back into the fields with the others, in from the ocean where they went to be safe, the survivors of bloody ambushes. Somewhere in the wet grass, she imagined, lay one of them, dark sodden breast, graceful neck still extended, great wings striving to beat, bloody sounds coming from the holes in its beak. She went around and

turned on lights. The rain was coming down, the sea was crashing, a comrade lay dead in the whirling darkness. [23](#)

The haunting beauty of this passage—the "graceful neck still extended, great wings striving to beat"—reinforces our sense of Mrs. Chandler from that earlier compact description of a graceful woman aching to stay in the game, whom no one wants any more. This entire passage has a far greater emotional impact because it comes after such held-in-check descriptions and because it is written with such spare language itself. By bringing in the image of a goose that has been shot down and left alone, furthermore, Salter can avoid *directly* describing Mrs. Chandler's emotional state, which might have been melodramatic or sentimental. We have no doubt what Mrs. Chandler is feeling, yet we've had to piece it together on our own: to feel it out, so to speak, by ourselves. Using lyrical yet veiled imagery, Salter keeps us almost one step removed from the scene, but it's because of that very detachment that we feel the weight of his character's anguish all the more.

In the examples I've just given, Salter along with Duras and O'Brien have used the strategy of transferring the emotion from the object itself to a symbol of the object. Using symbols can easily fall into sentimentality, however; something every good writer tries to avoid. Why, then, do Salter, O'Brien, and Duras succeed? How do they maintain that cool detachment which fights off sentimentality?

First, the metaphors they choose are not ordinary or clichéd. Salter's strategy in his story is, by contrast, to provide a detailed, novel description of the seasonal dangers that a flock of geese (and one goose in particular) encounters. It's as if we're listening to a PBS nature documentary:

They lived a long time, ten or fifteen years, they said. The one they had seen on the lawn might still be alive, settled back into the fields with the others, in from the ocean where they went to be safe, the survivors of bloody ambushes. [24](#)

Second, all three of the writers I've been discussing chose to *observe* rather than to declare. Note that it's *Mrs. Chandler* who observes the geese: "Somewhere in the wet grass, *she imagined*, lay one of them, dark sodden breast, gracefully neck still extended" and so forth. It's *her* imagining, not the author's. Salter deliberately has done this so that Mrs. Chandler can indirectly show us what she is feeling, her own woundedness. Because they're her feelings and not Salter's, two things happen: our sympathy is heightened and we feel a greater connection with Mrs. Chandler.

Finally, all three writers have chosen imagery that is *appropriate* for the emotions they want to convey. "Ecstasy/affords/the occasion and expediency determines the form," Marianne Moore wrote in "The Past is the Present." [25](#)

In an interview, Salter says, "I'm just not given to writing a deep analytical or confessional book. In many respects, I think my life is more interesting because of what I was able to observe than because of what I felt." [26](#) Through portrayals that don't stoop to direct analyses of emotional upheaval or psychological devastation, Duras, Salter, and O'Brien allow us to imagine and, finally, to understand on our own what their characters are going through. They're successful because they use such a sure but light hand with the language they wrap around their characters; they don't smother psychological or emotional moments with too many words. Put to the David Huddle test, they "will do certain things but will not do certain other things; the artists will say some things but will not say some other things." [27](#) They are discriminating about what they believe are the essentials. The tight diction, syntax, and pacing they use support and reflect their characterizations and their story's tense action. Their suggestive images and metaphors carry more weight because they're limited and given in such restrained language themselves. These writers understand that, as



the third century poet Lu Chi wrote in his poem "Restraint": "False feelings are / a slap / in the face of grace."  
[28](#) Their prose holds in check any possible mawkishness and, therefore, we trust the narrators.

Vladimir Nabokov once remarked that the art of fiction lies in "combining the passion of a scientist with the precision of the poet." Marguerite Duras, Edna O'Brien, and James Salter have managed to evoke the lives of three troubled women because, like passionate scientists, they've trusted observation and detail. Their eyes haven't strayed from the microscope. And, like precise poets, they've created images at once so telling and so evocative that no discourses on passion are required: it's all been made beautifully, disturbingly evident. To return to Chekhov's letter which began this essay, unlike Gorky, these authors have *allowed us to hear* what must be heard. They've practiced an "esthetic morality" rather than an "esthetic promiscuity." The shouting of the unrestrained spectator in Chekhov's theater has been quieted, and the clear, controlled notes of a lone clarinet make us sit up and lean forward in our seats. We're no longer weary, we're enraptured.

## AWP

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## NOTES

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22. Edna O'Brien, *A Fanatic Heart: Selected Stories of Edna O'Brien* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), 436-437.
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