

1 The Telescope in the Parlor

Ever since 1962, the year my family moved into a Greek Revival farmhouse at a country crossroads in New York's Finger Lakes region, my study has been the former parlor, a room once reserved for special occasions. Twenty years after we bought that old house and the surrounding fields and woods, I wrote an autobiographical essay or story—titled “The Laughter of Zeus,” it first appeared in the *New Yorker*—which early on contains a paragraph describing my feelings on the day we began to bring our belongings into the empty rooms:

...[T]he first possession I brought into the farmhouse was...[my] telescope, and I put it in a corner of the parlor that was to become my study. The windows of this room—the most formal in the house—are framed at the sides and top by wood that has been fluted to resemble Greek columns. After positioning the telescope on its tripod, I looked out the window at the wild-rose brambles just beyond the glass and at a field of corn whose dark-green leaves were shimmering in the August sunlight, and I was caught by the sense of a lovely strangeness that yet was familiar—a response so intense as to be astonishing,

The Telescope in the Parlor

and of the kind that perhaps comes only when the outer eye perceives what the inner one, which is blind to everything but the ideal, has all along visualized as the omphalos of the universe, as its long-sought home.

Once you find such a home, of course, it loses its ability to surprise you like that, even though the recollection remains as part of its quality. Some years ago, I replaced that telescope—a reflector with a four-inch mirror whose limited light-gathering power made it useful mainly for looking at the major spectacles of our solar system—with a Schmidt-Cassegrain refractor whose eight-inch mirror can also capture the glow of distant nebulae and separate the stars in a cluster; but as I have aged I use it less and less. It's a heavy instrument to lug out of the house into the country dark, and much of the wonder it brought me is now more accessible through memory than through its eyepiece.

But this telescope still serves me, as an instrument for remembering an even earlier moment—one that altered my life and gave me whatever voice I have as a writer. When I was younger, I said little about that moment. It was the seed from which I wrote autobiographical essays that—perhaps from my constant wish to get beyond my ego, or at least to perceive myself as a character in another writer's work—turned into interrelated stories with a first-person narrator who, with the passage of the years, was delineating his particular arc of our transitory human existence. This project was central to my writing career for three decades. Upon completing it, I began to describe more openly the moment that was—and remains—my creative seed, for it underlies my attitude to literature, pol-

The Telescope in the Parlor

itics, and life in general. Since it is essential to anything I might say about either my writing or my room, I will say it again here: That moment occurred one winter night early in the Cold War when nuclear annihilation was such a possibility that the phenomenal world became sacred, the humblest of objects (my dog's cold and moist nose; a deserted robins' nest, mounded with snow and illuminated by starlight in the bare branches of a Norway maple) interconnected with every other object, these interconnections reaching out to include the farthest star. My mind acknowledged something that every part of my body knew—something so overwhelming that if I felt anything at all, it might have been awe or fright.

Words are inadequate to describe such a moment, especially when they fall into a pattern like that: words that conform to a familiar pattern are a displacement of the actual event. But my immediate responses to that moment were its echo, the reverberations both lasting and clear. Humility was one such response. And I realized—to a degree that was painful—how fully I loved my wife and children. All the normal stuff of fiction I had depended upon—violence, the quest for dominance, the impurity of human relationships—became untenable to me, even banal. That night I became essentially a writer of my own experiences, attempting to connect the normal details of daily living to a unity I had apprehended only for an instant, and which consciousness itself has since kept from my reach. (I suppose the later moment, when I marked the parlor as my room for writing by putting the telescope in it, was my means of coping with, or adjusting to, the

earlier one, by providing the cosmos with a center.) Given the enormous restrictions of my way of telling a story—no invented characters, no imagined actions to form a plot—I wouldn't recommend my approach to anybody else: mine, while it provides a spiritual insight denied to my former fiction, was imposed on me, a necessity.

The two paintings closest to the desk in my room—one an abstract watercolor by Archie Ammons which for me implies much about that poet's psyche, the other a reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Polish Rider*—are in keeping with my creative seed. Among the changing notices on my bulletin board, three items have remained constant for decades as a reminder of writers who have influenced me: a pencil sketch of E. M. Forster, a photograph of Chekhov, and a haunting paragraph from Proust's "The Return to the Present" that begins, "The fine things we shall write if we have talent enough...."

The familiar artifacts on my study's walls include a resemblance to a face made by my youngest son as a child. He constructed it for me from scraps of wood and hardware he found in the woodshed, and I placed it in a corner where its eyes, round with pleasure, are appraising *The Polish Rider*. These objects are as valuable to me as the dictionaries, reference works, and volumes of poetry and prose that my overloaded bookcases contain; and so too is the view from my window. The field I look at on this July day is filled not with corn but with wide strips of oats that are still a light green, winter wheat that has already turned red, and spring-planted wheat of a darker green that seems luminescent in the sunlight. Though each fall I cut them

The Telescope in the Parlor

down, the prickly strands of the wild-rose bush still rise each spring with all their old vigor, their red and pink blossoms throughout the summer months so profuse and so close to the window they seem as much a part of my room as the telescope.