

*On Gossip and Bull**Two Forms of Narrative Talk*

Teaching a seminar on the novelist's creative process occasions the odd interview with local practitioners and fly-by celebrities. When Richard Russo of *Empire Falls*, nobody's fool, came to class, we asked him what childhood memories may have influenced his work. The answer came back without hesitation, "I was exposed in my father to an expert shooter of bull." Not two weeks earlier I was the subject of a similar interview and offered a similar response: "Gossip, particularly as overheard among women when I was a boy, engendered a love for story."

Gossip and bull are matched amenities. They're dirty words, both of them. Each provides information worth knowing and, maybe, using. Their performance requires artistry and rewards tour de force. They are audience-centered, every bit as hospitable as Macbeth or the White Queen and twice as much fun. To the

novelist, they are musts. Despite this family resemblance, however, gossip and bull are hardly the same thing. A couple of novelists tracing their roots to one or the other are unlikely to write similar stories.

I don't mean by "gossip" the spreading of rumors, malicious or benign. That's called "libel," and one way to reckon the difference is whether the tale told is actionable in court. A gossip's facts are always straight. Another thing I don't mean by "gossip" is any story told with a wink. Irony and satire may be gossip's kissing cousins, but they're nowhere near becoming bedfellows. Gossip demands a straight-arrow logic calculated to educe belief. And I don't include as gossip anything preached, proclaimed, or publicized. This performance is strictly a chamber art.

Here are some things that "bull" *cannot* entail: verification, sincerity, sympathy, empathy, or whispering. Whereas a gossip never winks, a buller can't hold still. He's likely to twitch, snuffle, chew, or spit, showing off real expertise in facial combinations. Entry into the Hall of Fame requires the hat trick, three scores in a single sentence.

Gossip passes on information deemed interesting to the speaker and important to the listener. Bull is the other way around. Gossip leans toward understatement, always holding something back, modesty forbidding.

Bull hunkers toward overstatement, holding forth. Gossip demands belief, "Who'd have thought it?" Bull wants disbelief: "Who are you kidding?" When challenged, gossip cites its sources; bull steps outside. Both are verbal arts, but gossip is conversational, whereas bull is oratorical. Gossip exists in the narrative mode, bull in the dramatic. At least, that's what Aristotle told Alexander, who told Cleopatra, who told Buffie, who. . . .

I'll bet that gossip and bull, way back when, were restricted to different settings — one in the house and another in the club. Long since, though, these cultural performances have hit the road. Now there's hardly a place or occasion that rules them out entirely. Certainly not the corporate boardroom, which breeds them both. The same holds for all committees, fraternities, sororities, and faculties. Political rhetoric is replete. Eulogies almost insist on one or the other. Even public prayer has proven amenable to each.

Some would maintain that gender predisposes, that women gossip and men bull. Daniel Webster (not *Danielle*) concurs. If CNBC did one of its dial-an-opinion plebiscites on the essential difference, this sex distinction would probably win hands-down. But a survey of personal experience comes up with too many exceptions. Linguistic crossdressing is so commonplace these days that male gossips and female bullers hardly

attract notice at all. The choice represents more of an aesthetic orientation than a genetic combination.

Since the verbal performances of gossip and bull are perfected by daily rehearsal, any novelist would be fool to walk away. These narrative materials, artfully delivered, are in the public domain and worth the price of admission. Far from infringing on copyright, the novelist provides a necessary service of transcription and transformation. Gossip and bull ask to be passed along. They measure their own success by repetition and embellishment, the rating points of an oral tradition.



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I maintain that novelists can be categorized under the headings “gossip” and “buller” as insightfully as with the labels realist/romantic, modernist/postmodernist, traditionalist/experimentalist, or any other fancy-pants dichotomy. Mind you, I’m not talking about the characters created by a novelist. Presumably, any good storyteller could create both varieties. I’m talking about

the work as a whole, the thing in itself — *das Ding an Gossip* or *das Ding an Bull*.

Let’s start with the easy ones.

Ernest Hemingway? A buller, clean and simple. Not only were his novels bull, but so was his narrative theory. He claimed to be possessed of a “built-in, shock-resistant, [bull] detector” that guided critical judgment.

Eudora Welty? No problem. A gossip. She says as much herself in *One Writer’s Beginnings*.

John Gardner? Buller.

Flannery O’Connor? Gossip.

See how neatly they all fall out?

Gertrude Stein. Did somebody say gossip? Wrong. Buller.

Henry James? Come now, my dear — a freebee.

The question can get tricky, however, with quick-change artists. John Barth is a buller disguised as a gossip. Norman Mailer, I’ll wager, is a gossip disguised as a buller. Now, Alice Walker is another story altogether — a gossip who winks, then asks you to step outside.

I don’t see why anthologies of American narrative don’t trace the lineage of gossip and bull at least as far back as Hawthorne and Melville. Each is a cinch to classify. Students could grasp the idea quickly and

would learn to comment critically on “The Comparative Techniques of Theodore Dreiser and My Uncle Teddy.” Exams might include long lists of true-false, multiple choice, and questions for matching. Essay topics would be reserved for problem novelists such as William Faulkner and Willa Cather.

I suppose some academic crank will object that this schema of mine trivializes narrative distinctions. But if I had a mind to, I could tell you a couple of stories about that academic crank, and you might think twice before buying him wholesale again. Or I suppose you might quibble with the odd point or two in my disputation. To which I say, “Wanna step outside?”

