George Bowering / BELIEF

I believe he had seen us out of the window coming off to dine in the dinghy of a fourteen-ton yawl belonging to Marlow my host and skipper.

You probably don't know who or what I am referring to in my use of the pronoun "I," and I imagine that that will be true, also, regarding the times I use it in this sentence about that first one. Or should I say "I" imagine, but then would that not be "I" imagines? You see the sort of problem a person has in trying to tell a story or relate an anecdote or make a confession in the first person. Whose idea was it to call "I" the first person in the first place? Surely there are people whose mindset or religion, or just plain good manners, would see nothing untoward in calling you the first person, or him the first person.

It could be a matter of adapting to the situation. If I were to say, "I saw him smile as he received the award from the hands of the Governor General," you might say that I was being only sensible if I were to call the award winner the first person in this circumstance. Or, say, Marlow, when I saw his smile when he knew himself to be the first skipper under the harbour bridge at the end of the Celebes run.

In any case, we have to start somewhere, so we will have to come to an agreement here that this "I" is I, either this person sitting here typing these words, or the one we agree to listen to while he or she tell this tale of the odd young man whose name you have not yet heard.

It is all a matter of chance. That is why I may not have chosen the best possible verb when I chose "believe." I say this even though I know that the end of my story will come when Marlow uses the word. He will say "Hang it all, for all my belief in Chance I am not exactly a pagan. . . ." Ever since I heard him utter that sentence, if that is the whole of the sentence, I have wondered how ironic he was being. Of

course, when it comes to the interplay of belief and chance, how could one not be ironic? It is just, I think, a matter of degree.

"It is my belief," he once told me just after we had experienced a terrific storm off Malacca, "that we have no justification in holding to any belief system, as much as we might desire that it may work."

I told him that I had prayed while his ship lay nearly on its side atop a thirty-foot wave.

"Do you *believe*," he asked me, "that your prayer brought us through?" He looked a little like a Buddha in the evening light. "I was told not long ago a tale of four men set adrift in a lifeboat off the coast of Florida. When their boat ran in on the reef, it was battered to pieces, and three of the four castaways died. The best among them drowned, and a brute with murderous intent was left to live. I do not know how many of these four prayed during their ordeal, nor what they prayed for."

I think that I have heard a thousand stories from Marlow. And I am pretty sure that he could have strung this one out so that it lasted several hours, or, let us say, a hundred pages or more. I know that it is a cliché to have sea captains reciting tales, but there you are — I oftentimes think that Marlow was created for the job.

In any case, I am willing to replace the word "believe" with "think," though there are problems there, too. For example, are we really justified in calling what I was doing thought? Let's let it go, and say something about this "he," I believe — think — I saw. I don't know why I merely used the pronoun rather than the man's name, or why I did not begin by telling you something about him. He is, as you can easily infer from my sentence, going to be an important personage in my account, just as he or his pronoun seems to be the centre of the topic sentence you have been fortunate enough to see or hear.

I believe — think — that starting a story or even a novel in this fashion, a kind of *in media res*, is fairly common in recent literature. Certainly, around the time of the beginning of the First World War it would have been done by the fiction writers who situated themselves forward of the general popular writing. When you see or hear me utter the pronoun "he" you expect that to be narrowed down in due

time. I think, *think*, that there have been writers who fancy themselves as experimental, who give no more personal information than the pronoun all the way through the piece or book in question.

Does that sort of thing happen in real life, you ask. Certainly not. Not a chance. It is a sure sign of design, of purpose. Or maybe not: maybe the writer who refuses anything more than the gendered pronoun is trying to imitate what your senses do in any passage through a day. That is, you notice, by sight and sound, a person, even a person you know, but you do not consciously say his name, aloud or inwardly. You leave it at "he."

Enough of that. I am not a literary theorist, you will be glad to learn, and we are not here for theory. We are here for clarity. That is why I am taking a little time to expound upon my topic sentence.

So we have an "I" and a "he." That is not bad when it comes to populating a tale. And you already know that there is a third, my host and skipper. Chances are, you have run into him before, especially if you frequent waterfront towns such as this one.

I am sure that we do not have to long consider the word "had," as it only serves to signify a tense, in this case the pluperfect. Doing that, it clarifies, or complicates, the time frame of the events to be reported. Well, some of that is inevitable. If I am going to recount these events in the normal past tense, I am going to have to use the pluperfect. If I were talking to you on the way to the ship, I might use the preterit, or possibly the imperfect. But starting with the pluperfect, I am preparing you for the phenomenon you will encounter within a few pages — quotation marks within quotation marks.

So: I "believe" he had seen us. That "us" joins the other pronouns we have been discussing, or which, actually, I have been writing and you have been reading. The difference here is that you will not yet know the number of people thus referred to, if you do not mind my hanging a proposition there. And why would you if you do not mind the ambiguities in my sentence that would suggest, among other things, eating in a dinghy.

In my next sentence, which we will not see for a while, you will learn that the "we" there employed will designate at least three

people, and in fact in what should have been a very short while, you will find that that will be the number. Three. The boy, Marlow, and I, or in the case of the first sentence, me.

I do not think that we have to contemplate or argue the single words that follow. I *think* that we can consider "out of the window" all at one time. Normally I would say "out the window," but we have a distinctly British, if tropical, setting here, or instance, let us say. And I believe, or sense, that the Brits double up on (hee hee) their prepositions. So it is out of the window.

You will learn in time that the window in question is the window of a river-side inn, where Powell, for that will be discovered to be his name, was dining at a long table as white and inhospitable as a bank of snow. I think that was the simile that came immediately to my mind, at least.

But you see what engineering I am endeavouring to pull off here, as I lay about me with your perceptions, or the imaginary ones I hope to invoke. There is the question of the pluperfect, of course, but here you are behind some window where someone is catching sight of your narrator and his companion, all this a matter of belief. It is even more complicated than that, but you see what direction I am sending your observation in. The optic heart must venture, as someone more recently said.

I had reason sometime later, I thought, to wonder whether he had "chanced" to see us from his vantage point. Youth was my lot in those days, and my aim as well as my duty was to listen to these two old seamen tell their tales.

It is true that there was nothing unusual in his choice of dining rooms. The inn was the only place along the river in which one might get decent European fare unless one were to climb a distance that would be equal to a dozen blocks in a British or German city. And there was likely no contrivance in his choice of a seat facing the window and its view of the landing stage. I would not call it chance, but I would call it normal. And his being there just when we were on our way? It could have been chance.

Marlow was always going on about chance with a capital C. It was like the religion of no religion for him. More than once he would make pronouncements about it in my hearing.

"But from that same provision of understanding," the atheist would say, "there springs in us compassion, charity, indignation, the sense of solidarity; and in minds of any largeness an inclination to that indulgence which is next door to affection."

This was the way in which Marlow would construct a conversational sentence, so there should be no animus against mine. Once on a night-time pier I heard a dying man offer Marlow's sentiment in more direct and far less encouragable language. "A man alone," this unfortunate said, "hasn't got a f—— chance."

It has always struck me that this kind of usage of that final word is almost an opposite to the other.

In any case, this so-far unmet old seaman observed our coming off, and probably from that moment arranged things so that our meeting and spinning of yarns was anything but accidental. Certainly we had no idea that we were being watched, and no idea that we would spend that evening and many others with the watcher. He was a man who could not adjust to his retirement on shore, and who often looked for someone such as Marlow, whom he recognized if he did not know him.

He it was who once remarked that Nietzsche said that there are two kinds of people — those who want to know and those who want to believe. I reckon that people in the latter group are not much interested in anything I have to write.

But what will you know? Do you know more now than our watcher knows by this point in the story? Can a character know more than his watcher, or rather reader? Certainly he seems to, as for example, he likely knows his name and his version, anyway, of his life story, before you open the book. But can he be said to exist at all before you open and read?

That is not exactly the sort of situation that he and Marlow conversed about that evening and those to come, but there is a similarity in form, or let us say in structure. He was watching us, as you are watching him, and certainly Marlow has seen this sort of thing so often, he the beginner of long tales. Romance never knew a better partner.

But as I have said, we came off not to spin yarns but to dine. I honestly do not know whether Marlow the Buddha ever tasted any of

the food that passed between his lips. Observing him at the board, one might surmise that he was there for the carrying out of a secular ritual. He might sever a morsel from a chop while listening to an opinion offered by the man with the red-tinted face and cap of curly iron-grey hair. But then his utensils would be the shining ends for gestures he might make to indicate the breadth of the Indian Ocean or the lawlessness on some of its islands.

In other words, to dine, for Marlow, is to meet the necessity of the body's sustenance. Necessity, you will point out, is the opposite of chance. I might counter that the opposite of some instance of chance is another instance of chance. Let us say that for Marlow, the need to dine is the opportunity to dramatize folly and honour.

Then there is the storyteller's necessity. Since the dawn of writing, at least, the meal has been the setting for accounts sacred and profane, entertaining and philosophical. We know Socrates and Alcibiades by the reasoning and wit they exhibited during their symposium. We listened while Jesus foretold his story at the Last Supper. But we also know that we have told and heard wonderful baloney around a campfire, and fancy that right after fire was domesticated, hairy men stared into it and commenced lying to one another about their exploits with spears and such.

"Dine in the dinghy" is a misleading and quite comical phrase, and one that I might change if I could, but it is as if the sentence had been passed down to me in its present form and I incapable of changing a word. I may asseverate but never slice. I might wiggle some, but must remain within the tides.

As chance might have it, "dinghy" follows three words after "dine" on page 157 of Partridge, just as it does in my sentence. Does that not sound like design? Remember Marlow, who said, "I am not afraid of going to church with a friend." If Marlow found a watch on a supposedly deserted island, he would reason that a wayfarer had been there before him, not that a deity had dropped the timepiece to prove a point.

What does Partridge tell us of a dinghy, seeing that we are there anyway? "Bengalese *dingi*, dim of *dinga*, a boat; ? from Skt *dru*, wood (cf, the Gr *drus* s *dru-*, the oak)."

What an interesting page. Did you know that our word "dip" is related to the OS *dopian* (with a little circle over the "o"), to baptize. But there you go; the last thing we want to do here is to stray from the story. I mean, every page in Partridge is interesting. A fire engine coming out of its garage.

A diminutive boat coming out of its element onto shore at dinner time. Two of us stepped out. The lad would return for us when he received Marlow's signal in the dark, and if precedent be a guide, the youth might be able to get some sleep before that event. He pushed off without our help, and we walked up to the boards that would lead to the restaurant. We arrived there just as the floating wood made it home to the fourteen-ton yawl.

Fourteen tons is a pretty fair weight for a yawl, most of the ones I have seen being perhaps three tons. Marlow never used the term — he always referred to her as a "dandy." Marlow has been skipper of a lot of vessels in his day and ours. I believe or imagine, let us say, that he favoured a yawl because with its mizzen mast abaft the rudder, he could trim delicately. This would mean that he could keep a small crew. I have often seen one of the smaller yawls crewed by a single man. At the moment our crew numbered eight, largely because stevedores can be hard to find in the unofficial, let us say, harbours to which we pay visit.

One foggy day in 1905, two fourteen-ton yawls carrying nothing but ballast collided and sank off Donegal Town. This despite the advantages of the mizzens. One of them was named *Maid of Erin*. The other bore the interesting cognomen *Victory*. You could, as an American friend often tells me, look it up.

Chance threw them, Marlow told me one damp night, in one another's way.

How long this particular yawl had belonged to Marlow, I never sought to learn from him. One got the impression that the craft had a past unknown to him, and an even stronger sense that he had been the owner or at least skipper of a long list of vessels of many sorts. I more than once heard that he had negotiated the Congo River at the helm of some sort of paddle-wheeler, and that there had at least on one occasion been only a shadow line between his occupation and

that of a brigand, this somewhere that British institutions had never rubbed smooth.

But in another sense it seemed as though the rig and its owner were almost indistinguishable. They were both weathered and brown and of an undeniable age. They both, one fancied, had unfinishable tales to tell. They both creaked when they moved.

I was then amazed and have since been astonished that Marlow is not the most famous man in the Empire. If all his stories have secure attachment to the real events of his watchful life, he is Homer for our time. And I have heard sufficient allusions to both his history and his historifying to believe (or assent) that the untapped narratives might be more resourceful than those I had (to return to the pluperfect) been vouchsafed.

Marlow was, in the rivermouths of the eastern hemisphere, ubiquitous — yet he was mysterious. I have heard people compare him with a god and an idol, with a statue of the Buddha and a wrinkled bird of the jungle canopy. I have pulled my watch from my vest and been astounded to see that four hours had slipped by while he smoked his pipe and told us about conflict in the heart of a man encountered belowdecks.

In his stories he was always marling such things.

I sometimes thought that Marlow had been invented by some overarching intelligence to frequent the waters of the colonized world and bring doubt into the minds of anyone, east or west, about the intentions of the European colonizers. All of Europe, he once told me, went into the making of a monster named Kurtz. In our nightly discussions with Mr Powell, this question always lay in the background: how was it that Powell had retired to a land so far from his bringing up, and how was it that Marlow, easily his equal in years, seemed bound for an eternity on the water?

Perhaps a coming together of two such differing fates was necessary to the story — for it was not long until we would discover that Marlow knew the young Powell, and understood a key factor in his life — that young Powell had by mere chance received his first posting as second-in-command, and that by that accident was the whole course of his life directed — his and those of numerous

others. Well, you will see. You will sit at Marlow's table or on his deck. You will decide whether we are dealing with design as introduced to us by the European Greeks, or chance, a word, Partridge reminds us, that like many others descends from the Skt *çad-*, to fall.

Not to jump, eh?

By "my host" I mean principally my host at the dinner to come, or as we will see it or now do see it, depending on whether we are inside or outside the narrative, the dinner that ensued. Well, enough of that mumble — you have by now seen my point regarding that. Marlow had noticed that I was careful with my ready money once ashore. He did not know my reason, and certainly there is no need for you to know it. Suffice it to say that any money I came upon was required in a coastal town on the other side of the sphere upon whose surface we sail.

Marlow sensed my situation, but was too much an officer of the old school to pry. He told me that in buying my supper he was ensuring himself an audience for his hoary narratives. Then he busied himself with his pipe. He was an actor with sufficient skill and experience to play himself. I directed mental plaudits his way and looked forward to filling my stomach more than usual.

As Marlow liked the term "dandy" in reference to his vessel, I like the term "skipper" in reference to its master. I know that he did. He was uneasy with the appellation "captain" because it has the word for head in it. Perhaps that displeased him because he was opposed to the hierarchy or governance proposed, seeing himself as he was in his youth, a soul setting to sea because the sea and its unknown resembles hope, resembles in its promise of chance a great possibility that no god or empire would extend to a fellow. Certainly a captain is *enmeshed*, both in his history and in rank.

Perhaps he did not like the word "head" because he had learned over a long career among dark trees and mirror-like water, that the head as the imperium of the living organism is a conceit that loses its usefulness upon the part of any journey that leaves Europe astern.

Besides, he did not want to dress up as a captain.

"Sir," I once gathered the nerve to say, "there is a recollection of last night's curry upon the back of your jacket sleeve."

"Where it will stay," he replied, never taking his eye off the azimuth, "until I require sustenance enough to search it out."

So "skipper," a word that is simply connected to the word "ship." Important here is my reference to him as *my* skipper. That is the relationship and debt that I want to keep visible when I get to my next sentence, for there it is that you will see us working together, not head and arms but arms bent to our mutual task.

Or if I abandon you to carry on the story by yourself, I hope that you do it with the "dignified loneliness" that I would have attributed to old Mr. Powell in that second sentence. It was going to be a long one, and the story too. I hope that you will include me among your listeners when you happen upon this.