

## Literature and Art

“... none of us can ever express the exact measure of his needs or his thoughts or his sorrows; and human speech is like a cracked kettle on which we tap crude rhythms for bears to dance to, while we long to make music that will melt the stars.” — Flaubert, Gustave, *Madame Bovary*, tr. Francis Steegmuller, Random House, N.Y., 1957, p. 216.

The “art” in the title of this chapter means art in the conventional sense, namely, painting, sculpture, film. The conventional sense usually includes music, but that art, except for the film, *Vivaldi’s Bassoonist*, described in the section, “Film: Projects” on page 665, is covered in a separate chapter of this book. Properly speaking, of course, all first-class creative work — whether the subject be engineering, science, mathematics, cooking, or any of the crafts or trades — is art.

## Literature and Art

### Literature and Art: General Observations

#### Academics

We must not let academic experts and the hype of the commercial art market make us forget the truth, which is that we are all artists to some degree. Singing (e.g., in the shower, or while performing trivial tasks) is an art form; so is whistling, driving (consider the graceful sweep of the motorcyclist through traffic), personal grooming, dress, handwriting (in particular, signatures), gardening, maintaining a lawn, cooking, cleaning of all types (e.g., washing and waxing a car), interior decorating (home and office), dancing, love-making. There are people who in everyday life are as ignorant as stones of anything the cultured world calls “art”, yet who become artists of the highest order when they make love.

“[Is] there in art a more profound reality, in which our true personality finds an expression that is not afforded to it by the activities of life?” — Proust, Marcel, *The Captive*, vol. 5 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Modern Library, 1956, p. 209.

What is art? Art is doing what you want in the way you want. “From the ends of the earth one long cry goes up from the heart of the artist: Give me a chance to do my very best!” — *Babette’s Feast*

What is art? A way for people who are appalled by their ugliness and inferiority to create a representation of themselves that the world will admire.

“The world is full of reviewers and professors who could, in their erudition, erect around *Gatsby* or *Tender Is the Night* complex critical edifices beyond anything Fitzgerald could have done — people who could do anything to *Gatsby* or *Tender Is the Night* except write them.” — Leithauser, Brad, “Great Scott?”, *The New York Review of Books*, Aug. 11, 1994, p. 16.

“Interpretation is the compliment that mediocrity pays to genius.” — Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”

If you want a clear example of the *febleness* of literary criticism despite the important-sounding technical terms and the illusion of scholarly objectivity, get hold of a copy of Barthes’s *S/Z*, about which Susan Sontag said “*S/Z* demonstrates once again that Roland Barthes is the most inventive, elegant, and intelligent of contemporary literary critics,” but which John Updike far more accurately described as “an unreadable book about reading”. Browse through the book, read as many pages as you can endure (but at least a few), and then turn to Victor Hugo’s short story, “Sarrasine” (in the Appendices), which is the subject of the book, and suddenly, like a blaze of sunshine following a long night, you will see why literature is important and literary criticism is not.

“...the artist is — each within his own limitations — oftenest to be depended on as a critic; his criticism will be criticism, and not the satisfaction of a suppressed creative wish — which, in most other persons, is apt to interfere fatally.” — Eliot, T. S., “The Perfect Critic”.

It is worthwhile — just this once — to contrast academic literary criticism with criticism by literary artists. We begin by asking what the principal functions of academic criticism are: certainly one function is pronouncing on the quality of literary works in accordance with the critic’s criteria; another is showing relationships in a given work, or between works; another is analyzing the literary techniques used in a work; another is interpreting the work, i.e., explaining the “meaning” as it is seen by the critic; and another function is reviewing the work, normally prior to judgement and commentary, as in the case of critics for periodicals. Criticism by artists may perform many of the same functions, but there is often an additional function, namely, that of “improving the breed”: the artist critic asks, “What is there in this work that we can make use of?”

Every writer and artist should view with revulsion the appropriation of the arts by the academy — the taking over of the judgement of works more often than not created under the most dire circumstances, works by individuals who, with no guarantees, staked their sanity and in many cases their lives on bringing something new into the world — the taking over of the judgement of these works by a bunch of timid, ass-kissing bureaucrats who wouldn’t think of doing *anything* without someone giving them official permission to do it plus a lifetime guarantee of a prestigious job. Think of not having the courage to devote your life to doing something on your own, but instead having to settle for a sure thing, a guarantee of your value, and doing it on the coattails of those who *did* have the courage! Think of the Shakespeare industry, these pompous academic clerks poring over the words and life (what little is known of it) of an actor and playwright in whose company, and in the company of whose fellow actors, these prestige-obsessed bureaucrats wouldn’t have been caught dead had they lived at the time. Think of the professors of the history of art (I have known a few!) who wouldn’t be caught anywhere near an artist’s studio.

Think of the academics who are interviewed on PBS programs on the occasion of the publication of their latest book, which is — *what?*, another biography of *Lincoln*? What courage, what daring, to have invested years in the research on such an obscure, controversial subject!

And the Helen Vendlers of this world. Yet another volume on Keats, explaining what has never been explained before, analyzing, interpreting, this from a professor (at one of our best universities) who wouldn't be caught dead telling her students that if you want to understand poetry, then you have to hear it read aloud by gifted readers, just as if you want to understand great music, you have to hear it played. You have to try to read it aloud yourself or recite it in a way that conveys to your listeners something of what it is expressing. The proper study of poetry is listening and trying to read aloud or recite in a moving way.

More than one potentially great writer or artist, I imagine, has given up in despair after realizing in whose hands the final judgement of his work would rest. We must also wonder how many great works of the past have been permanently lost because they were not deemed important by these timid minds.

And how they love the spectacle of the suffering artist, these voyeurs who lavish so many hours of their lives on the study and description of miseries they couldn't endure for a day!

“ ‘I ask myself,’ wrote the novelist Elias Canetti in 1973, ‘whether, among those who build their leisurely, secure, dead regular academic life on that of a writer who had lived in misery and despair, there is *one* who is ashamed of himself.’ — Coetzee, J. M., “The Genius of Robert Walser,” *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 2, 2000, p. 13.

If there is a single essential step which writers and artists must make who want to move into the future, it is to stop imitating these professors and get off their hands and knees before the suffering of writers and artists of the past. Writers and artists must fight the disgraceful lesson which the professors teach, and believe in, thrive upon, namely, that to be remembered (that is, to be looked upon favorably by professors) is the main goal of the creative life, and that to achieve it you must pay with great pain — alcoholism, drug addiction, tormented love life — and that the whole point of it all is to suffer and be remembered and give the professors lots to write about.

**Table 1: Academics vs. Artists**

Characteristics selected for by Ph.D. process	Characteristics required of a good artist
Conformity, pleasing others, namely those with power to grant degrees and tenure	Independence, faith in one's instincts, courage of one's own convictions
Need for security (tenure)	Need for opportunities to take risks

**Table 1: Academics vs. Artists**

Characteristics selected for by Ph.D. process	Characteristics required of a good artist
Contempt for those not holding the views of one's own school in one's specialty	Curiosity about other arts, other spheres of human life
Pedantry	Attention to the details that are important, ignoring the rest
Need for credentials, official recognition of one's status, prestigious awards, obsequious students	Need to do one's best according to one's own high standards

You would think that, at the very least, people with as much *knowledge* about literature and the other arts as university professors have, would be able to recognize quality when they see it, in particular, among new writers or artists. You would think that they would be the first to detect new talent. Yet nothing could be farther from the truth. Name a single major twentieth century artist or writer who was first championed by an academic. Can you imagine any professor you ever studied under advocating, without the prior approval of his colleagues, or the prior notoriety among discriminating readers, a poet as original as Pound or Eliot? Yet what good is all that learning if all you can do with it is find other ways of praising the great writers and artists of the past? It is no secret that any good art forger can fool an academic expert (see Orson Welles' film, *'F' for Fake*). In my youth I knew an English professor who was fond of proclaiming that the last English poet was Robert Browning. I know a professor of history of art at one of the nation's leading universities who believes that no film of merit has been made (in the world!) since 1952. And we send our children to these ignoramuses — to be *educated*?

Another proof of the unfitness of academics to judge the work of artists is their naive belief in the "definitive edition", a belief arising from the idea that there is one and only one best, correct, version of each of an artist's works, and that this is the one that the artist wanted to pass on to posterity, and that it is the scholar's duty to discover. But for many artists, the "finished work" is simply the least-bad version they are capable of producing at that moment. For them, a work of art is finished when they no longer have anything to add to it or remove from it. "Art is never finished, only abandoned." — Leonardo. Some classics, e.g., some of Moliere's plays, were written in haste: is it conceivable that if these artists were to return to earth today, they would not scorn the fuss made over the "correct" version of their works, and instead wish that it were possible to convert all that scholarly time and effort into producing a better version of the work of art? There are few ideas more destructive of creativity than the idea that each work of art has one and only one correct finished form.

And this juvenile fascination with the sex lives of writers and artists, in particular, with the question of whether this one or that one was homosexual or not. Who cares? No one can deny that the persons whom a writer or artist was in love with are a subject of interest, but to spend whole books, whole lives, investigating just how homosexual a given writer or artist was — now *that* is the real perversion.

“New biographies of [Thomas Mann] appear, and are reviewed almost always on the basis of his homoeroticism, as though he can be saved for our interest only if he can be certified as gay, and so gain a place in our curriculum.” — Bloom, Harold, *How to Read and Why*, Scribner, N.Y., 2000, p. 27.

### Believing in Oneself

Only fools and academics speak confidently of the importance of a writer or an artist’s “believing in himself”.

“No one who doesn’t know what it’s like to be unable to stop producing failures and at the same time to be unable to stop trying to succeed, has any right to speak on this subject.” — S.f.

“...I’d gone along thinking...that everything in my life I’d hoped for or wanted to do, was possible. But...I realized that this simply was not true. I realized...that my life was a small-change thing for the most part, chaotic, without much light showing through. At that moment I felt — I knew — that the life I was in was vastly different from the lives of the writers I most admired...Things were going to change some, but they were never really going to get better...At that moment, I saw that accommodations would have to be made. The sights would have to be lowered. I’d had, I realized later, an insight. But so what? What are insights? They don’t help any. They just make things harder.” — Carver, Raymond, “On Writing”, in *Fires*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1984, p. 24.

And yet, it must be said: Imagine being a writer *without fear*, a writer who spends next to no time worrying about his ultimate worth or his rank among other writers of his time or of any other time, a writer who has long ago decided not to spend his life on his knees before academics and posterity, a writer who has decided that he is perfectly capable of making the most of what talents and judgement he has, and does not need to accompany every word he writes with an anguished plea, “But is this good? Will this be remembered?”. In other words, a writer who belongs to himself.

“...the most difficult thing is the *free* usage of what is *our own*.” — Hölderlin, Friedrich, quoted in *Hymns and Fragments by Friedrich Hölderlin*, tr. and intr. by Sieburth, Richard, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J., 1984, p. 14.

### Artists’ and Writers’ Misery

“...only an aching heart  
Conceives a changeless work of art.”

— Yeats, “Meditations in Time of Civil War”

To make a work of art out of one's misery — to convert what no one else has the slightest interest in, into something the world will admire, to find beauty in ugliness — is a natural response on the part of a certain kind of imaginative individual. Yet it can habituate that individual to the utterly false and abominable idea that beauty and intellectual accomplishment can only come out of great suffering, with the result that eventually his investment will begin to think for him: he will add up the bleak hours and decide that they *must* be made to pay off.

“The artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal that will not actually kill him.” — John Berryman.

“Despair ... is the mother of invention.” — Rosen, Charles, “Music a la Mode”, *The New York Review of Books*, June 23, 1994, p. 55. Which sums up the whole of 20th century art and literature.

“...good work only comes out under pressure of a bad life; ...he who lives does not work; ...one must die to life in order to be utterly a creator.” — Mann, Thomas, “Tonio Kröger”, in *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories*, tr. H. T. Lowe-Porter, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1962, p. 94.

On the other hand:

“For some time past the words of Bergotte, when he pronounced himself positive that, in spite of all I might say, I had been created to enjoy, pre-eminently, the pleasures of the mind, had restored to me, with regard to what I might succeed in achieving later on, a hope that was disappointed afresh every day by the boredom that I felt on setting myself down before a writing table to start work on a critical essay or a novel. ‘After all,’ I said to myself, ‘possibly the pleasure that its author has found in writing it is not the infallible test of the literary value of a page; it may be only an accessory, one that is often to be found superadded to that value, but the want of which can have no prejudicial effect on it. Perhaps some of the greatest masterpieces were written yawning.’” — Proust, Marcel, *Within a Budding Grove*, vol. 2 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1970, pp. 281-282.

Even as you are preparing to pull the trigger, at least have the honesty of admitting the inexhaustible source of scenes and ideas that your torment has brought you.

“You know, poverty ain't all it's cracked up to be.” — observation by a young jazz musician from the upper class after several years of the bohemian life.

We think: “That he was able to create such beauty despite such misery!”, when instead we should be thinking, “That he considered his life so worthless that he would go to *these* lengths to cause something to be associated with his name that was not that worthless!”

Every artist's and writer's wish: to be able to be attached to a machine perhaps similar to that described in the chapter, "Psychology", and get a list of all other artists and writers, present and past, whose daily depression "felt like" his or hers. Now *that* would bring a whole new lease on life!

"In the Western world, all our drama, literature, music, is just a complicated way of being scared." — Watts, Alan, radio broadcast.

## **Success and Failure**

If, after a lifetime of effort, a person produces something of value, the world says, "See how it pays to persevere and believe in yourself!" If, on the other hand, the person dies a failure, the world says, "See how a whole lifetime can be wasted through self-delusion!" The world is never wrong.

In Las Vegas, they ring a bell whenever someone wins a jackpot. They never ring a bell when someone does not win a jackpot.

"[Johnson] remarked, that attacks on authours did them much service. 'A man who tells me my play is very bad, is less my enemy than he who lets it die in silence. A man, whose business it is to be talked of, is much helped by being attacked.'" — Boswell, James, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, Oxford University Press, London, 1957, p. 344.

There are at least two kinds of failure for artists and writers: in one, the artist or writer fails to achieve deserved success in the world. In the other, the artist or writer fails to recognize how bad his work really is. Unfortunately, there is no sure way to determine which is which.

"The worst thing about being stupid is not knowing you are." — Hermann Simon in Edgar Reitz's film *Heimat 2*, Vol. 1

"...it is better to fail in originality than to succeed in imitation. He who has never failed somewhere, that man cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness. And if it be said, that continual success is a proof that a man wisely knows his powers, — it is only to be added, that, in that case, he knows them to be small." — Melville, Herman, "Hawthorne and His Mosses", in *Great Essays*, ed. Houston Peterson, Washington Square Press, Inc., N.Y., 1967, p.

Every writer or artist who decides to "believe in himself", to go against the grain, to face years, perhaps a lifetime of rejection and (worst of all) indifference, needs to remind himself of an



old saying in the underworld: “If you can’t do the time, don’t do the crime,” or, in this case, “If you can’t take the contempt, don’t make the attempt.”

The naiveté of writers is reflected in what might be called the central dogma of the literary art, namely, that each writer must choose between being true to him- or herself on the one hand and opting for commercial success on the other, but that those who choose being true to themselves will eventually achieve fame and immortality if not commercial success.

We need to pick this piece of wishful thinking apart once and for all. First of all, there have been great writers who have been true to themselves and achieved fame and commercial success almost from the start: Dickens is an outstanding example. Second of all, it is inconceivable that there there have not been writers (many!) who were true to themselves throughout their lives and were forgotten even before they died.

It is perfectly legitimate for a writer to say, “I want above all to make a lot of money from writing, and therefore I will perfect my craft, and my ability to produce products for my intended market, in order to achieve that end.” It is also perfectly legitimate for a writer to say, “I don’t care about commercial success, I want to be true to myself,” as long as the writer remembers that the world does not owe him or her a living, much less fame and wealth and immortality, just because the writer was true to him- or herself! What such a writer can legitimately hope for, and strive to achieve (especially in this computer age), is to reach a few readers in each century who will appreciate his or her work. Maybe only one or two! (There is all the difference in the world between having one reader and having none.)

Beware of succeeding, because then you will have to face the fact that success was *no more difficult* than this, and when you recall how desperate you were to succeed, you will be a little ashamed of yourself. Better to get beyond the need for success *before* you succeed, not after.

Writers and artists, like everyone else in these times, live in an age of the Object, which means that all but a tiny minority live and work under the assumption that the worth of their efforts is, in the last analysis, decided by the commercial or academic or national-cultural marketplace. Of course, writers and artists also believe that this marketplace is particularly sensitive to the kind of *real* worth which lies in “going it alone”, in “being true to oneself”, in short, in turning away from the marketplace. Any group of human beings who must endure as much misery as this one, may be forgiven for this naive attempt not to have their cake and eat it too, but it is important for them to understand that there *is* another way to look at the matter.

*If* being an artist or an intellectual were, in essence, just another way of being a Commodity that produces Commodities, then no humane person could possibly look on these activities as anything but a futile, self-deceiving, self-destructive waste of life, for all but a tiny minority. So the question that must be asked, preferably early in an artist’s career, is, Is there anything else in art but the very slim chance of becoming a Commodity in this or that marketplace? To which I reply with another question, namely, Is anything whose only value lies in providing that very slim chance, worth doing at all?

The truth, now almost lost and forgotten, is that if there were no publishers, no art galleries, no university courses on art, no literary or artistic magazines, no fame or money to be earned by

being an author or artist, some people would still be authors and artists. It is the grossest perversion of this natural desire to convert it into something that we must *earn* the right to do, something that we must *prove* we have the right to do, something that must *pay off* through the production of successful Commodities.

If the writer's or artist's life is nothing but being locked in an airless room while he or she frantically tries to make, intuit, devise, the Object that will charm the world into opening the door, then suicide is a far better alternative. On the other hand, for a *real* artist, everything begins and ends with a need to kill at least part of one's time each day in the shaping of certain materials. If you have no love of the *materials* — words, paint, wood, stone — if they are just means to the end of getting the world to concede that you have a right to go on living, or the right to having lived, if you take no pride in the way *you* handle the materials, then (and only then) are you in the wrong business.

“Sometimes I think about celebrated men and women and then I feel all the bane of celebrity. Celebrity is a plebeianism. It wounds any person of sensitivity. It is a plebeianism in that, by exposing a person to public gaze, to the common view, it forces a sensitive person to share the same position as those who behave scandalously in the street, or gesticulate or talk loudly in a public place. The man who becomes a celebrity no longer has any privacy...The walls surrounding his private life are turned to glass; his clothes acquire a certain excess; his slightest actions — even the most ludicrously human — which he should want to keep invisible, become, beneath the magnifying glass of celebrity, little exhibitions which soil the soul or weary it. You have to be really coarse to live at ease with celebrity. And, besides its plebeian character, celebrity is a contradiction: whereas it gives the impression of valuing and supporting a person, it actually devalues and enfeebles him. The unknown man of genius can relish the voluptuous contrast between his obscurity and his genius; when he reckons he could be celebrated if he so wished, he is measuring his value against the one true yardstick — himself. Once recognized publically, however, he no longer possesses the power to return to obscurity. Celebrity is irreparable. Like time, the machine can't be put into reverse.” — Pessoa, Fernando, quoted in Merwin, W. S., “Footprints of a Shadow”, *The New York Review of Books*, Dec. 3, 1998, p. 41.

### Originality

What is originality? Is it possible to make a work of art consisting solely of fragments of other works of art? (In the case of literature, the answer is definitely yes if the “fragments” are limited to letters or words. See also the passage on an idea of Walter Benjamin in the chapter, “Philosophy”. But even a copy of an entire work can itself be a work of art — consider, e.g., a medieval manuscript.

Which, in passing, brings up the question of what it means to say that two objects are “the same”. At *some* level, perhaps only the microscopic, even two copies taken from the same printing run of the same book, are different. Certainly two copies of a book that are owned by different persons are not identical.

Suppose someone carves a duck out of a piece of wood, then uses a carving machine to make copies of the carving. In using such a machine, the human carver attempts to “describe” the surface of the carved original using a tool, representing a knife, that is electronically or mechanically connected to the machine. The machine, working on another piece of wood, attempts to duplicate each cut that the carver makes, cutting away other wood as necessary to make the cut be at the proper distance and angle above some reference surface. Clearly, each such copy will differ, however slightly, from the original, but why should we believe that any given copy is in any way inferior to the original?

Why, throughout the history of sculpture in the Western world, from the ancient Greeks through at least the end of the nineteenth century, was there such an abhorrence of “modeling from the object”, i.e., of creating a sculpture by making a mold (copy) of the object? Was the reason really nothing more than the superstitious belief, which still lingers on in the twentieth century, that nothing can be a work of art unless it is produced by a human artist?

A work of literature can be viewed as a hierarchy: first letters, then words, then phrases, then sentences, then paragraphs, then chapters, then the work in its entirety. Where in this hierarchy is the originality in an original work? Certainly the work is not original because it is composed of letters and words and phrases in a grammar which no one has ever used before.

How many novelists and short story writers belonged to themselves sufficiently to take on the problem of descriptions as it should be taken on, namely, by beginning, early in their careers, to categorize types of description — of rooms, streets, country scenes, flowers, clothes, houses, people, etc. — and then under each type to accumulate references to passages of that type in world literature? How have good authors handled the stringing together of a sequence of actions — “He put the paper down, got up, walked to the sideboard, searched for his pipe, couldn’t find it, looked around the room, then ...” ? The familiar did something, did something, did something, did something, then ... How many actions come before the “then”? What are some ways to vary, to get around, these tedious lists? The making of such categories is not a sign of lack of originality, it is a sign of a writer who is aware of the tasks involved in his work, and who has no superstitions about what the truly creative writer “should” do.

Why aren’t the works in a given field of art more nearly “continuous”? Why aren’t there lots of almost-Beethoven’s-Fifth-Symphonies, each differing, by a few, or many, notes, from the one we know ? Why weren’t there many Robert Frosts, each of whom produced poems that differed by a few, or many, words, from the ones we know? Or is it simply that we do not normally know about all the other almost-masterpieces produced in a given age, so that, if we did, e.g., if we had before us all the poetry being written in England at the time of Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, etc., the works of these poets would seem far less original?

“I am not only allowed to finish my work, I am bidden to finish it. This, it seems to me, is the meaning of all the talk about civilization. It can exist only where each individual fills his own personal sphere of duty. If everybody recognizes and takes upon himself the duty to which he is called, genuine life will result. The civilization of an entire nation cannot be based on anything else.” — Kollwitz, Kaethe, diary, quoted in introduction to *The Portable Cervantes*, tr. Putnam, Samuel, Penguin Books, N.Y., 1978, p. 34.

“...the artists who are always sighing after liberty are often the most bewildered when they get it...” — Edouard, in Gide, André, *The Counterfeiters*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1973, p. 185.

### The Pursuit of Immortality

Every writer and artist must learn to think straight about the pursuit of immortality. According to Robert Hughes (for several years our best art critic) there are about 200,000 artists in the U.S. at present (early '90's). Assume that only, say, 100 of these will be remembered a hundred years from now (i.e., they will be among the immortals). A pessimist, e.g., a talentless critic or academic, who can only judge art in terms of winners and losers, might argue that this means that an artist has only 100 chances in 200,000 of achieving immortality in our time: he or she might say something like, “the probability of an artist achieving immortality is only about .05%”. But achieving immortality is not a crap shoot! Shakespeare and the other dramatists of his time did not all put their names in a hat and then ask something called Posterity to draw one at random to decide who would win the prize as Greatest Dramatist. Nor is this drawing repeated in each age. (Darned if Shakespeare, that lucky fellow, doesn't keep winning! What are the chances of that happening? Don't tell me that Shakespeare wasn't a remarkable human being!)

About 50,000 new book titles are published in the U.S. alone each year (mid-nineties). Not all of those authors will be remembered! Many, perhaps most, of these books will only sell a few hundred copies and their authors will never write another book, and the copies that were sold will wind up in the garbage can or the recycling bin within a few years. Becoming a serial killer is a far better way of achieving immortality than writing books.

On the other hand — “...the iniquity of oblivion blindly scattereth her poppy, and deals with the memory of men without distinction to merit of perpetuity. Who can but pity the founder of the Pyramids? *Herostratus* lives that burnt the Temple of *Diana*, he is almost lost that built it; Time hath spared the Epitaph of *Adrians* horse, confounded that of himself. In vain we compute our felicities by the advantage of our good names, since bad have equall durations; and *Thersites* is like to live as long as *Agamemnon*. Who knows whether the best of men be known? or whether there be not more remarkable persons forgot, than any that stand remembred in the known account of time? Without the favor of the everlasting Register the first man had been as unknown as the last, and *Methuselahs* long life had been his only chronicle.” — Browne, Sir Thomas, *Hydriotaphia: Urne-Burial*, chap. V, in *Sir Thomas Browne: Selected Writings*, ed. Keynes, Sir Geoffrey, Univ. of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill, 1970, p. 151.

Those of us who, as a consequence of being stubborn, are unlikely to see our books published in our lifetimes, must learn to think of books in the same way that painters think of paintings, that

is, as individual objects to be preserved. We imagine that immortality lies in the size of printing runs, in books being kept in print. But this is to forget that single books, single manuscripts, have survived for centuries (pen and vellum or rag paper being far more durable than the acid-treated paper on which books were printed beginning in the twentieth century). It is a sign of authors' obsession with being published, that it is so difficult to find out how authors in earlier times made copies of their work. A lot has survived! How did the authors send it to publishers? Did they send the original? Who did the copying? How did they check the correctness of the copy? Print a few copies of your book and then sell them at a very favorable price to the used-book stores, the archive of our literary culture, because used-book-store customers tend to love books. Give copies of your work to people you trust, who will not discard them every time they clean house or move. We are more fortunate than the painters.

### **Too Many Books, Too Few Readers**

"The point may soon come when there are more people who want to write books than there people who want to read them."<sup>1</sup>

Suppose the only people who *would* read books, were the people who *wrote* books and they spent all their time writing. Then there wouldn't be anyone who had time to read the books, hence there would be no point in writing books, except as acts of will power and self-satisfaction on the part of the author.

Suppose the world's authors got together and said, "Someone has to read what we write! So let each of us write 1, 2 or  $x$  books *fewer* in our lifetime than we otherwise might, and use the time we would have spent writing, in reading each other's books."

But if each author still turned out more books than there was time for the others to read, some books would go unread.

And we haven't even mentioned all the books of the past, which would go unread. If they *were* read, then that would mean that some new books would go unread.

Suppose that we are approaching a time, or may already have entered a time, when some books of necessity will go unread, not because they are unworthy of being read, but because there are simply too few readers in the world. Will we reach a point at which people will only write books for individuals they know who have promised to read them?

### **Artistic Freedom**

Whenever you hear someone calling for "unlimited artistic freedom", you know you are dealing with a member of the less-than-bright. No one who thinks deeply about the matter will hear that call without protest. Suppose a beautiful color film were made of a child actually being tortured to death. Should that film be given unlimited public access? In the controversy over the Metropolitan Opera's proposed performances of John Adams' "The Death of Klinghoffer" in October 2014, the demand for unlimited artistic freedom was often heard, despite the fact that the opera contains lines that are sympathetic to Islamic terrorists, and despite the fact that those terrorists were at the time beheading not only many of their countrymen and women, but also several Western journalists and aid workers.

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1. Rich, Motoko, "Bright Passage in Publishing: Authors Who Pay Their Way", *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2009, p. 1.

Suppose someone were to write an opera about a lynching in early 20th-century American South, and suppose it contained lines that were clearly sympathetic to the motives of the whites carrying out the lynchings. Would intellectuals demand the artistic freedom to perform it anywhere in the country?

### **Miscellaneous Observations**

For a thinker or artist, only one thing is unforgivable (apart from making children unhappy), and that is wasting time.

“...every work of art is only the sum or the product of the solutions of a quantity of small difficulties...” — Edouard, in Gide, André, *The Counterfeiters*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1973, p. 189.

In attempting to understand a work of art, our business is to understand why the artist went to all the trouble in the first place.

If you want to understand what an artist is trying to do, look at his worst efforts.

Why do we continue to pretend that a *real* work of art shouldn't have to be explained, when the bookstores and libraries are full of books that explain works of art, and, in fact, careers have been built on this activity alone? Why shouldn't artists incorporate the explanation into the work itself, just as the frame is often part of the painting (so you know where the painting ends)?

Wherever virtuosity is being praised — whether in music or painting or sculpture or sport or mathematics — a cynical and healthy part of us should ask how much of that could be done by a machine.

The greatest gift to the arts, at least up to the 19 century, was Christianity.

### **Literature and Art: Exercises**

*Exercise 1.* Construct a table of comparisons of all the arts which contains, for each art, at least the following categories:

#### **1. Reasons for practicing the art in the first place**

- making money;
- gaining fame and possibly immortality;
- having something to do

*in literature:*

- finding people who might be interested in your ideas.

## **2. Sources of the idea of a work, e.g.,**

*in literature:*

- a plot idea which is then filled out, or an intellectual idea which is then filled out, added to, i.e., developed by accretion;
- a mere impression or anecdote which is then developed into a story, play, novel;
- improvisation on paper, e.g., automatic writing, free association, pursuing a conscious fantasy;
- a formula, e.g., the detective story, the various formulas used in journalism;
- reworking of an existing story, including one written by the author or by another, or the story of the author's life or of people the author has personally known;
- imitation of another author, i.e., imposing the author's style on an idea of one's own; slowly, laboriously attempting to guess a sequence of words that will win the approval of prestigious judges, e.g., editors of small magazines, *New Yorker* editors;
- dream, including one in which the *text* of the work is dreamt;
- a combination of some of the above.

*in painting:*

- an idea which is then filled out;
- improvisation on canvas or other medium;
- reworking of an existing painting (the painter's own or another's)
- dream (so that the only task for the painter is one of *copying*);
- a combination of some of the above;
- etc.

## **3. How the work is made available to its audience, e.g.,**

*in literature:*

- by selling printed copies through bookstores or by mail-order, the copies having been printed from a typeset copy of the original manuscript (original manuscript may itself be in typeset form);
- by selling or giving away xerographic copies of the original manuscript itself;
- if manuscript is in a computer file, by making paper copies of that file and selling them or giving them away, or duplicating the file on the same or other computers;
- by making the work available on the Internet.

*in painting:*

- by selling the original through galleries or by the painter selling the original himself;
  - by making a black-and-white or color reproduction of the painting, and selling it individually or as part of a book via bookstores or mail-order;
- etc.

*Exercise 2.* Discuss: Is an artist original because he or she has feelings that very few other people have, or because he or she has the ability to express his or her feelings so that other people can, to a certain degree, experience them also, regardless of how unusual they are, or does an artist's originality lie in both of these abilities, and if so, to roughly what degree (name specific artists)?

*Exercise 3.* Discuss: To what extent can art be viewed as a *ceremony* about certain feelings? Why do we want a ceremony (of all things!), e.g., when something bad happens to us? What does the ceremony *do*, and how does it do it? Does it somehow grant dignity and importance to the feeling? (Poetry is more important than prose.) Don't say "Art communicates feelings", because so do the most inartistic human utterances, as well as measurements of skin temperature, perspiration, heart rate, brain waves. "Poetry begins...with a savage beating a drum in a jungle", said T. S. Eliot (in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*) What does the beating of the drum do? How does it, and poetry, make something become "different"?

*Exercise 4.* Investigate boredom as an art form, as a self-conscious goal of artists. When did the idea first appear in print? Which artists have been its most successful practitioners? Is an artist successful in this art form if the effect is achieved unintentionally? Try to write a truly boring story or essay that readers nevertheless find themselves wanting to continue reading (or simply choose a classic which you believe will accomplish the same purpose).

### Literature and Art: Possible New Movements

For Americans, suffering does not have the irresistible call to higher things that it has, e.g., for the Germans. Yet the growing hardship of the middle class may yet produce a movement, and one not limited to the arts, in which suffering — specifically, doing what you hate to do — has the highest value. Members of this movement will attempt to outdo themselves in, e.g., enduring loneliness (although, in this case, that is just what they will not be enduring); in living in shabby quarters, in subjecting themselves to daily humiliations among people who do not (at first) know that they are intentionally doing so; in cultivating the esthetics of ignored places, e.g., the landscaping along heavily travelled freeways, the sidewalks and curbs of poor sections of a city, of warehouses at night, dumps and toxic waste disposal sites. A favorite work of art of the movement will be that of "illegal domiciles", e.g., underground homes secretly dug in hills or mountains along main thoroughfares, the challenge being not only to accomplish all the digging undetected, but to have continued access thereafter, also without being detected. Members of this movement will subject themselves to special types of physical discomfort, e.g., after jogging on a rainy day, they will not take a warm shower or bath, but instead lie in the crawlway under the house, in their wet clothes, for several hours; they will, on impulse, enter abandoned buildings



alone, crawl into dark, narrow, dusty places and remain there for hours on end; they will, on impulse, eat foods they hate; they will deliberately, or “unconsciously”, buy faulty or unreliable products. Wherever there is the prospect of pleasure, they will ask themselves, “Is there a way that I can convert this prospect into one of hopelessness, of suicidal despair?” The principal goal of the movement will *not* be suicide, nor the elimination of suffering, but instead the ability to endure more and more suffering.

A: “My goal as an artist is to depress people.”

B: “But people don’t want to be depressed. They will simply ignore you.”

A: “But I will make depression so sensually appealing they won’t be able to resist.”

Interior decoration has always been aimed at making home and office interiors pleasant. Certainly the time is overdue for interior decoration aimed at making interiors as depressing as possible. This goal requires, first, a study of what makes interiors depressing. What combinations of colors, what types of furniture, induce thoughts of suicide?

Related to the above esthetic is the esthetic of ignored or unseen activities. These activities can be created at will. Examples are: choosing people at random on the street and following them for several hours; recording the sounds of an empty house over a period of, say, twelve or twenty-four hours; deliberately leaving an object behind — an umbrella in a bus or restaurant, a knapsack in an unlocked car — and then unobtrusively observing what happens to it (petty thievery as a subject of art); lighting a cigar, placing it in an ashtray on a closet shelf, then closing the closet door; weeding a vacant lot at night.

Or consider the failed writer who one day decides to take the poet’s advice and make a work of art out of his life — the life of the failure who does not give up. His achievement, as the years pass, becomes all the more remarkable when we realize that he knows that no one apart from his landlady, who will gather his papers together when he dies and place them in storage until it can be determined if he has any relatives, will ever know about it.

Less admirable, but possibly of more value to other writers and artists, would be a writer or artist like the above who decides to devote the rest of his life to setting an example of will power *and nothing more*. He proceeds exactly as the writer in the above example, but does everything he can to make sure that the world knows about his self-discipline in the face of its utter futility as far as producing any work of value is concerned. He does this for no other reason than to provide an example to those who do, in fact, have talent (“if he could work that hard for absolutely no reason, why certainly I can...”).

And we must not overlook the esthetic of ordinary everyday activities, of which the Japanese tea ceremony is probably the best-known example, although numerous other possibilities suggest themselves.

“Even if [Josephine’s] were only our usual workaday piping, there is first of all this peculiarity to consider, that here is someone making a ceremonial performance out of doing the usual thing. To crack a nut is truly no feat, so no one would ever dare to collect an audience in order to entertain it with nut-cracking. But if all the same one does do that and succeeds in entertaining the public, then it cannot be a matter of simple nut-cracking. Or it is a matter of nut-cracking, but it turns out that we have overlooked the art of cracking nuts because we were too skilled in it and that this newcomer to it first shows us its real nature, even finding it useful in making his effects to be rather less expert in nut-cracking than most of us.” — Kafka, Franz, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk”, in *Selected Stories of Franz Kafka*, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1959, pp. 307-308.

Is it possible to create works of art which can *only* be perceived through peripheral vision? The answer would seem to be yes, if only as a result of the well-known fact that, in near-dark conditions, our peripheral vision enables us to see objects that we can’t see if we look at them directly. Can the idea be carried farther?

## Literature

### Literature: General Observations

“I hate American literature. Frankly, I don’t give a shit if yet another down-and-out poor old country boy has a drinking problem; I also don’t care if Naomi can’t seem to find a purpose in life after graduating from Harvard and spending a boring summer on the Continent. I don’t want to read any more goddamn stories about father and son fishing trips or hunting trips, I don’t want to see any revelations of character in the way someone opens a beer can. And I don’t want even so much as a *whiff* of any stories, poems, or novels that have anything to do with the women’s liberation movement.

“I hate American literature — well, I don’t hate Mark Twain, or Vladimir Nabokov, or Eric Hoffer, or Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. or J. D. Salinger. I hate American *preciousness* — I hate the oh-so-simple-words, the plotless stories — those little farts of despair —; I hate the sucking up to pop culture, and the stink of the classroom, the writers’ workshop (Jesus!) and the Artist’s Retreat; I hate the *New Yorker*-university complex (nothing good artistically comes out of the university, and the exceptions only prove the rule); I hate the Eastern squire school of American literature; I hate Well-Crafted Poems — the kind that Franny Glass calls ‘syntax droppings’<sup>1</sup> — I hate Well-Crafted Stories — all this stuff that is written by wimps who always got an A in English and who believe that with enough work, and discipline, and suffering, and belief in oneself, and doing The Different Thing, they too will succeed, which means, they too will get an appointment to the Creative Writing Chair at the University of ...

“The art world, needless to say, has its equivalent:

““During the 1960s this entire process by which *le monde*, the culturati, scout bohemia and tap the young artist for Success was acted out in the most graphic way. Early each spring, two emissaries from the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr and Dorothy Miller, would head downtown from the Museum on West Fifty-third Street, down to Saint Marks Place, Little Italy, Broome Street and environs, and tour the loft studios of known artists and unknowns alike, looking at everything, talking to one and all, trying to get a line on what was new and significant in order to

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1. In Salinger, J. D., *Franny*, in *Franny and Zooey*, Bantam Books, N. Y., 1961, p. 20.

put together a show in the fall...and, well, I mean, my God — from the moment the two of them stepped out on Fifty-third Street to grab a cab, some sort of boho radar began to record their sortie...*They're coming!*... And rolling across Lower Manhattan, like the Cosmic Pulse of the theosophists, would be a unitary heartbeat:

“*Pick me pick me pick me pick me pick me pick me pick me...*O damnable Uptown!” — Wolfe, Tom, *The Painted Word*, Bantam Books, N.Y., 1975, pp. 18-19.

“I think the ability to relate anecdotes in an interesting way about real-life people one has known, is far more admirable than the ability to write stories about make-believe real-life people which will please professors and the judges on award committees. I think the ability to tell jokes well is far more admirable than the ability to get As in English courses.

“I hate Henry James, that darling of English literature grad students and their professors. There *is* an author who accomplished what James always tried, and never succeeded, in accomplishing, and that author is Proust. ‘... James ... was deficient in precisely those gifts of vividness and humor which Proust, to such an astonishing degree, possessed...’ — Wilson, Edmund, *Axel's Castle*, Charles Scribner's Sons, N.Y., 1931, p. 137.

“I hate literature written by dumb-shits like the Beats. Ask yourself what Allen Ginsberg's public reception would have been if he had worked in an office and been a Republican while writing the same poetry. People judge the quality of his poetry by the wildness of his behavior — exactly what you'd expect from people who have no love or knowledge of poetry. Ask yourself how many people can recite *any* of his poetry. His ‘first thought, best thought’ policy is crap, as any number of great poets, including Yeats<sup>1</sup> and Frost and Eliot and Wallace Stevens, could have told him. It is merely an excuse for laziness. His work is as transient as the means used to create it.

“I hate literature which asks us to believe there is something profound in sex, drugs, and rock n roll, instead of revealing these for what they are, namely, the last resorts of born losers. I hate literature which attempts to make a virtue out of the basic stupidity of the average American.

“I love literature which gets down to business about the important things in life. I love stories which begin, ‘In the city of —, there once was a ...’ I love Conrad, Le Carré, Solzhenitsyn, Borges. I love writers of comedy. (I think that comedy and pornography are the only two literary forms worth spending any time on, because in both cases the criterion of success is clear.) Tolstoy's ‘The Death of Ivan Illych’ is a great short story. So is Poe's ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’, and Conrad's ‘Typhoon’ and Chekhov's ‘Heartache’. Kafka's ‘The Metamorphosis’ is a great short story, as is Sartre's ‘The Wall’. Evan S. Connell's true story in his essay, ‘The White Lantern’ of the survival of Antarctic explorer Sir Douglas Mawson is better than many literary short stories. Borges' ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ and Joyce's ‘The Dead’ are great short stories. Salinger's ‘For Esmé — With Love and Squalor’<sup>2</sup> and Mann's ‘Disorder and Early Sorrow’ are great short stories. I think that any piece of literature that doesn't make you want to talk about it, argue about it, in a coffee shop or over dinner with your friends, isn't worth shit.” — S.f.

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1. “It took me a devil of a lot of trouble to get this into verse, and I *will not* read it as if it were prose.— Yeats, preliminary remarks to his recorded reading of his “Lake Isle of Innisfree”

“... A line will take us hours maybe;...” — Yeats, “Adam's Curse”.

2. If Salinger had not written another line, he would be among the immortals for that story.

Comedy lives, tragedy dies. We can understand the humor of virtually any age and culture, if not actually laugh outright at it. To understand the tragedies, we need a college course. The plays of Aristophanes are much more accessible to us than those of any of the Greek tragedians. The silent film comedies of the early twentieth century still make us laugh. We have to force ourselves *not* to laugh at some of the “tragedies”, e.g., horror films, of the same period.

Why do movies age in a way that novels do not? Even a four-star film like *Mutiny on the Bounty* (the 1935 version) seems terribly contrived. Yet we return to the novels of the nineteenth century and earlier and continue to plumb their depths, as we do plays of even earlier periods.

A Life Devoted to Literature. Let us try to conceive, at its extreme, one of these lives. A man without a grain of self-confidence is born into a godless age. But... there is literature! He submits himself to it, spends hours writing a letter, trying to make it perfect, because the goal of his entire life is nothing less than immortality. He learns the meanings of obscure words. Of every word he speaks, every sentence, he asks, is this better than all the rest? Is this perfect? A rejection by a publisher or magazine editor is all but unbearable: what aspect of perfection is he still blind to? He writes year-in year-out, reads to his friends even though they seem uncomfortable when he does so. But he does not give up. He puts on little plays, like Goethe. He follows in the track of the greats. He has no doubt that he will win eventually, because he has read the biographies of those who did.

The same religious impulse sometimes appears in people for whom every clod of dirt, every leaf, every stick is an Opportunity to be Creative. If someone expresses dissatisfaction with a plant, a piece of furniture, or item of clothing, the reply is always the same: “But there’s lots of things you can do with it!” Always a smile, always a breathless enthusiasm. Writing a letter is an opportunity to explore the wonders of calligraphy. Buying a broken musical instrument at a garage sale is an opportunity to invent a new kind of music. Being poor is an opportunity to learn how to Make Things. Never a moment of despair. (It is simply not allowed to exist.)

You would think that how-to books would be written in ages which had solved the problems which the books are about, but that is not the case: most how-to books are written in times when no one has the answers.

The how-to book — the instruction manual — is a literary form indigenous to the 20th century, but its rich potential will not be realized until the 21st.

Given literary works by two different authors, we may ask: how large a fragment of each is necessary for a person who is familiar with some of the works of each author but not the two in question, to ascertain which author wrote which fragment? (A measure of the individuality of the authors’ styles.)

You understand an author when you can imitate his style on any subject. In the case of some authors, e.g., Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it is not possible to understand them *unless* you can imitate them. The normal way of studying, e.g., taking notes on “what they say” in chapter 1, chapter 2, etc., is almost a waste of time.

And why shouldn't an author shop among the classics for a style in which to tell a story? Why shouldn't an author write the story in the style of several different authors and see which works best? Of course, learning how to write on any subject in a given author's style is a long way from academic analysis of a style. We must ask *statistical* questions, among others: what percentage of the time does the author describe the look or activities of the speaker when presenting dialogue? What percentage of the text is devoted to description of externals, what percentage to description of goings-on in characters' minds? What is the average length of a sentence? What are the most common grammatical constructions? A way of looking at the overall task here is to imagine that you have a limited time to teach someone *else* to write in the style of the author: what would you tell that person? Needless to say, in addition to statistical information, you would have to include what in writing classes is normally called stylistic analysis, i.e., the characteristics that enable us to distinguish one author from another: e.g., Hemingway's *ands*, Dostoevsky's humble bureaucrat mannerisms, Thomas Mann's overstuffed-chair style.

It is entirely possible that, more often than most authors would care to admit, the only thing preventing their story idea from becoming a good story is a style to write it in. (The author is in the position of a person trying to write in a language he can read but can't speak fluently.) So borrow someone else's style!

“Stendahl (in the *Roman Promenades*) believed that ‘style is the manner that each one has of saying the same thing’. But, obviously, no one says the same thing because the saying is also the thing. A technique or a style for saying something original does not exist *a priori*, it is created by the original saying itself.” — Stravinsky, Igor, in Stravinsky, Igor and Craft, Robert, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, N.Y., 1959, p. 25.

“Influence was one of the chief preoccupations of Eliot's literary criticism. The concept relies on a difficult distinction — the distinction between what is given (for example, all the poetry the young T. S. Eliot had read when he sat down to write ‘First Caprice in North Cambridge’) and what is original and unique. The distinction is difficult because at a certain level, as any reader of Rick's notes [in Ricks, Christopher, *The Waste Land, the 75th anniversary edition*, Harcourt Brace] will eventually come to feel, nothing is original and unique. The words, the rhymes, the images — it's all been done before. So how do we get the unambiguous sense when we read a poem of Eliot's that this is not Tennyson or Milton or Mallarmé, or some amalgam of all of them, but Eliot? We have the sensation of authenticity, but there is nothing we can point at to explain where it comes from. The voice is Eliot's, but the words are all someone else's.

“...The notion that a poem could be constructed out of [references to other people's poems] was the discovery Eliot made in 1917...” — Menand, Louis, “How Eliot Became Eliot”, *The New York Review of Books*, May 15, 1997, p. 27.

Some day, with the help of machinery and mathematics, it will become possible to *map* literary styles to sounds and, yes, even to smells. In other words, it will be possible to give answers to the questions, “What does this author’s style sound like in terms of music? What does this author’s style smell like?” Skeptics should keep in mind that many attempts have already been made to map music to abstract visual images. If someone asks what *good* such a thing would be, I answer: “The same kind of good as, for example, mapping mathematical equations to pictures, as was first done in the 17th century: it increases our understanding of the subject, it enables us to bring new *intuitions* to the subject.”

In technical subjects, there are many ways of saying the same thing; in literature, this is not the case (it is not the case that there are many different versions of “Hamlet”, each of which express the same thing). Is this because all technical subjects are fundamentally geometrical? There are many different ways of describing a geometric picture (no matter how abstract that picture may be), all of which are equivalent; but there are not many different ways of describing a scene or a person or a state of mind, all of which are equivalent.

Italo Calvino’s *If on a winter’s night a traveler* makes us realize that in any narrative there are: (1) the activities (or thoughts); (2) the persons who perform the activities or think the thoughts. We can replace “he” by “you”, or for that matter, we can replace any doer’s identification by any other’s we want, even though the results in some cases will be incongruous. In other words, there is always the what occurred and the who did it. “x put the book on the table and sighed. x thought of x’s trip to England the previous summer, and of how y had introduced y’s-self in the line at the cafe in the airport. Where was y now? z entered the room and asked where w went...” where x, y, z, w, can be replaced by persons’ names or by pronouns.

How to win the Nobel Prize for Literature — Skeptics ask themselves on what possible *literary* grounds the Prize should not have been awarded to Mark Twain, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Vladimir Nabokov, or John Le Carré, while others with not a tenth of the literary talent of these should have been awarded the Prize.

The answer is that Alfred Nobel’s original instructions were that the prize for literature should go to the “person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency”<sup>1</sup>.

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1. Quoted in the article, “Nobel Prizes”, in *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer, eds., Oxford University Press, N.Y., 1987, p. 401.

This may explain why the Nobel Committee never awarded the prize to Le Carré for *Smiley’s People*, a morality tale that is without question one of the great novels of the 20th century. Consider, for example, the two chapters describing Smiley’s visit to Connie Sachs, the aging former member of the British spy headquarters, whose phenomenal memory Smiley uses in his complex plan to get Karla, the head of the Russian spy network, to defect. Or the final pages, which will bring any sensitive reader to tears, in which Smiley’s associates watch breathlessly as Karla crosses the bridge between East and West Berlin to give himself up. But, unlike Solzhenitsyn’s novels, in which the Russians are evil and the West is good, there is often little difference between the British and the Russian spies. That is probably what made the Committee decide not award the prize to Le Carré.

### Literature in the Schools

The ontology of literature as taught in the schools: literature is an entity before which you are *small*; but of course it was produced by *geniuses*, people whose works we can only study, and study, and study, and *attempt* to understand. Yet, even after so many centuries scholars have not reached agreement on the meaning of a single one of these works. *That* is how great the great authors really are!

Cast a cold eye, a critical eye, on scholarly “analysis”, on the scholarly superstition that you can’t *really* appreciate, much less understand, a work unless you know as much about it as the professor does. This nonsense does more than anything else each year to turn young students away from curiosity about books of the past. The *only* task that scholarship has in the undergraduate classroom is to bring students to the level of knowledge that the author is believed to have assumed among the members of his audience. Thus, Martin Gardner’s *The Annotated Alice* is an excellent classroom aid for reading *Alice in Wonderland* because it tells us something about the various ballads and songs of Carroll’s time which he was satirizing. On the other hand, the presumption that students *need* the footnotes that obscure most editions of Shakespeare’s works, is as arrogant and stupid as would be the presumption that, because most people know next to nothing about the words they use in everyday life except when to use them, that therefore they don’t really know what they are saying. (A scholar at the right hand of each speaker throughout the day, that’s what the people *really* need!).

### How to teach Shakespeare:

- (1) Forget about the footnotes;
- (2) Have the students watch several of the great films of Shakespeare’s plays, e.g., those directed by, and starring, Laurence Olivier: *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, and *Richard III*
- (3) Do your utmost to give your students an idea of what it was like to be an actor and playwright in the Globe Theater. Help your students to understand that iambic pentameter is no big deal; that it is all around us — “I wish I didn’t have to learn this stuff”; “Will you be grading on a curve this time?” — and that with a little practice almost anyone can get into the habit of thinking and speaking and writing in it. Have the students do this. Then have them discuss the most common plots in popular movies, e.g., romance, detective, science fiction. Explain that these are like the themes (e.g., blues) that jazz musicians improvise on, and that, like jazz musicians, actors (and playwrights) of Shakespeare’s time probably had memorized an extraordinary repertoire of these plots and plays. In other words, like jazz musicians (and baroque composers), they had a great deal of ready-made “boiler plate” from which to construct their works. Then have the students outline a play that they would write if they had the time and talent. Then have them write just a few lines in iambic pentameter that they would probably put in their play if they had the time and talent.
- (4) Explain, clearly, with illustrations, what folio, quarto, octavo, etc. really mean, so that the students will have some idea of what the first publication of Shakespeare’s plays looked like, and so they will not be inclined to think that these strange terms somehow represent deep or complicated things that only professors can understand.

### Against Shakespeare

And yet, having said all that, I must confess that from the time I first had to read Shakespeare, namely, in college, I have thought him a crashing bore. For me, a Shakespeare play is two hours of shouting in complicated language. The only way I willingly sit through a performance of one of his plays is by watching one of Olivier's films.

For me, *King Lear* is just one long rant. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* nothing but an opportunity for actors to jump around, shout, roll on the floor, and say way too many words. Hamlet is not a character, he is a state of mind. I will grant that Falstaff is a real character.

Emperor Joseph II supposedly remarked to Mozart, after listening to *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, "Too many notes, my dear Mozart." If only Queen Elizabeth or King James I had said the equivalent: "Too many words, my dear Shakespeare", although it probably wouldn't have done any good. But his contemporary and friend, and one of the leading playwrights of the age, namely Ben Jonson, said as much.

"[Shakespeare's] mind and hand went together," [John Hemings and Henry Condell] wrote in the introduction to the First Folio, "and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." To which Ben Jonson famously replied in exasperation: "Would he had blotted<sup>1</sup> a thousand!"<sup>2</sup>

Granted, he had a way with words: there are immortal lines, but considering how many lines he wrote, he'd damn well better have come up with some good ones.

Why his continuing appeal through the centuries? Well, people think they are doing something that places them among the elite when they go to see one of his plays. The flood of difficult language and rhymes convinces them of that. The plots involve love, betrayal, murder, kings who actually existed, and low forms of humor now and then — what more could a respectable member of the upper middle class ask for?

English professors — and indeed, professors of the literature of any language — have an abhorrence of indexes to the literary works they teach, and I mean detailed indexes to the various events, characters, geographical locations in novels and plays. Why? Could it be because such indexes suggest that maybe one need not sit through semester courses and take lengthy notes in order to find one's way around in these works? Fortunately, there is at least one outstanding challenge to this self-serving prejudice, namely, Terence Kilmartin's *A Guide to Proust* (The Hogarth Press, London, 1983), which contains several annotated indexes to Proust's great work.

A truly heretical thought is the following: in each novel there are passages that together give the outline of the plot. In addition, there may be a number of passages that have become famous in themselves. Now suppose it were possible to buy editions of novels in which these passages were clearly marked, say, via underlines or a certain color of type. Then a reader with very limited time could get at least an idea of the plot, plus a list of the famous passages, in ten or fifteen minutes by simply reading the marked passages. Perhaps a synopsis ala CliffsNotes could be

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1. deleted

2. [english.stackexchange.com](http://english.stackexchange.com), Dec. 15, 2015



given at the start of the book. A second approximation could be made by passages marked in a different color, these being the next-most-important as far as comprehending the novel is concerned. And so forth. Why would this be worse than presenting the reader with the usual all-or-nothing choice: read the whole novel or don't bother reading it at all?

### **The (Self-) Education and Discipline of a Writer**

“All good writing is swimming underwater and holding your breath.” — F. Scott Fitzgerald

“True books should be born not of bright daylight and friendly conversation, but of gloom and silence.” — Proust

Just as surely as some people squander their youth on drugs and alcohol, some of us squandered ours reading Hemingway. And even though, having come to our senses, and having realized the great wisdom of always knowing more than you need to know, we may look up every hard word whose meaning we are in the slightest unsure of, no matter how many times we have looked it up before; even though we may work crossword puzzles, study foreign languages, and make a point of reading authors who use hard words, we will probably never be able to make up for those lost years of Hemingway idiocy.

If you are inclined to credit Hemingway with daring originality for disregarding the rules and stringing all those sentences together with “and”s, then you need to read the book that probably gave him the idea in the first place, namely, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Here, of course, the job is done right, and never becomes the pecker-twitching affectation it became in Hemingway's works.

*“No pictures and no interviews”*: a writer worth keeping your eye on.

The two most important rules for any aspiring writer or, indeed, for any aspiring intellectual: (1) Never let your schooling interfere with your education; (2) Never let your job interfere with your work.

“It is important that the artist should be highly educated in his own art; but his education is one that is hindered rather than helped by the ordinary processes of society which constitute education for the ordinary man. For these processes consist largely in the acquisition of impersonal ideas which obscure what we really are and feel, what we really want, and what really excites our interest. It is of course not the actual information acquired, but the conformity which the accumulation of knowledge is apt to impose, that is harmful.” — Eliot, T. S., “Blake”, in *The Sacred Wood*, Methuen & Co. Ltd, London, 1967, p. 154.

### **How to Write**

The most difficult work of fiction that every unpublished author must create is his audience.

“... of all the characters that a great artist creates, his readers are the best.” — Nabokov, Vladimir, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, N.Y., 1981, p. 11.

“The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors.” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “Kafka and His Precursors”, in *Labyrinths*, New Directions, N.Y., 1964, p. 201.

“...an aesthetic problem never before posed: Can an author create characters superior to himself? I would say no and in that negation include both the intellectual and the moral.” — *ibid.*, p. 215.

The analysis of a piece of music is typically a grammatical one: it discusses the way the composer has applied (or perhaps broken) certain rules of melody and harmony. The analysis of a literary work is almost never grammatical: (“Notice how he begins the first chapter with a gerund, then a verb, then a possessive pronoun, then another gerund...”) Why?

“Precision in the reader’s imagination should be obtained not by accumulating details but by two or three touches put in exactly the right places.” — Gide, André, ‘Edouard’s Journal...’ in *The Counterfeiters*, Vintage Books, 1973, N.Y., p. 87.

When confronting a huge quantity of notes to be worked into finished form, first resign yourself to the fact that the task is hopeless. Tell yourself that all you can do is put them into the order that you would want them to be in in their finished version. Then, each day that you find yourself with another day to live, take only one note to work on, saying, “Better to do one well than to finish them all. At least I can make this one good. That will be my only goal today. Then if there is any time left, maybe I will do the next.”

From the Creative Writing class: “He said it was OK about the wrench. But then he looked at the river for a long time.”

Every writer needs to know who his enemies are. In our time, they are Big Publishing and English professors. Both thrive on quantity, both love prolific authors. By the time a student emerges from the clutches of his professors, he or she knows two things: that one must never waste time on authors that professors consider unimportant, and that the one worst thing in the world for a writer is not to write enough. But a single sentence, a single paragraph or story can be worth dozens of books — “Man would rather have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose”<sup>1</sup> — and a writer’s real task in life is to create those sentences and forget about the rest.

“During the past three months the novel has progressed very satisfactorily, according to my drafted schedule. I have worked through several rough drafts to a final version of Chapters 5 and 8, completing a total of 105 pages of the novel in all, and have outlined in detail Chapters 9 through 12.” — from Sylvia Plath’s first quarterly report to the trustees of the Eugene F. Saxton Memorial Fellowship, who had given her \$2,080 to complete her novel, *The Bell Jar*.

Poor Sylvia, working under the thumb of the high-prestige professionals! The single most important piece of advice for any writer in these times when every writer works looking over his shoulder to see if he is meeting the approval of the professionals (while at the same time worrying about who is writing more books than he or she) — the advice that expresses the very essence of individuality and defiance of Those Who Know — is *take your time!*

“Do all your work as if you had a thousand years to live.” — Ann Lee, founder of the Shaker movement.

Once you are able to allow yourself to take your time, you will be able to do what in the past you felt there was no time to do, and what you feared would mark you as doomed to failure. Specifically: if you have difficulty with descriptions of interiors, of what people wear, of people themselves, of landscapes, you will now start accumulating references to examples of these descriptions that you come across in your reading and that you particularly admire. If your prose is rough, you will now start to accumulate references to examples of prose passages which have the quality of smoothness you would like your prose to have. You will make a conscious study of what makes the passages appealing: the kind of variation in tone and rhythm if the passages are read aloud. What makes your prose rough, clumsy?

The goal is to *make the craft your own*, which is what it means to be a master of your craft. If there is a single characteristic that you are doing this, it is that you are confident about taking as long as it takes to accomplish a task.

And take your time in reading. Always remember that whatever you can speed-read is probably not worth reading in the first place. Speed reading is reading “by eye”.

The German [like the American] does not read with the ear but merely with the eye; his ears he has put away in his desk drawer. When ancient man read — which happened rarely — he read aloud to himself, in a loud voice. If anyone read silently, everyone secretly wondered why. In a loud voice: that means with all the swellings, inflections, and variations of key and changes of tempo in which the ancient *public* world delighted. — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago, Ill., 1955, para. 246, p. 182.

And yet, this too must be said: some authors, all too aware of the century they are living in, and of the works of some of the literary giants this century has produced, spend huge amounts of time fussing over and wrestling with the question of *sound*, believing that with enough work and self-torment, they can find the sequence of sounds which will say what the meanings of the words can never say. The best advice anyone can give them is the Duchess’s in *Alice...:* “Take care of

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1. Nietzsche

the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves,” about which, incidentally, Martin Gardner provides an interesting note: “Surely few American readers have recognized this for what it is, an extremely ingenious switch on the British proverb, ‘Take care of the pence and the pounds will take care of themselves.’” Gardner, Martin, *The Annotated Alice*, New American Library, N.Y., 1974, p. 121.

*“I don’t write words. I write meanings.”* — an author worth keeping your eye on.

“Let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way about.” — George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”

“The real life of a writer, [Doris Lessing] says, is boring and hardly describable. ‘Work begins. I do not sit down but wander about the room. I think on my feet, while I wash up a cup, tidy a drawer, drink a cup of tea, but my mind is not on these activities. I find myself in the chair by the machine. I write a sentence... Will it stand? But never mind, look at it later, just get on with it, get the flow started. And so it goes on.’” — Dinnage, Rosemary, “Doris Lessing’s Double Life,” review of Lessing, Doris, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949-1962*, *The New York Review of Books*, Nov. 19, 1998, p. 57.

### **The Menace of the Computer**

Writing books or papers or short stories or essays using the computer is making a bargain with the Devil, because you can lose everything without warning. And no: conscientiously doing backups will not necessarily protect you. A friend of mine lost years of work when, after a disk crash, he found that his backup tapes were all bad. But for the kindness of a few anonymous FrameMaker programmers, thousands of pages of my own work would have been doomed to oblivion, since the latest version of the word-processor was not officially supposed to be able to load files from my much older version. Fortunately, these programmers had had the courage to go against their management’s dictates, and thus ensure that even files from versions as old as my previous one, would be loadable in the new version.

You need to keep in mind at all times that the computer is only an advanced typewriter. You are asking for trouble if you regard it as *the* storage medium for your work. Disks crash, backup tapes and disks go bad, word-processors become obsolete, word-processor and computer manufacturers go out of business (so that, eventually, you will not be able to repair the hardware). Rule 1 if you are an author who is publishing online is always to upload changed files, no matter how insignificant the change. If you are not publishing online you should *always* print out every page you change, with the date the change was made marked in hidden text. Periodically, print every document file, including hidden text, and store in a safe place. If possible, also give copies to trusted friends, so that, if everything fails, you can still use an optical character reader to get your work back into a new word-processor.

Some of this advice will sound extreme to those who have the use of institutional computers, e.g., in the university, because such authors need not give a second thought to keeping the computers running; a staff takes care of that. For such authors, the computer is indeed an advancement over pencil and paper or the typewriter.

But in this computer age, I invite the reader to contemplate the chances of the works of, say, a novelist ever seeing the light of day — ever being read — if he or she writes only in longhand. (As all authors did until at least the end of the 19th century.) It is fair to say that the typewriter is no longer a viable alternative, since no new ones are being made, and since sources of parts and persons skilled in doing repairs are disappearing rapidly. So if you write in longhand, you must sooner or later commit your works to the computer, e.g., by paying someone to type them. And if you do not have readers you respect among whom you can circulate your paper mss., then sooner or later you will have to consider publishing online. Unless, of course, you are lucky enough to have your manuscript accepted by a publisher. But the effort to find such a publisher is seldom worthwhile.

And let no author ever forget that the reason that he feels he must subject himself to the torment of being at the mercy of the computer, not to mention the lifelong torment of searching for publishers, is that he and his fellow authors haven't the courage to become their own readers and critics, but instead still believe what their professors taught them, and what the publishing industry wants them to believe, namely, that without the validation of Being Published, their work is as nothing. You do not need hundreds or thousands of nameless and faceless readers, the vast majority of whom wouldn't think of picking up a book unless someone important had told them to, and who, having done so, wouldn't have the vaguest idea what to think of it unless someone important had told them that too. One or two readers who are capable of giving you thoughtful and sensitive criticisms of your work will make you feel *much* better than knowing that you have hundreds or thousands of the other kind of reader. Try it!

It is remarkable how little is known about publishing in the Greek and Roman periods. Cicero was a prolific author in his old age (he was murdered at age 63 by order of Mark Antony in 43 bc) and most of his books have survived. How exactly did he go about publishing them? Did he pay someone to read them aloud to a group of assembled scribes, who then each made a copy? And then was this process repeated by each scribe with his copy? But errors can easily be promulgated by this method. How many copies of a new book were typically made? Who paid for the publishing of books? What was the price of a typical book relative to the income of, say, a skilled craftsman?

The reader might also be interested in the section, "The Light Dawns Regarding the Task of Writing" in the second chapter of the fourth volume of the author's autobiography, *Genius Without Genius* on the web site [www.thoughtsandvisions.com](http://www.thoughtsandvisions.com).

### **Form and Style**

A form is itself a message, or a collection of messages. What does each form, as a form, say? One way of thinking about the answer to this question is to imagine listening, through a wall, to an example of each form being read aloud, the wall just thick enough so that individual words cannot be recognized. Another way is to imagine reading an edited version of each form in which all proper nouns and "concrete" words have been replaced by dashes, so that all that is left are

words such as “a”, “the”, “and”, “is”, “then”, “before”, etc. Which brings to mind the following poem:

“One Size Fits All: A Critical Essay

Though  
Already  
Perhaps  
However.

On one level,  
Among other things,  
With  
And with.  
In a similar vein  
To be sure:  
Make no mistake.  
Nary a trace.

However,  
Aside from  
With  
And with.  
Not  
And not,  
Rather  
Manifestly  
Indeed.

Which is to say,  
In fictional terms,  
For reasons that are never made clear,  
Not without meaning,  
Though (as is far from unusual)  
Perhaps too late.

The first thing that must be said is  
Perhaps, because  
And, not least of all,  
Certainly more,  
Which is to say  
In every other respect  
Meanwhile.

But then perhaps  
Though

And though  
On the whole  
Alas.

Moreover  
In contrast  
And even  
Admittedly  
Partly because  
And partly because  
Yet it must be said.

Even more significantly, perhaps  
In other words  
With  
And with,  
Whichever way  
One thing is clear  
Beyond the shadow of a doubt.”

— Lehman, David, *The New York Review of Books*, July 20, 1989, p. 19.

A clear writing style says: “*The subject* (or the present level of treatment of the subject) *is no more difficult than this!*”; an obscure style says: “*The subject* (or the present level of treatment of the subject) *is at least as difficult as this!*”

“For my part, I have always suspected that clarity is the last refuge of those who have nothing to say.” — Waismann, Friedrich, “How I See Philosophy”, in *Logical Positivism*, ed. A. J. Ayer, The Free Press, N.Y., p. 360.

Every writer needs to know some of the basic rules for inspissating his prose. Among these are: use capitals, or, more precisely, use words that are normally capitalized; remove scaffolding, for example, subtitles; run dialogue of different speakers together in one paragraph (as in Proust), rather than have separate paragraphs for each speaker; make paragraphs long rather than short; use big words and foreign words and phrases; print the text in smaller type than usual; use footnotes.

You have literary aspirations: you start writing in whatever form your anxiety can bear and you start studying a foreign language or two. The years go by and you can't deny that you have developed a certain facility with your native language: you are able to say what you mean more precisely than others around you; you are also able to find the words to express complicated or unusual or subtle things much more quickly than they. What has taken place in the mind and ner-

vous system during those years? It seems that above all the study of foreign languages — particularly one like German, for an English speaker — helps to break syntax habits; where before you had only one or two ways of saying a thing, now you can say (almost) the same thing in a thousand different ways.

In writing autobiographical fiction, you have at least two options: keep your own name and change the names of all the others, or change your own name as author and keep the names of all the others.

### Literary Genius vs. The Ability to Think

Most literary works are read by humanities graduates, none of whom received any training in how to think, which, among other things, includes how to separate the What from the How, substance from syntax, the content from the music. They were trained above all to write in the approved style, and to admire good writing, which means that they can be led down any garden path a sufficiently skilled author wants to lead them down. “He writes brilliantly! Why of *course* what he says must be true!” “Critical ability” for them means nothing more than the ability to criticize the literary qualities of a text.

Yet it is absolutely crucial that literary genius not be confused with the ability to think — to make sound judgments. Consider Bernard Shaw. We may smile at his confidence in socialism as a panacea for the world’s ills. We may allow ourselves to believe that maybe, perhaps, he is right after all, for consider how compellingly he makes the case in his plays (and their prefaces). But the truth is that Shaw was a fool when it came to real-world politics. We need only compare his utterances after his visit to the Soviet Union in the 1930s, with those of Bertrand Russell, who saw the truth very soon in his own visit.

“After visiting the USSR in the 1930s where he met Stalin, Shaw became a supporter of the Stalinist USSR. On 11 October 1931 he broadcast a lecture on American national radio telling his audience that any 'skilled workman...of suitable age and good character' would be welcomed and given work in the Soviet Union. Tim Tzouliadis asserts that hundreds of Americans responded to his suggestion and left for the USSR

“A recent documentary, *The Soviet Story*, includes an extensive clip of film in which George Bernard Shaw, facing the camera, is apparently speaking in favour of discarding those members of society 'who are no use in this world':

‘You must all know half a dozen people at least who are no use in this world, who are more trouble than they are worth. Just put them there and say Sir, or Madam, now will you be kind enough to justify your existence? If you can’t justify your existence, if you’re not pulling your weight in the social boat, if you’re not producing as much as you consume or perhaps a little more, then, clearly, we cannot use the organizations of our society for the purpose of keeping you alive, because your life does not benefit us and it can’t be of very much use to yourself.’

“Shaw echoes this sentiment in the preface to his play *On the Rocks* (1933) writing:



‘But the most elaborate code of this sort would still have left unspecified a hundred ways in which wreckers of Communism could have sidetracked it without ever having to face the essential questions: are you pulling your weight in the social boat? are you giving more trouble than you are worth? have you earned the privilege of living in a civilized community? That is why the Russians were forced to set up an Inquisition or Star Chamber, called at first the Cheka and now the Gay Pay Oo (Ogpu), to go into these questions and "liquidate" persons who could not answer them satisfactorily.

“Yet, Shaw also maintained that the killing should be humane...” — Wikipedia, “George Bernard Shaw”, 11/6/10.

Another example is H. L. Mencken. When his targets are people or institutions we don’t like, we think, “What a brilliant writer! How clearly he saw things as they really are!” But when we find out that he had nothing but contempt for F. D. R. and the New Deal (though he knew next to nothing about economics), and that he was against U.S. involvement in World War II, and that he regarded himself as a libertarian — “I believe that all government is evil, and that trying to improve it is largely a waste of time.” — then, if we have any brains at all, we realize that, at least in political and economic matters, the man was a fool.

Sartre is another example, his unquestioned literary genius excusing, in the minds of many, perhaps most, of his readers, his continuing admiration for Stalin long after the truth of the Stalinist regime had become known to the world.

In our time, Christopher Hitchens is another example. His support for the Iraq war reveals a man who has little or no understanding of the enormous distance that separates the Iraqi culture from that of the West, and therefore the hopelessness of the extremely costly enterprise (in dollars and human life) of trying to bring Iraq into the modern world. But I am sure there are readers who were against the war, but who, on seeing what this skilled polemicist had to say about it, began to have doubts. (Hitchens also regards Lenin and Trotsky as great men. The term means more than men having world-historical importance; it also is a term of admiration. Yet any intelligent, compassionate, person who has studied what Lenin had in mind for the Russian people, and the lengths he was willing to go to in order to achieve it once he had seized power, cannot admire the man.)

### The Novel

“If Norman Mailer, John Updike, Philip Roth and Joyce Carol Oates are successful writers, then thank God I’m a failure! I refuse to appear on talk shows, I refuse to pretend to be a boxer<sup>1</sup>, or to have a highly cultivated opinion for hire about every important art event that hits town, or to teach creative writing at a prestigious university (what aspiring writer with any self-respect can stand the *smell* in such classrooms? the smell of way too much prestige and of always Doing the Right Thing). I refuse to write confessions and ask the public to believe they are “fiction”, I refuse to *keep up*, I refuse to begin a piece of work by asking myself, ‘What will sell?’ (‘Will this

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1. The strange and thoroughly repugnant fascination that this non-sport has for all-American writers! Apparently it began with Hemingway, the John Wayne of American literature, who somehow always managed to avoid facing the risks he boasted about.

get me the Nobel?") I refuse to make my talent, my life, myself, into a media product." — Berkeley author.

The Great American Novel: first of all, we have to be clear that there are at least two meanings to the phrase : (1) the greatest novel on any subject written by an American, and (2) the greatest novel about things essentially American written by an author of any nationality. Second, we must certainly agree that there is no one single great American novel, because centuries are so different. The great American novel of the 19th century (category (1)) was probably *Moby Dick*; in category (2), *Tom Sawyer*. In the 20th, the great American novel (category (2)) was unquestionably *Lolita*: no other book shows us better what we are.

Once and for all we must overcome the dreadful hype of the university clique and the desperate authors who serve it. There is telling what happened to you using the original names; there is doing the same and changing the names; there is making up stories about people you have known, the stories not necessarily being true; there is "beginning with a feeling" or with an impression, a mood, you want to get across, and then coming up with appropriate characters, possibly derived from various people you have known. Where does the fiction begin? Suppose I try to write an accurate autobiography but get some incidents wrong, in short, make them up. Have I suddenly begun to write fiction? Suppose I make up a story and someone later tells me it is exactly something that happened to them. Was I writing fiction when I wrote the story?

Let's face it: most fiction is the author's desperate attempt to get the world to approve of his or her life. We are asked to believe that Mary, who was raised on a ranch and had a terrible father and then went to New York to become an actress, but then married a financier, until she realized she was really a lesbian, after which she became a writer — that Mary, out of her profound literary artistry, just happened to come up with a story about a woman named Alice, who was raised on a ranch and had a terrible father and then went to New York to become an actress, but then married a financier... Or are we in the realm of Woody Allen's mythological beast, which had the head of a lion and the body of a lion but not the same lion?

What is the difference between good fiction that is derived from the author's life, and bad? If we sense that the author's motive is to gain approval for his life, to have the public look on his life and admire it, if we sense that his purpose is self-dramatization, then the result is bad autobiographical fiction. Hemingway belongs in this category; so does Philip Roth and the Brazilian author Clarice Lispector. Roth tries to buy off the public's disapproval (and suspicions of what is really going on) by a robust sense of humor and all manner of fantastic twists and turns on the author's basic obsessions, but since the motive is "See me!" the result is not commendable. But if there is clearly a distance between the author's experiences and the fiction — if we sense that the author has said to himself, or at least feels, "A life like mine offers interesting material for a story — for real literature", then it has a chance of being something worthwhile. Colette, e.g., in the early Claudine novels, Melville, Conrad, Nabokov, and John Le Carré are in this category.

A good question to ask of an author is, "What is he really *doing*?" The answer for some authors is set forth in the previous paragraph, namely, gaining public attention for his life. But

what is an author like Louis Auchincloss doing? My answer is, The Right Thing in the eyes of the upper class. He is presenting an image of that class with a view toward pleasing its members. They get to view themselves in the presence of flawless manners, namely, his prose. Updike was in a similar line of work, except here the aim was to please the literati, in particular *The New Yorker* staff and the academic custodians of perfect style.

Our question should really be, “Whom is he trying to please?”

### Aphorisms and Maxims

Maxims make us feel better because they are usually in the form of bold assertions. “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” “There are three types of liars: liars, damned liars, and statisticians.” “Die young or die old but die at the right time.” If your life is meaningless, if each decision is an agony because you hear, in your mind’s ear, a chorus of expert opinion against each choice you consider, if you live with zero self-confidence and zero hope, a good maxim — your own or someone else’s — is something to hold onto: This at least we have! This at least is true no matter what anyone says! For a moment, before the water rises again, your feet are on solid ground.

“That meditating on things human, all too human (or, as the learned phrase goes, ‘psychological observation’) is one of the means by which man can ease life’s burden; that, by exercising this art, one can secure presence of mind in difficult situations and entertainment amid boring surroundings; indeed, that from the thorniest and unhappiest phases of one’s own life one can pluck maxims and feel a bit better thereby: this was believed, known — in earlier centuries.” — Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Human, All Too Human*, paragraph 35.

Few things encourage a concise style more than (1) being forced to work at a full-time job which has nothing to do with writing; (2) having to pay for the publication of your own books, and (3) spending a lifetime among engineers, whose attention span for the vast majority of interesting subjects in this world is measured in seconds.

### Poetry

#### What is Poetry?

If the question were *where* is poetry, we could simply take Lautreamont’s assertion by way of reply and leave it at that:

“Poetry happens to be wherever the stupidly mocking smile of duck-faced man is not.” — Lautreamont (graffito formerly at entrance of Cafe Milano, Berkeley).

But our question is *what* is poetry? Most people who feel they understand poetry, or at least modern poetry, sooner or later answer with something like, “If you have to ask, then I can’t explain it to you. You just have to know.” Below, we will put this assertion to a test.

## Free Verse

Free verse is rarely written well. The proportion of free verse that is good is much smaller than the proportion of standard metric verse, rhymed or unrhymed, that is good<sup>1</sup>. The reason is that it is far more difficult to write competent free verse than it is to write competent rhymed, metric verse. (Just as it is far more difficult to write competent, i.e., emotionally-moving, atonal music than it is to write competent tonal music.) Why this should be so is an important question. Among those who have written free verse superbly are: Jules La Forge, Eliot, Rilke, Auden, Marianne Moore, Sylvia Plath.

Some poets write it well on rare occasions: William Carlos Williams' "Yachts" is good free verse. But most of the rest of Williams' poetry is merely stacked prose — stacked journal entries in fact. If the vast majority of Williams' poetry were subjected to the poetry tests described below, very few listeners would say it is poetry, whereas very many listeners would say just the opposite in the case of any of the four poets listed in the above paragraph.

The bulk of contemporary free verse "is little more than trite imagery and flabby prose camouflaged by the jagged lines customarily associated with poetry." — Anderson, Daniel, "Sound and Sweet Airs", review of the 2003 edition of *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*, in *Harper's*, Sept., 2003, p. 85.

This is a legacy of the dumbing down of artistic craftsmanship that took place in the late 20th century. Everyone's an artist! (And not merely in the everyday activities described at the start of this essay.) The less technique you have, the better the artist you are. Having little or no technique means that you have a pure heart. You are authentic. All the more so if the subject of your poetry is (putting it as succinctly as possible) being a loser. (See, e.g., the above review of the *The Norton Anthology*.) If I were a poet today, I would use rhyme and meter just so that there was something I could say that I had done right.

To see the extent to which prose has come to be considered poetry, the reader need only listen to Garrison Keillor's "The Writer's Almanac" weekdays on WQXR. The initial part of each program is always worth listening to, with its list of birthdays of important people and events, and its background on each. But then comes the work of modern American poets. I challenge any lover of poetry to call this anything but what it is: prose reminiscences and reflections.

I have reached the point of having no qualms about declaring that the greatest modern poet is Ewan McTeagle, whose early efforts included such poems as "Lend us a quid till the end of the week". But as the literary critic St. John Limbo has remarked, "...there is still nothing to match the huge swoop...the majestic power of what is surely his greatest work, 'Can I have fifty pounds to mend the shed?'"

'Can I have £50 to mend the shed?  
I'm right on my uppers.  
I can pay you back  
When this postal order comes from Australia.  
Honestly.  
Hope the bladder trouble's getting better..

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1. I would like to hear from any poet who can explain how a poet arrives at the meter and rhyme scheme he or she uses in a poem.

Love, Ewan' ”

Another critic observes, “There seems to be no end to McTeagle’s poetic invention. ‘My new cheque book hasn’t arrived’ was followed up by the brilliantly allegorical ‘What’s twenty quid to the bloody Midland Bank?’ and more recently his prizewinning poem to the Arts Council: ‘Can you lend me one thousand quid?’ ” — *The Complete Monty Python’s Flying Circus*, Vol. 1, Pantheon Books, N.Y., pp. 212-213.

### Tests to Determine if a Given Text is Poetry

1. Take any sequence of words from a poem and read them aloud to a poetry lover who doesn’t know their source. Ask if they are poetry or prose.

As often as not, the person will be unsure, unless the meter or rhyme is obvious or the words and phrases are too unusual. So why does the sequence of words become poetry when they are seen, in print, in a poem? Insofar as a free verse poem is intended for recitation, or not explicitly forbidden to be recited, what is the purpose of the line breaks? Are they markers for breath control, voice control, a pause, however imperceptible?

In my opinion, no poetry lover could fail to recognize the following as poetry upon hearing it read aloud. And yet no poem could be more “prose-like” in its language.

Error

We drifted downstream under a scattering of stars  
and slept until the sun rose. When we got to the capital,  
which lay in ruins, we built a large fire out of what chairs  
and tables we could find. The heat was so fierce that birds  
overhead caught fire and fell flaming to earth.  
These we ate, then continued on foot into regions  
where the sea is frozen and the ground is strewn  
with moonlike boulders. If only we had stopped,  
turned, and gone back to the garden we started from,  
with its broken urn, its pile of rotting leaves, and sat  
gazing up at the house and seen only the passing  
of sunlight over its windows, that would have been  
enough, even if the wind cried and the clouds scudded seaward  
like the pages of a book on which nothing was written.

— Mark Strand<sup>1</sup>

Poems like this are the reason why I think Mark Strand is the greatest living American poet.

2. Type out two different versions of a free verse poem: one a duplication of the original, the other with the line-breaks changed, but the sequence of words exactly as in the original. Show the two versions to a poetry lover who does not know the poem. Ask which version is the original one and which the doctored version.

As often as not, the person will be unsure.

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1. *The New York Review of Books*, Mar. 10, 2005, p. 14.

3. Select a passage of poetry that you feel is “prose-like” but that you nevertheless consider to be poetry, and write it out as prose. Show it to several poetry lovers who do not know the source of the passage and ask for their opinion on the piece of *prose* you are about to give them. Record the proportion of persons who say, “This is not prose, it’s poetry!”

4. Repeat a version of I. A. Richards’ experiment<sup>1</sup>, namely, hand out, to several poetry lovers, printed sheets of poems by poets not all of whom are considered great poets. Names of the poets should be omitted. The poems should be chosen so that they are not likely to be known by the test subjects. Ask each subject to write a literary appraisal of each poem.

If the results are anything like those that Richards obtained, there will be little correlation between the generally accepted critical opinion of each poem, and the comments.

### **Tentative Answer to the Question, “What is Poetry?”**

We may be inclined to search for an answer by looking at extremes. At one extreme we have mere verse, where all that matters is adhering to the form — the rhythm pattern and the rhyme pattern. An instruction manual, a weather report, could be written in verse. At one time philosophical treatises were written in verse. At the other extreme we have mere fantasy, with no regard to any prescribed rhythm or rhyme scheme in the words.

But we may be inclined to point out that neither extreme is necessarily poetry. We may be inclined to argue that the fundamental characteristic of poetry is that the words are doing different work than they normally do, that as soon as we sense they are merely doing the everyday work of prose (regardless of the rhyme or rhythm or subject matter) then we say they are not poetry. So, what is poetry? I answer, tentatively: poetry is a word ceremony. Not a ceremony in which words are used, but words performing a ceremony in themselves. Words at work in a different realm, just as we sometimes feel that music comes from a different realm. I say that rhyme and rhythm (whether a regular rhythm or the rhythm in free verse) are means of elevating words from their everyday roles into this ceremonial role. For, what does any ceremony do? It takes an ordinary event — the putting of a corpse into the ground, the placing of a crown upon a head — and takes it out of the realm of the everyday. In poetry, it is words that are attempting to lift us into contact with this other realm. Rhyme, rhythm in poetry are means (among others) of saying “This is not to be taken literally, it is something else, it is part of a ceremony.”

### **A Sign of Good Poetry**

In good poetry, we feel as though *these words* are just what *these rhythms* have been waiting for all along. The words sit in their rhythms.

“I know that a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches an expression in words, and that this rhythm may bring to birth the idea and the image; and I do not believe that this is an experience peculiar to myself.” — Eliot, T. S., “The Music of Poetry”, in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, Kermodé, Frank, Ed., Farrar, Straus and Giroux, N.Y., 1975, p. 114.

Which suggests a bizarre project:

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1. See Richards, I. A., *Practical Criticism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, N.Y., 1929.

1. Make a list of all single syllables in the language.
  2. Then make a list of all the naturally occurring — including in books and poetry — two syllable *sequences* in the language, e.g., “faster”, “and the”, “ocrat” (as in democrat), “terdep” (as in interdepartmental) etc. and divide it into those in which the stress is on the first syllable, those in which the stress is on the second syllable, and those in which the stress is equal on both. Then break down each class into rhyming sets.
  3. Now do the same for all the naturally occurring — including in books and poetry — three syllable sequences in the language, and again do the same breakdowns.
  4. And all the four syllable sequences in the language, ...
- Etc.

For me, the real test of a poem — the real test to determine if something that is presented as a poem really is a poem, and not just ornate, convoluted prose — is if it makes me want to memorize it, or at least if it makes me want to read it again and again. (Thus, among poems I have recently read, there is no doubt in my mind that Mark Strand’s “The End” and Walter De La Mare’s “The Listeners” are outstanding poems.) I have never had the slightest desire to memorize any Beat Generation poetry, not even Allen Ginsberg’s except for the first two lines of “Howl”<sup>1</sup>, which many people can recognize if they hear it quoted. I have never heard a student — not even the English majors who have rented a room in my house, nor any of their friends — remark on any Beat poetry, including Ginsberg’s, much less quote any of it. On the other hand, there are middle-aged adults who at least say, and I think truthfully, that they loved Dylan Thomas’ poetry when they were young.

Question in passing: what would it be like to write poetry in a language in which all words rhyme?

### **The Lives of the Poets**

If Allen Ginsberg had worked in an office, been a family man, and written the same poetry that he did, no one would have heard of him. (Unlike Wallace Stevens, who did work in an office, and was a family man.) People who say they are moved by Ginsberg’s poetry are really moved by his lifestyle. And whereas no one can possibly deny the craftsmanship of James Merrill, I can’t get it out of my head when I read him that basically this was a very rich man whose poetry was merely ornamentation for a self-involved life of privilege and idleness and homosexual love affairs.. Many of his poems seem to me to be essentially letters written to intimate friends — with the sentences cut and stacked to make them look like poetry.

### **Diaries**

“These novels will give way, by and by, to diaries or autobiographies — captivating books, if only a man knew how to choose among what he calls his experiences that which is really his

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1. “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for  
an angry fix,…”

experience, and how to record the truth truly.” — Emerson: quoted as epigraph to Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*

“‘What a book,’ hissed ... Gertrude Stein, ‘would be the real story of Hemingway, not those he writes but the confessions of the real Ernest Hemingway. It would be for another audience than the audience Hemingway now has but it would be very wonderful.’” — Frederick Crews, “Pressure Under Grace”, review of Kenneth S. Lynn’s *Hemingway*, *New York Review of Books*, Aug. 13, 1987, p. 32.

“I cling desperately to this notebook; it is part of my patience; it keeps me from going under.” — Gide, *Journal*, 1916.

A man starts keeping a diary at age twenty exactly for Gide’s reason. Years later, a psychiatrist repeatedly challenges him to destroy it on the grounds that it is a poor substitute for the companionship he needs. So one Saturday morning he gathers up all fourteen volumes and dumps them into the garbage. Nothing changes. He waits for three years, then starts again, exactly for Gide’s reason. A few years later, he comes across a book by another psychiatrist, the first chapter of which begins:

“The *Intensive Journal* process plays an active role in reconstructing a life....As it has evolved in practice since 1965, the *Intensive Journal* method has become the instrument for a wide variety of techniques which progressively draw each person’s life toward wholeness at its own tempo.” — Progoff, Ira, *At a Journal Workshop*, Dialogue House Library, N.Y., 1975, p. 9.

Of course, that was not the first time when members of the medical profession gave contradictory advice, each physician completely confident he was right:

“...I had recently read in a book by a great specialist that perspiration was injurious to the kidneys, by making moisture pass through the skin when its proper outlet was elsewhere. I thought with regret of those dog-days at the time of my grandmother’s death, and was inclined to blame them for it. I did not mention this to Dr. E — , but of his own accord he said to me: ‘The advantage of this very hot weather in which perspiration is abundant is that the kidney is correspondingly relieved.’ Medicine is not an exact science.” — Proust, Marcel, *Cities of the Plain*, Vol. 4 of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1970, p. 33.

“The art of medicine is not so rigid that we cannot find an authority for anything that we may do. According to Fernel and l’Escale, it changes according to climate and according to the phases of the moon. If your doctor does not think it good for you to sleep, to take wine or some particular meat, do not worry; I will find you another who will disagree with him. The diversity of medical arguments and opinions assumes all sorts of forms. I have seen a poor man fainting and perishing from thirst in pursuit of a cure, and afterwards laughed at by another physician, who condemned the first one’s advice as harmful. Had the sick man tortured himself for nothing?” — Montaigne, “On experience”.



In the vast majority of cases, a diary written with a view toward publication (e.g., Anais Nin's) stinks of no-but-yes: observations and confessions having the form of something written for one's own solace, as something that "doesn't count", with all the indulgence such writing expects from the (possibly non-existent) reader, are offered to the world as something that does count after all, while at the same time demanding the same indulgence.

It is tempting to say that the only diaries worth reading are those that were not intended for publication — e.g., Pepys's, Kafka's, Anne Frank's. But Ned Rorem's is worth reading, as are the diaries of explorers. In Rorem's case, we have, first, a man who is famous to begin with, second, an admitted homosexual who doesn't seem to mind discussing his sex life, and third, a cool, detached, viewpoint, the first and last of which at least do wonders to make a diary appealing.

For some people, diaries remain the only place where they can write honestly, the reason being that diaries have no academic respectability (unless they are the works of great persons). These people thus feel themselves free of the presence of experts looking over their shoulder and thereby converting every attempt to write into an agony of trying to guess what will please.

"I put all this down for the sake of discipline and for the very reason that it bores me to put it all down." — Gide, André, 'Edouard's Journal...' in *The Counterfeiters*, Vintage Books, 1973, N.Y., p. 84.

### Science Fiction

What is important in science fiction is the *spell* it creates. The best science fiction is a form of poetry. Mediocre science fiction is merely stories about futuristic machines written for engineers and technicians.

Because good science fiction is a form of poetry, hence aimed at expressing certain kinds of feeling, it never becomes obsolete. To any person who appreciates literature, the fact that the spoken language, the technology, and some of the scientific principles are obsolete in the old masterpieces like *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *The Time Machine*, matters very little if at all. Similarly, the only reason for making a new piece of science fiction "scientifically accurate" is to make readers and viewers more willing to subject themselves to its poetry.

When we read a sea story, we do not know very much if anything about the engines that drive the ships, yet we do not feel that the story is thereby incomplete. (See exercise below under "Literature: Exercises".) The same is true of good science fiction. All details about machines and, indeed about science, in a science fiction story, should be present only insofar as they aid in producing the spell.

A good science fiction author will ask about adapting the styles of great authors of the past, e.g., Proust, Dostoevsky, to his own purposes.

Examples of good contemporary science fiction, apart from the early books of Ray Bradbury, include: the films *2001*, *Solaris*, *Blade Runner*, and *Alien*.

Science fiction, sea stories, and spy stories are the same in this respect: there is a great Otherness: space, sea, Cold War. There is a vessel of rationality: spaceship, steam ship, spy department. One does the best one can, but the Otherness is always poised to overwhelm.

### Nature Writing

Some people (I am one) hate Nature mainly because it produces Nature writers, i.e., writers for whom Nature is a confirmation of all their fondest hopes, a place of beauty with a justice that is always just (when viewed from the right point of view), where everything occurs for the right reasons (the good of the species if nothing else), where you can always find a happy ending to every story —

“Knowing Nature never did betray  
The heart that loved her...”<sup>1</sup>

— and where a lonely, alienated soul can always find solace and comfort — and, coincidentally, a living selling this fiction to an ignorant public. (How can I be alone when I always have Nature (and, of course, my writing about Nature)? And certainly I should share this pleasure and solace with others by writing a book about my writing...) The only thinker I know of who has taken a hard look at the modern Love of Nature is Eric Hoffer. His essay “The Return of Nature” is must reading for all those whose nostrils are offended by the odor of the sanctity of Nature<sup>2</sup>. The essay begins:

“All through adult life I had a feeling of revulsion when told how nature aids and guides us, how like a stern mother she nudges and pushes man to fulfill her wise designs. As a migratory worker from the age of eighteen I knew nature as ill-disposed and inhospitable. If I stretched on the ground to rest, nature pushed its hard knuckles into my sides, and sent bugs, burs, and foxtails to make me get up and be gone. As a placer miner I had to run the gantlet of buckbrush, manzanita, and poison oak when I left the road to find my way to a creek. Direct contact with nature almost always meant scratches, bites, torn clothes, and grime that ate its way into every pore of my body...

“Almost all the books I read spoke worshipfully of nature. Nature was pure, innocent, serene, health-giving, bountiful, the fountainhead of elevated thoughts and noble feelings... I assumed that [these writers] had no share in the world’s work, and did not know nature at close quarters. It also seemed to me that they had a grievance. For coupled with their admiration of nature was a distaste for man and man’s work...

“The truth about nature I found in the newspapers, in the almost daily reports of floods, tornados, blizzards, hurricanes, typhoons, hailstorms, sandstorms, earthquakes, avalanches, eruptions, inundations, pests, plagues, and famines....

“Man became what he is not with the aid, but in spite of, nature. Humanization meant breaking away from nature, getting out from underneath the iron necessities which dominate nature.” — Hoffer, Eric, “The Return of Nature”, in *The Temper of Our Time*, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 93-95.

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1. Wordsworth, William, “Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey”

2. As in the books of Annie Dillard and the poetry of Gary Snyder

## Autobiography

### Before Writing an Autobiography...

Before writing an autobiography, an author should have a clear idea of the purposes that autobiographies have served in the past, because here, as elsewhere in life, it is important that we know what business we are in. These purposes (not mutually exclusive) include:

- The perennial one of gaining attention;
- To put certain experiences on paper before death obliterates them permanently;

“We may well be astonished by space-filling acts which come to an end when someone dies, and yet something, or an infinite number of things, die in each death — unless there is a universal memory, as the theosophists have conjectured. There was a day in time when the last eyes to see Christ were closed forever. The battle of Junin and the love of Helen died with the death of some one man. What will die with me when I die? What pathetic or frail form will the world lose? Perhaps the voice of Macedonio Fernández, the image of a horse in the vacant space at Serrano and Charcas, a bar of sulfur in the drawer of a mahogany desk?” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “The Witness”, in *A Personal Anthology*, Grove Weidenfeld, N.Y., 1967, p. 178.

- To prove that you existed; “Like a freshman in a physics lab, I wrote about the weekend’s activity in... a logbook...The astronomer’s rule of thumb: if you don’t write it down, it didn’t happen.” — Stoll, Clifford, *The Cuckoo’s Egg*, Doubleday, N.Y., 1989, pp. 27-28.

Some lives are lived only to be written about. The first time around the persons who live these lives feel they are not living them, that these persons have been erroneously placed in someone else’s life. But then, when they write about what they experienced, they feel that, at last, the life is their own.

“I...have always known that my destiny was, above all, a literary destiny — that bad things and some good things would happen to me, but that, in the long run, all of it would be converted into words. Particularly the bad things, since happiness does not need to be transformed: happiness is its own end.” — Borges, Jorge Luis, “Blindness”, in *Seven Nights*, New Directions, N.Y., 1980, p. 116.

“...I speak in a poem of the ancient food of heroes: humiliation, unhappiness, discord. Those things are given to us to transform, so that we may make from the miserable circumstances of our lives things that are eternal, or aspire to be so.” — *ibid.*, p. 121.

No experience occurs, or matters, unless it is observed by others. This is why people from happy families, who themselves create happy families, have no need for immortality. They exist in the eyes of others and always have. They have their immortality. But the alienated, those who have never existed in the eyes of others, particularly not their parents, are driven to find someone, anyone, before whom to place their experience, hence the source of most literary and artistic drive. It amounts to nothing more than that. They try to make it real in print, since it wasn’t real when it happened

- To tell the world how you became famous (if in fact you did);
- To (perhaps) overcome your life’s torment by writing down its story. This is the “ordering of experience” sometimes mentioned by novelists. The discipline of putting dates and place names on the sources of your misery seems to take some of the menace out of them. It makes you

realize that, no matter how terrible, these too took place in world that was going about its business, a world some of whose events are recorded in history books because they were experienced by many people.

“You gain power over a thing by naming it; you become master of a situation by putting it into words.” — Levin, Harry, “The Artist”, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, The Viking Press, 1968, p. 406.

- To put your life in one of the official literary languages of your time in hopes that in that way it will become a life that belonged to the time and thus had value;

- To make one more try at finding out what what caused you to be so miserable;

- To try to find out who you are (who you were all along);

- To help others avoid the mistakes you made. Knowing some of the things that might have caused our misery is not enough. We should want to pass on to others some of the thoughts and actions that helped to alleviate, if only for a few moments, our agony;

- To create a consolation — if nothing else some companionship — for those in the same hopeless situation you are. In particular, to make an argument *against* the importance of believing in oneself. We always hear about the winners, never about the losers (I mean the real losers, not the ones who are the center of media attention). On the other hand, if such a book ever becomes widely read, it becomes a lie, and should stop being read. Such a book can succeed only if at most a handful of readers ever read it.

- To try to evaluate what you have and have not accomplished;

- To leave a record for your children and friends as to why you committed suicide;

- To save people from having to plow through the journals and diaries you kept.

- To leave a historical record of your corner of an age.

### **How to Write an Autobiography**

The problem is to create something honest, something authentic. There are essentially two possibilities:

- Try to express the experience itself as it occurred. Here the reader is asked to suspend disbelief as to how such a thing could be brought into being at all, namely, a literary representation of something that took place with no authors present.

One reason for the appeal of this approach is that it seems less likely to trivialize anguish and misery. It is a way of getting around the wretched popular modes that do just this, e.g., narratives told in some therapeutic environment — individual or group therapy sessions, official reports, talk shows. The century that has been called the worst century so far, namely, the twentieth, produced

a few artists who were able to present anguish (the most common emotion) without trivializing it. Among these in literature are Eliot and Beckett.

But if we choose this approach, we confront the enormous artistic problem of expressing the anguish as it was experienced..

Of course, we experience other emotions besides anguish. For these we can try to adopt Joyce's method as represented, e.g., by the famous opening paragraphs of *The Portrait of the Artist...*:

“Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo....

“His father told him that story: his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face.

“He was baby tuckoo. The moocow came down the road where Betty Byrne lived: she sold lemon platt.” — Joyce, James, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, and Notes*, ed. Chester G. Anderson, The Viking Press, N.Y., 1968, p. 7.

Or we can keep a diary, and then just publish the diary as our autobiography. Anyone who has kept a diary for many years, and still retains a modicum of artistic judgement, knows the argument against this. Nowadays, of course, we are no longer limited to recording events on paper. We could, starting at an early age, video-tape our lives. Or, more interestingly, use some repeated daily activity, like taking a shit, as a randomizer, and simply film that. Nothing more. Just the toilet scenes and the conversations, perhaps with the thoughts at the time, and a statement of the location of the place. Let the reader figure out the rest.

The second approach to writing an autobiography is:

- Tell it from the present, in other words, as a traditional narrative.

The most honest and insightful assessment of this approach I ever read is this:

“Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no beginnings. Days are tacked on to days without rhyme or reason, an interminable, monotonous addition. From time to time you make a semi-total: you say: I've been travelling for three years, I've been in Bouville for three years. Neither is there any end: you never leave a woman, a friend, a city in one go. And then everything looks alike: Shanghai, Moscow, Algiers, everything is the same after two weeks. There are moments — rarely — when you make a landmark, you realize that you're going with a woman, in some messy business. The time of a flash. After that, the procession starts again, you begin to add up hours and days: Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, April, May, June, 1924, 1925, 1926.

“That's living. But everything changes when you tell about life; it's a change no one notices: the proof is that people talk about true stories. As if there could possibly be true stories; things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning: 'It was a fine autumn evening in 1922. I was at a notary's clerk in Marommes.' And in reality you have started at the end. It was there, invisible and present, it is the one which gives to words the pomp and value of a beginning. 'I was out walking, I had left the town without realizing it, I was thinking about my money troubles.' This sentence, taken simply for what it is, means that the man was absorbed, morose, a hundred leagues from an adventure, exactly in the mood to let things happen without noticing them. But the end is there, transforming everything. For us, the man is already the hero of the story. His moroseness, his money troubles are much more precious than ours, they are all guided by the light of future passions. And the story goes on in the reverse:

instants have stopped piling themselves in a lighthearted way one on top of the other, they are snapped up by the end of the story which draws them and each one of them in turn, draws out the preceding instant: 'It was night, the street was deserted.' The phrase is cast out negligently, it seems superfluous; but we do not let ourselves be caught and we put it aside: this is a piece of information whose value we shall subsequently appreciate. And we feel that the hero has lived all the details of this night like annunciations, promises, or even that he lived only those that were promises, blind and deaf to all that did not herald adventure. We forget that the future was not there; the man was walking in a night without forethought, a night which offered him a chance of dull rich prizes, and he did not make his choice.

"I wanted the moments of my life to follow and order themselves like those of a life remembered. You might as well try and catch time by the tail." — Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Nausea*, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn., 1959, pp. 57-58.

The case can be made that, if we want to be authentic, honest, then we should present the memories as they are being remembered, since that is the case, and in fact in conversation we do say things like, "Little did I know then that ...". What is remembered in what order may be interesting from a psychological point of view perhaps, but I am interested in creating something of value for other people, not indulging in more therapy.

"'Do you think it is possible to write a life of anyone?' [Virginia Woolf] wrote to her young niece when she was contemplating her life of Roger Fry. 'I doubt it; because people are all over the place.' So *Roger Fry* was not a great success, though in the semi-biography *Orlando* she did allow herself to go all over the place — mixing up centuries, sexes, and magical transformations ... In her fiction, the difficulty of pinning down a life keeps recurring...for instance...in *The Waves* — a book that mocks the 'biographic style' which just 'tacks together bits of stuff, stuff with raw edges.'

"Woolf summed it all up in a review of a biography:

"'Here is the past and all its inhabitants miraculously sealed as in a magic tank; all we have to do is to look and to listen and to listen and to look and soon the figures — for they are rather under life size — will begin to move and to speak, and as they move we shall arrange them in all sorts of patterns of which they were ignorant, for they thought when they were alive that they could go where they liked; and as they speak we shall read into their sayings all kinds of meanings which never struck them, for they believed when they were alive that they said straight off whatever came into their heads. But once you are in a biography all is different.'"

— Dinnage, Rosemary, "The Whirr of Wings", review of Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf*, Knopf, *The New York Review of Books*, May 29, 1997, p. 4.

### Self-Publishing

Academics, those brave souls with guaranteed lifetime incomes and assured audiences, have nothing but contempt for others who would dare to evade the approval process by which the professors have built their careers, and so they conveniently ignore, but in any case make a point of

not telling their students about, the many classic authors who self-published their own work. The following is only a partial list.

Blake, William, almost his entire life's work;  
Callenbach, Ernest, *Ecotopia*;  
Carroll, Lewis, *Alice in Wonderland*;  
Crane, Stephen, *Maggie, A Girl of the Streets*;  
Houseman, A. E., *A Shropshire Lad*;  
Joyce, James, *Ulysses*;  
Lawrence, T. E., *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*;  
Melville, Herman, much of his poetry;  
Montaigne, initial essays;  
Poe, Edgar Allen, first volume of poetry, *Tamerlane*;  
Potter, Beatrix, *Peter Rabbit*;  
Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*, first volume of *Remembrance of Things Past*;  
Shaw, George Bernard, *Back To Methusaleh*;  
Shelley, Percy B., Gothic novels, *Zastrozzi* and *St. Irvyne, or, the Rosicrucian*, and probably the pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*;  
Swift, Jonathan, "A Modest Proposal...";  
Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass*;  
Yeats, W. B., *A Vision*..

### Literary Executors, Inc.

Every author, young or old, who thinks about the disposition of his life's work after his death, knows what a monumental problem it is to attempt to convey to non-literary persons exactly what is to be done, especially if some or all of his work is on the computer in word-processor files. Electronic storage, of course, is not a solution, since it is not long-term storage: compact disks deteriorate after a few years, word-processor files are only as durable as the word-processor that accesses them: once the software company decides to discontinue the product, the author or his heirs must attempt to transfer the files to other word-processors, and if that is not possible, then the files only last as long as the hardware containing them and the word-processor can be kept working. Paper copies made on acid-free paper with dark ink are without question the best bet for survival. They are the nearest thing to permanent back-up.

I cannot believe there isn't money to be made in a business that might be called Literary Executors, Inc., which would perform the following tasks, among others:

- discuss with the author the disposition of his works, with an offer to:
  - attempt to find publishers if requested;
  - provide or have access to expertise pertaining to online publication and maintenance of web sites
- obtain written instructions for what is finally decided upon, including distribution of any royalties;
- keep the author's heirs or other appointees up-to-date regarding status of his works;
- submit detailed periodic bills;
- find another literary executor if it all possible should the company go out of business.

## Literature: Exercises

*Exercise 1.* What is the book consumption per capita in the U.S. (borrowings from public libraries plus purchases)? Compare this figure with estimates from previous centuries. Who reads what? What proportion of their time do readers spend on reading? What proportion of books that are borrowed or bought are actually read?

*Exercise 2.* Have a programmer write a program, or develop a spread sheet, so that, upon providing values for a sufficient number of the following parameters, the remaining values are automatically displayed.

Number of people in population;  
Number of people in population who read;  
Average amount of time per day that people who read spend reading;  
Average amount of time it takes to read (1) a book; (2) an article or story;  
Number of people in population who write books and articles and stories;  
Average amount of time per day that people who write spend writing;  
Average amount of time it takes to write (1) a book; (2) an article or story.

Use the program or spread sheet to answer questions such as, Under what circumstances would it be the case that there were only readers and no writers, and vice versa? What is the optimal number of readers and writers such that the readers could just find time to read all the books and articles the writers wrote?

*Exercise 3.* Depending on whether you are primarily a short story writer, novelist, or poet, list the names of all the commonly used literary forms of the short story, novel, or poetry, during the last, say, two hundred years, and give a description, based on understanding, of each.

*Exercise 4.* Take any piece of writing you admire, regardless of subject, and imagine it as rewritten in the most inappropriate form you can, e.g., a poem rewritten as a medical report; a mathematical theorem and proof rewritten in verse.

*Exercise 5.* Discuss: If literature and art express feelings, and if no writer's or artist's feelings are similar to those of other writers and artists, why not just develop an index to passages in other works that express the feelings?

*Exercise 6.* Have various people read a passage in a work of fiction, and then have them describe, in as great detail as possible, what they visualized, if anything, and why the fact that all the visualizations are not the same doesn't seem to bother anyone.



*Exercise 7.* Discuss: If a literary masterpiece were changed by one word, would it cease to be a masterpiece? If by two, three, ...? How many words would have to be changed in order for the reading public (not scholars) to begin to suspect something wrong, start to lose interest in the work? Why are we so squeamish about rewriting the classics, assuming we do not destroy the originals?

*Exercise 8.* With another person who reads and perhaps writes poetry, select a particular form, e.g., blank verse, and:

(1) recite poems without words, i.e., recite actual poems but substitute, say, “dit” for short syllables, and “dah” for long syllables, so that, e.g., a line of blank verse would go, “di-dah, di-dah, di-dah, di-dah”; include all tonal variations and pauses you would include if you were actually reciting the poem *with* words.

(2) improvise poems (aloud) in the same manner, with, perhaps, each person then giving an exegesis of the poem.

(3) read any piece of prose “shifted” one or more syllables, i.e., attempt to make words or phrases by grouping a given succession of syllables in a different way than usual, possibly altering slightly their pronunciation; thus, e.g., “improvise” might be read as “in pro vice” (as opposed to in amateur vice); “attempt to make” might be read as “a tent tomhawk”; etc. Before attempting this exercise, you should obtain a copy of d’Antin van Rooten, Luis, *Mots D’Heures: Gousses, Rames*, Penguin Books, 1980.

(4) Make the following experiment: take any piece of blank verse and read it aloud to a person who appreciates such verse. Then read the same piece of verse aloud, but with all lines “shifted back” one syllable, or two syllables, or three, etc., and ask him or her if they notice any difference, and if so, what difference. Thus, e.g., you might first read:

“To drive Paul out of any lumber camp  
All that was needed was to say to him,  
‘How is the wife, Paul?’ — and he’d disappear.  
Some said it was because he had no wife,  
And hated to be twitted on the subject;  
Others because he’d come within a day  
Or so of having one, and then been jilted...”  
— Frost, Robert, “Paul’s Wife”

then read it as though it were written:

“To drive  
Paul out of any lumber camp all that  
Was needed was to say to him, ‘How is  
The wife, Paul?’ — and he’d disappear. Some said  
It was because he had no wife, and hated

To be twitted on the subject; Others  
Because he'd come within a day or so  
Of having one, and then been jilted..."

Make a sincere attempt not to caricature the shifted version: have someone read it aloud who has never seen the original, and doesn't know the change you have made in it.

(5) Perform similar experiments with free verse.

*Exercise 9.* Find a story that has been published in a prestigious literary magazine and that still seems "up-to-date". If it is by a famous author, it should be a relatively unknown story by him or her. Copy the story onto cheap paper with a stubby, thick-leaded pencil, making sure, however, that every word is legible. Make up a fictitious name for the author. Send in the story, with a cover letter written in the same way, to, say, a dozen small literary magazines. Record how many (1) detect the fraud; (2) reject the story because it wasn't typed or written on a word-processor.

The goal of this exercise is to make clear to you how much good manners counts among the literati, and how few of these genteel folk are able to recognize content if it appears in the wrong guise.

*Exercise 10.* Study great novels of the sea, e.g., those by Melville, Conrad, and tally the amount of space textual that is devoted to descriptions of machinery. Then do the same with the best science fiction novels, and compare the results. Give reasons for the differences, e.g., if sea novels use less space, is the reason that the authors could assume readers knew more about ships than science fiction authors can assume their readers knew about space travel as conceived by the authors?

Is a sea story that involves steam ships, e.g., Conrad's *Typhoon*, essentially science fiction for a previous age, e.g., the Middle Ages or the Renaissance?

*Exercise 11.* Write several reviews of non-existent books, including a review of at least one book you hope someday to write but may not find the time for.

*Exercise 12.* Play the house game, i.e., walk through a neighborhood of houses you like, preferably with someone else of similar mind, pick a house, and free-associate regarding who lives there, what their daily lives are like. Do not neglect to do this for houses that seem to be occupied by obscure, people-hating people.

*Exercise 13.* Discuss writing poetry in a language in which all words rhyme, and all consist of a single metric foot, e.g., — . . , or one or more repetitions of that same metric foot.

### Summary of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*

*Exercise 14.* Write a winning entry for the annual All-England Summarize Proust<sup>1</sup> Competition<sup>2</sup>, in which each contestant has 15 seconds to orally summarize all seven volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*<sup>3</sup>. Below is the first draft of an entry that, in final form, might be a winner if someone could be found who could read the words fast enough. Or a recording could be made of a voice reading the draft at normal speed, and then the tape speeded up as necessary so that the whole was delivered in the required 15 seconds.

Title of each volume is given in italics, followed by a summary of that volume. Page numbers in the novel, and in Milton Hindus' *A Reader's Guide to Marcel Proust*, are given in double brackets, [ ... ]. The full reference for each volume is given at the end of the summary. Since parties are so important in the novel, I have indicated each one with bold-face type.

#### *Swann's Way, Overture*

The narrator, Marcel, has restless nights during which, in memories as he lies awake, and in dreams, he recalls the country town of Combray, where he spent vacations as a child. [SW 1-54] He remembers how the art connoisseur Swann, who lived nearby, would be a guest for dinner, and how he (Marcel) would anxiously wait for his mother to come upstairs after dinner to give him his good-night kiss, and what a trauma it was one night when she failed to do so. [SW 32-43] But then she finally comes to his room, and, at the encouragement of his father, stays with him that night, reading to him from a novel of George Sand until he falls sleep. [SW 47-52]

Years later, the taste of a madeleine (a kind of cookie) that Marcel, an aspiring writer, is given by his mother along with his cup of tea, suddenly reminds him of the cake that his great-aunt Léonie used to serve him when he and his family stayed at her house in Combray, and this sets off more memories of those days. [SW, 54-57].

#### *Swann's Way, Combray*

Marcel's great-aunt Léonie, after the death of her husband, Octave, is a perpetual invalid, spending her days in a bed by a window, watching the goings-on on the street below. [SW 60] Her loyal cook and servant is the peasant woman, Françoise. The church of Saint-Hilaire is one of Marcel's favorite sights in Combray.

Marcel visits his Uncle Adolphe, who is entertaining a "lady in pink" who will turn out to be Swann's future wife, Odette de Crécy. [SW 93-99],[H 33]

The family enjoys two different walks at Combray: one along what they call the "Meseglise way", also called "Swann's way", because it passes Swann's estate, and the other along what they call the "Guermantes way", because it passes one of the wealthy Guermantes family's estates. [H 26], [SW 171 ff.]

On Swann's way, near the little village of Montjouvain, Marcel sees through an open window at the home of the late composer Vinteuil, Vinteuil's daughter make love to another woman. During this scene, the woman says that she would like to spit on the photo of Vinteuil, who had apparently disapproved of the daughter's lesbian relationships. [SW 204 - 210]

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1. Marcel Proust, French author, 1871-1922

2. Chapman, G., Cleese, John, et al., *The Complete Monty Python's Flying Circus: All the Words*, Vol. 2, Pantheon Books, N.Y., 1989, pp. 105-107

3. Published 1913-1927.

We learn that Marcel wants to become a writer. [H 35] He composes his first literary work, a brief description of the twin steeples of Martinville, a village near Combray. [SW 233]

One day at the theater, Swann is introduced to Odette de Crécy, a courtesan, by an old friend. At first he is indifferent to her beauty, but then falls in love with her. She continually deceives him. She introduces him to the Verdurins, a newly rich, ill-bred, self-assertive, social-climbing bourgeois couple. [H 40] In his spare time, Swann works on an essay on Vermeer. [H 41]

At a **party** hosted by the Verdurins, who have a “little clan” (also called “the faithful”) of people who regularly attend their parties, Swann hears a sonata for violin and piano by the composer Vinteuil, who before his death lived in Combray. It has a phrase which captivates him, and which becomes the “national anthem” of his and Odette’s love.

Their phrase for making love is “doing a cattlya”, after the orchid which, having become loosened by a jolt of the carriage in which they are riding, he had re-attached to her dress. [H 45]

Odette is adept at arousing Swann’s jealousy. (Jealousy is one of the fundamental themes of Proust’s novel. [H 48]) One of the men we are led to believe is a lover of Odette’s is Forcheville. He is present at a dinner **party** at the Verdurins’.

Swann has a falling-out with the Verdurins when he refuses to deride as uncouth bores his famous friends at the Faubourg Saint Germain, the wealthy district of Paris, as the Verdurins want him to. [H 47]

In his jealousy, Swann one night after Odette has dismissed him a little early, claiming to be ill, returns, sees her windows lighted, raps on the shutters, only to find them opened by two strangers: he had chosen the wrong house! [H 48]

An often-anthologized passage of Proust is the description of the musical *soirée* (**party**) at Mme. de Saint-Euverte’s. [H 51, 52] It includes an example of Proust’s ability to see the pretensions of the aristocracy for what they are, e.g., in his description of how the Princesse des Laumes (Duchesse de Guermantes) shows, to all observers, that she not only understands the music that is being played, but at the same time, understands it in her own, unique, way. “She began to ask herself whether ... gesticulations might not, perhaps, be a necessary concomitant of the piece of music that was being played,...and whether to abstain from them was not a sign of her own inability to understand the music...[and so] she would beat time for a few bars with her fan, but, so as not to forfeit her independence, she would beat a different time from the pianist’s.” [SW 429]

An anonymous letter to Swann says that Odette has been deceiving him with many lovers, and that she has had a lesbian relationship with Mme. Verdurin [H 53] [SW 461]

Odette goes on a series of yachting voyages with the Verdurins, and stays away for more than a year. [H 54]

When Swann falls out of love with Odette, he marries her. They have a daughter Gilberte. Years pass. Francoise becomes Marcel’s parents’ cook after Aunt Léonie dies. She takes Marcel to the Champs-Élysées for walks. There, Marcel first meets Gilberte; she invites him to join in the game of prisoner’s base. He soon falls in love with her. She gives an agate marble to Marcel, which he cherishes. [H 58] But he never knows where he stands with her, she is as fickle as her mother. His love for Gilberte is the second of the great quintet of love affairs in the novel: Swann-Odette, Marcel-Gilberte, Marcel-Albertine, Saint-Loup-Rachel, and Charlus-Morel.

### ***Within a Budding Grove***

This volume takes place in Paris and in the seaside resort of Balbec.

Marcel’s parents have the pompous Ambassador Norpois over for dinner (**party**) [WB 18-40]. Norpois convinces his parents that Marcel should be allowed to go see a performance by the

famous actress Berma, whom Marcel idolizes. Marcel shows him a prose poem he wrote years before [WB 21]. The Ambassador does not like it [WB 21, 35]. Nor does he like Bergotte, the author Marcel admires the most [WB 34-36]. Both are inspired by the idea of Art for Art's Sake, which Norpois despises.

Marcel goes to see Berma perform in *Phèdre* [WB 8] but is disappointed.

Marcel goes to Balbec, a Normandy sea-side resort, with his grandmother, whom he dearly loves. At Balbec, he meets two main characters of the book, Robert de Saint-Loup, a handsome young military officer, nephew of Mme. de Guermantes, and the Baron de Charlus, the flamboyant, closet-gay, very wealthy brother of the Duc de Guermantes. We also meet the colorful manager of the Grand Hotel, where Marcel and his grandmother stay. The manager is an unending source of malapropisms. Among the visitors to the hotel is the Marquis de Cambremer, son-in-law of Marcel's parents' snobbish neighbor in Combray, Legrandin.

On the beach near the Hotel, Marcel sees a "little band" of five or six young girls. One is pushing a bicycle (this is Albertine, whom Marcel becomes attracted to, and eventually falls in love with), two are carrying golf clubs [H 74]. One leaps over a terrified old man, brushing his yachting cap with her nimble feet (this is Andrée, Albertine's friend and an important character in the novel) [H 75].

While dining at Rivebelle, a small town near Balbec, Marcel meets the painter Elstir.

Marcel is introduced to Albertine at a tea party at the home of Elstir [H 78], [WB 326-328] Marcel joins the little band in childish games. In the midst of one of these, as a jest, Albertine passes him a note which says, "I love you!" [H 79]

Albertine invites Marcel to come to her room at the Grand Hotel. He finds her in bed with a slight cold. The sight of her lying there is too much. He tries to kiss her, but she responds by saying, "Stop that or I'll ring the bell!" [H 80]

### ***The Guermantes Way***

Marcel's family moves to Paris<sup>1</sup>, to an apartment in a building owned by the wealthy Duc and Duchesse de Guermantes. Jupien the tailor has a shop in the courtyard. He will become involved with the Baron de Charlus later.

Marcel falls in love with the Duchesse, even though she is considerably older than he. At first she ignores him, but then begins inviting him to her apartment, which is in the same building.

We get to know more about another chief character, Marcel's family's lifelong cook, Françoise, a colorful character of peasant stock.

Marcel goes to a theatrical *soirée* (party) at Mme. de Villeparisis's, aunt of the Duchesse de Guermantes and of Charlus, for which he arrives too late [GW II 85-102]. She is a bluestocking who paints pictures, writes memoirs, but is considered too free with invitations to people who simply appeal to her [H 89]. (The social ranking is: Duchesse de Guermantes on top, though she does not occupy the most exalted rank, then Mme. de Villeparisis (in the second rank because of her freedom with invitations, and because of the fact that she publishes memoirs and paints, and because of a scandalous past (she had been the diplomat Norpois's lover, and she had been the ruin of Mme. Sazerat's father), then Mme. de Saint-Euverte; and finally the Verdurins.) At the party is Bloch, Marcel's outwardly obnoxious Jewish friend, who is now a playwright.[H 90]

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1. We are not told the name of the town where they had lived until then; it was not Combray, that being only a town where the family went for vacations.

Saint-Loup invites him to the garrison town of Doncières, where he is stationed, tells him about troubles he is having with his girlfriend, Rachel.

After the party, Marcel goes home to find his beloved grandmother gravely ill. [H 91] We watch her slowly die while being treated by various crackpot physicians.

After the death of Marcel's grandmother, Albertine is back in the picture; she comes to call on Marcel.

He goes to a dinner **party** at the Duchesse de Guermantes's [H 97][GW II 149-326], where we observe the difference between the wit of the Guermantes and the stupidity of their kinsmen, the Courvoisiers [GW 168-195].

Afterward, he goes to visit the Baron de Charlus, who is so abusive to him that he stomps on the Baron's hat in rage [GW II 343].

Later, at the apartment of the Duc and Duchesse, Swann arrives to tell them that he is dying [GW II 392]. The Duchesse dismisses his statement: "You're joking." Then, as they are leaving, the Duc notices that the Duchesse is wearing black shoes with her red dress, makes her go back and put on red shoes instead (GW II 394). Swann's impending death is thereafter completely ignored by the Duc and Duchesse.

### ***Cities of the Plain***

The book begins with a long essay on homosexuality. There follows a homosexual scene between Charlus and the taylor Jupien in the courtyard of the Guermantes' building, where Marcel lives.

Marcel's jealousy of Albertine begins to seize control of his relationship with her. He suspects that she is carrying on lesbian affairs behind his back.

He goes to an evening **party** at the Princesse de Guermantes's, [CP 27 ff] a cousin of the Duchesse, to which he was not sure he had been invited. At the party, there are rumors that the Prince is about to ask Swann to leave, in part because he is Jewish, but these prove unfounded. The Prince has come to the conclusion that, in the famous Dreyfus affair, Dreyfus is probably innocent, and wants to discuss this with Swann [CP 77 ff].

We get further evidence of the lack of sensitivity of the Guermantes. The Duc's cousin, Amanien, is dying, but the Duc doesn't want to be forced to leave the masked ball he is going to that evening, should the cousin die during the evening.. So he dismisses his servants with strict instructions not to disturb him until morning [GW II 370].

Dr. Cottard remarks to Marcel that he observed Albertine dancing at the Casino with Andrée, their breasts touching.[H118]

Marcel goes to a dinner **party** at la Raspelière [CP 213 ff], the country house that the Verdurins have rented from the Cambremers,[H 119] who are provincial lesser nobility [H120]. We get further examples of Dr. Cottard's taste for atrocious puns. [H 119]

The old pianist of the Verdurins, Dechambre, dies. He had played the Vinteuil sonata, and his replacement is the brilliant violinist Morel, who is the lover of the Baron. The learned historian Brichot gives an extensive critical etymology of names and places in the region [CP 235-240].

The Verdurins slight the Baron in the seating arrangement, explaining to the Baron that a Marquis like Cambremer outranks Charlus, who is only a Baron.. He tells them, with withering scorn, that seating arrangements are "not the slightest importance, *here!*" [H 120], [CP 243]. This begins a nasty battle between the Baron and the Verdurins.

We learn that Albertine may have had sexual relations with the lesbian lover of Vinteuil's daughter. [H 122]

Marcel invites Albertine to come and stay at his apartment in Paris. [H 124]

### *The Captive*

Albertine comes to live in Marcel's apartment in Paris. But he is consumed with jealousy over the possibility of her lesbian relationships, so the title of the volume can refer both to the fact that Marcel feels he has "captured" Albertine by getting her to live in his house, or the title can refer to his own bondage in the coils of his jealousy.

Proof that his suspicion is not entirely unfounded occurs in the "syringa episode" [C 64-66], in which, on coming home to his apartment building with some branches of syringa, a shrub with fragrant white flowers, which the Duchesse had given him, he runs into Andrée on the stairs. She seems distressed by the powerful fragrance of the flowers, tells him that Albertine dislikes strong scents, that he shouldn't take the flowers up to her. He says he will have Françoise put them on the service stair, but Andrée says she believes Françoise has gone out. Marcel says he hasn't got his latch key. It turns out [SCG 131] that this interchange is only Andrée's attempt to buy time for Albertine to leave her bedroom, where she and Andrée had been making love, and go to Marcel's room where Albertine then pretends she had been writing a letter.

The only mentions of the narrator's name, "Marcel", in all seven volumes of the novel occur on [C 91, 207].

In order to keep Albertine away from the Verdurins, where she might meet a certain girl, Marcel gets her to go to the Trocadéro [C 115, 138, 171]. He then asks Andrée to accompany her and make sure she stays there [C 129]. Then he becomes worried about her meeting an actress at the Trocadéro, and sends Françoise to spy on her and Andrée. Marcel seriously considers running off to Venice with Albertine [C 141].

The cries of the street vendors below Marcel's window attract his attention because they are a kind of music and poetry [C 152-155, 165-167, 178-180].

Marcel is strongly attracted to a dairy maid [C 185].

Marcel reflects on his love of Wagner's music [C 213].

Marcel witnesses Morel's abuse of his fiancé, who is Jupien's niece, Morel repeatedly accusing her of being a whore. [C 216-218]

Because Marcel feels himself in bondage to Albertine, he is more attracted than ever to other girls, e.g., several street girls he observes [C 229].

Bergotte, Marcel's favorite author, dies of old age, in a passage often anthologized. The concluding lines are said to have been the last that Proust wrote (it is known that he did not work on the novel in chronological order of events described):

"They buried him [Bergotte], but all through the night of mourning, in the lighted windows, his books arranged three by three kept watch like angels with outspread wings and seemed, for him who was no more, the symbol of his resurrection." [C 251]

Marcel attends a musical *soirée* (**party**) at the Verdurins's at the Quai Conti [C 307 ff]. It is hosted by the Baron, whom Mme. Verdurin encourages to invite his aristocratic friends. But as part of his war with the Verdurins, his guests insult Mme. Verdurin when they arrive, paying no attention to her but making remarks within her hearing such as, "Shew me which is mother Verdurin; do you think I really need to speak to her?" [C 331]. When they leave after the concert, they don't even bother to shake hands with her. [C 359].

Mme. Verdurin takes her revenge on Charlus by telling Morel that his relationship with Charlus will destroy his career, that no one will have Charlus in their house anymore, that the police are watching him, that he will be no use to Morel in the future because he is already on the verge of bankruptcy, and that once he had referred to Morel as “my servant”. All of which are lies. [C420-425].

### ***The Sweet Cheat Gone***

Albertine is thrown from a horse and is killed [SCG 44]. A letter arrives which she had written before her death in which she tells him she wants to come back to him. Marcel grieves excessively for her.

He learns that, after Swann’s death, and a period of genuine grief, Odette, who inherited Swann’s large fortune, married Forcheville, who agreed to let Gilberte take his name, so that she is now known as Mademoiselle de Forcheville [SCG 114].

Marcel sees Gilberte after many years, and fails to recognize her at first. [SCG 105-114] We learn that Gilberte has inherited a huge fortune from one of her father’s uncles. [SCG 114] She has become “a great snob” [SCG 121] and tries not to mention the name of her father, Swann, in public, because she is ashamed of the fact he had married a courtesan (Odette) and that he was a Jew [SCG 121-122].

The article Marcel had submitted long ago to the newspaper *Le Figaro*, is finally published. [SCG 100] The Duke and Duchesse de Guermantes have only superficial interest in it [SCG 120].

Andrée tells Marcel that Albertine had numerous lesbian affairs, and that she and Andrée were lovers. [SCG 131-142] She gives further details about the “syringa incident”. [SCG 131] Marcel is not sure if she is lying or not.

Saint-Loup marries Gilberte for her money [SCG 170]. At the same time, he begins to indulge in homosexual relationships [SCG 176].

### ***The Past Recaptured***

World War I breaks out. Marcel is away at two sanatoriums for several years. When he returns to Paris, he out of curiosity enters a building while out walking. It turns out to be a male brothel. He secretly watches the Baron de Charlus, who, chained to a bed, is being beaten by a young man [PR 123 ff]. Saint-Loup is killed in the War [PR 167]. The aging actress Berma invites Marcel and others of Guermantes circle to a luncheon in honor of her daughter and son-in-law [PR 178] but no one comes [PR 339 ff] because they all prefer to go instead to a **party** given by the Princess de Guermantes’s [PR 191 ff]. Marcel is struck by the fact that everyone seems suddenly very old. It then dawns on him that he was remembering them as they were years ago. The Princesse is now none other than Mme. Verdurin, whom the Prince, ruined by the defeat of Germany, has married for her money [PR 293]. (The first Princesse had died several years before.) Gilberte introduces Marcel to her daughter. Marcel arrives at a point of view from which to write his novel.

### **References**

[H ...] denotes pages in Hindus, Milton, *A Reader’s Guide to Marcel Proust*, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962.

[SW ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *Swann’s Way*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1928.



[WBG ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *Within a Budding Grove*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1970

[GW ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *The Guermantes Way*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1925. [GW II refers to Part II of the volume.]

[CP ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *Cities of the Plain*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1970.

[C ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *The Captive*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, The Modern Library, N.Y., 1956.

[SCG ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *The Sweet Cheat Gone*, tr. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Vintage Books, N.Y., 1970.

[PR ...] denotes pages in Proust, Marcel, *The Past Recaptured*, tr. Frederick A. Blossom, The Modern Library, 1932.

### Chronology of Events in Borges' "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"

*Exercise 15.* Write a chronology of the events in Borges' story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius".

This is certainly one of the world's great short stories. But it is also one in which the chronology of events is difficult to keep straight in one's mind. (The chronological order is not, of course, the same as the order in which events are revealed in the narrative.) The following is my attempt at such a chronology. Page references are to what is probably the most accessible printing of the story for English-speaking readers, namely, the volume *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, New Directions, 1964.

Early 1600s: in London or Lucerne, Switzerland, a secret society arose to invent a country. "After a few years of secret conclaves and premature syntheses, it was understood that one generation was not enough to give articulate form to a country. They resolved that each of the masters should select a disciple who would continue his work.." (p. 15)

Early 1800s: the "persecuted fraternity" springs up in America (p. 15).

1824: an affiliate of the fraternity confers with the ascetic millionaire Ezra Buckley, who says that in America it is absurd to invent a country and proposes instead the invention of a planet. He suggests that a methodical encyclopedia of the imaginary planet (which was eventually called "Tlön") be written (p. 15).

1828: Buckley is poisoned in Baton Rouge (p. 15).

1914: the secret society delivers to its collaborators, some three hundred in number, the 40th and last volume of the First Encyclopedia of Tlön. It is decided that another, more detailed, edition should be written, not in English but in one of the languages of Tlön. This "revision of an illusory world, was called, provisionally, *Orbis Tertius*." One of its collaborators was probably Herbert Ashe, an English engineer living in Argentina.

Sometime between 1914 and 1937: the narrator's father enters into a friendship with Herbert Ashe (p. 6).

1935: the narrator's friend Bioy Cesares cites an article on the country of Uqbar in *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia* (New York, 1917), a "literal but delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* of 1902". (p. 3)

1935, day after previous entry: Bioy finds a copy of Vol. XLVI of the *The Anglo-American Cyclopedia*. It contains an article on Uqbar. It says that the literature of Uqbar "never referred to reality, but only to the two imaginary regions of Mjlenas and Tlön." (p. 5)

1937, September: Herbert Ashe receives, by mail, a book titled *A First Encyclopedia of Tlön. Vol. XI. Hlaer to Jangr*. “On the first page and on a leaf of silk paper that covered one of the colored plates there was stamped a blue oval with this inscription: *Orbis Tertius*.” (p. 7)

1937, September, a few days after receiving the volume of the *First Encyclopedia*...: Herbert Ashe dies of a ruptured aneurysm (p. 6)

1940: The story up to this point is published as an article on Tlön in the *Anthology of Fantastic Literature* (p. 14). The article describes the culture and language of Tlön, including its bizarre resolution of certain paradoxes, and the strange objects called *hrönir*.

1941, March: a letter written by Gunnar Erfjord is discovered in a book by Hinton that had belonged to Herbert Ashe (p. 14). The letter tells the history of Tlön (as described above).

1942: Princess Faucigny Lucinge finds, in a box of her silverware that had been shipped from Poitiers, a very heavy metallic cone about the size of a die. “These small, very heavy cones (made in a metal which is not of this world) are images of the divinity in certain regions of Tlön.” (p.16)

Around 1944: the forty volumes of the *First Encyclopedia of Tlön* are found in a Memphis (Tenn.) library (p. 17).

1947: Postscript is added to the article published in 1940, describing events since 1940 (p. 14). The culture and objects and language of Tlön begin taking over our world.

*Exercise 16.* (Note: this exercise is more difficult than it first appears.) Write a convincing example of the speech of a member of the lower class when he or she is confronted with any situation that requires the slightest exercise of reason, e.g., at a window in traffic court. Transcription of one or more tape recordings is perfectly acceptable, but this exercise must conclude with guidelines for writing this kind of dialogue: why exactly does it take such persons so long to understand the simplest things? What is the *content* of this type of speech? What exactly tends to be misunderstood, and how is it responded to? Etc.

*Exercise 17.* (Note: this exercise is more difficult than it first appears.) Similar to previous exercise, only in this case, the type of speech is that of one of the endless talkers one sometimes hears in breakfast places and coffee shops: non-stop for fifteen minutes or half an hour. Transcription of one or more tape recordings is perfectly acceptable but as in the previous exercise, this exercise must conclude with guidelines for writing this kind of dialogue. What is the *content* of this type of speech? What kind of information is being communicated? What makes it so insufferably, unendurably boring? What psychological forces would impel some people to talk like this?

### Literature: Projects

These projects are offered as challenges to the writing community. I would be glad to read any of the responses.

### Poetry

Write a poem or story titled, “The Painter Edvard Munch”.

## Literature and Art

Write a poem whose first line begins, “Thank you, Note, ...”

Write a poem whose first lines are,

“Not all my molecules didn’t know I was dying:  
Some did but went about their work as usual...”

Write a poem containing the line, “thalassic fishes with luminous organs” (from definition of “thalassic” in *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, G. & C. Merriam Company, Springfield, Mass., 1981).

Write a poem containing the lines,

“The day outside is sunny and bright  
But the window is covered with tears”

Write a poem titled “Proposing in a Cemetery”

Write a poem that is the thoughts of a single strand of hair in the bushy hairdo of a famous female black author.

Write a book of poetry titled *Fireproof Ashes*.

Write a book of poetry titled *Racing to the Stop Sign and Other Poems*.

### Stories

Write a story titled “Nostalgia for the Avant-Garde”, in which an old couple decides to spend a spring weekend day in San Francisco visiting the places they frequented in their youth during the days of the Flower Children in the Sixties. Despite their age, they are still attractive, and still clearly very much in love with each other. They hold hands, laugh, kiss every now and then. They wear the clothes of that other time (she in a long dress and a flower in her hair), go to antique stores specializing in the memorabilia and styles of the time, and frequently say things like, “Didn’t — live in that house? Oh, you remember her! The really crazy one?” “We were all crazy, then.” “And there! Wasn’t that where we saw *Rhinoceros*?” “No, I don’t think so. I think the building was torn down.” “Do you remember that bakery on — St., and how we used to love to go and have those delicious pastries, and their wonderful coffee, and talk, and hold hands, and...”

Write a story about an old man who all his life made half-hearted attempts to write stories, never getting very far because no story ideas ever came to him, he all the while enduring boring low-level jobs, and who now, old and dying, is suddenly overwhelmed with story ideas but lacks the strength to convert them into finished form.

Write a story titled “Report From a Monastery” in which a monk describes, in a letter to a relative, his jubilation over the dreary surroundings, deteriorating walls, the in-fighting and petty bickering among the monks, the evil abbot, the slant of sun on the peeling, cracking walls on cold fall evenings, the weeds growing in the hard dirt, the tilt and squeak of the ancient doors.

Write a satirical story titled “The Good Life” which is a description of a man living a life he hates. His flossing of his teeth, taking vitamins, putting in eye drops, going to work, eating healthy food he despises, doing exercises he despises, his twice-weekly visits to his therapist, the depressing news on TV each evening, his not watching the programs he wants so he can watch self-improvement videos instead.

Write a story about a white mansion on a hill near a well-traveled road. Another road, seldom used, runs below the front of the house, parallel to the well-traveled road. There is a stony creek below the seldom-used road. The house is barely visible behind stately trees. The windows are trimmed in black.

Write a story titled “An American Contemplates Having His Hand Cut Off”, about an American engineer sentenced in an Arab country to have his hand cut off for a theft which the engineer did not commit. The story is the engineer’s interior monologue over the question when the hand will no longer be his. We see that the monologue is a kind of hysterical attempt to pass the time until the sentence will be carried out. Will the hand no longer be his at the moment they put it on the block? At the moment the sword starts to fall? At the moment when the sword first strikes the flesh? At the moment when it has gone through the bone? At the moment when the hand falls into the basket? Or when the hand is finally dead? Or when he first looks at the stump? The writing must be as realistic as possible regarding what actually occurs during these punishments — whether they actually use a basket, what sterilization measures, if any, are taken afterward, the hospital care, etc.

Write at least one story about a ruthless Ph.D. in the research and development laboratory of a large computer or drug company. He has no love of science except as it can bring him money and prestige, is not brilliant at research, but *is* brilliant in his understanding of human psychology, in particular, at detecting the weaknesses of other people. The story should reveal just enough of his background that we are *unable* to explain what made him what he is.

*Literature and Art*

Write a story titled, “Lunch”, which takes place inside a cave. The cave has a small window with window panes. Through the window we see a bright blue sky. Two men sit on the cave floor, eating fruit, bread, from an old wooden board. They each have a white napkin with crossed blue and red stripes.

Write a story titled, “An Avant-Garde Composer in the University Works on His Next Prize-Winning Opus”, in which we listen to the composer’s anxiety-ridden thoughts about whether critics will decide that a sequence of notes actually *has a key*, and about whether a given harmony will be liked or disliked by the nuclear physicist down the hall, and about whether the composition may yield to systematic analysis despite his best efforts to prevent that, and so forth.

Write a story titled, “You’ll Have to Excuse Me, I Have a Terrible Cough”.

Write a story titled, “The Other Day, As I Was Emptying My Pockets”.

Write a story titled, “No! This Is *My* Heater!”

Write a story titled, “‘Don’t Touch Me There!’ ‘Where?’”.

Write a story titled “The Virtuous Ant”, possibly beginning, “S687 had had a hard day. All morning he had been forced to carry enormous pieces of muffin that had been dropped by several Big Feet who were having a picnic...”.

Write a detective story in which the body of someone named *Yegan de Gorgola* (the name pronounced as indicated) is found in a gorge in a strange wooded part of the countryside. The name itself has something to do with why the murder took place, and why the body was found in that location. Blue sky, clouds overhead, green trees growing on the steep sides of the gorge, which has a little creek at the bottom.

Write a story beginning, “Bombardier Diga, as the boss calls her, met with...”

Write a story beginning, “ ‘Levitation,’ my comrade said to me, ‘is not something to be taken lightly.’ ”

Write a story about a huge worm slowly developing in the soil. What will its behavior be? When will it emerge?

Write a story titled “The Man Who Got Through Life”. Perhaps it should only be part of an essay, the premise of which is that although, in times when many people lived meaningless lives, there were some who brought meaning into their lives by creating works of art to express their state, or wrote analyses or explanations of it, there were also people who had no talent for these things. Many turned to drugs and self-destructive lives. But it is reasonable to suppose that some didn’t. The challenge is to portray such a life — the life of a man, say, middle-aged and working in a dead-end job, with no family, no prospects, living in a plain little house or apartment. It is reasonable to suppose that among all such individuals, there are one or two who decide that all they can do and hope for is to get through each day. And so he keeps very careful to-do lists of the trivial things he must do each day: floss teeth, take pills, have oatmeal breakfast, sweep, try to fix the leaky windshield of his car, search for a competent electrician, fight the proposed erection of cell-phone towers in his neighborhood, try to guess what investments to make, keep up with the endless medical exams and dietary restrictions and exercise that a supposedly healthy lifestyle requires. All with no one to observe him, praise him now and then, talk to him. His life is a performance for a non-existent God.

Write a story titled “Interview With a Dying Novelist” about a once very-successful avant-garde novelist who is now a relic; he is bedridden during the interview; he describes how he methodically analyzed the trends of his youth, figured out ways to exploit the most important of them by always keeping one step ahead; how he made a point of cultivating influential critics who were sympathetic to new movements (because they didn’t want to seem old-fashioned), how he adopted a personality sufficiently *outré* so that he kept himself in the public eye. But now, in his final days, he wonders if there wasn’t a better way to have spent his life.

Write a story about a plain young man who believes that the reason that women never look at him is that they are afraid of falling hopelessly in love with him. And so he goes through life quite contentedly, even happily, ascribing their eagerness to get away when he happens to exchange a few words with them as a measure of how uncomfortable their passions make them. All goes well until one day a young woman seems actually to take an interest in him. He becomes worried about her, tries to get away from her, but she pursues him. He begs her to think of her own well-being, she says that is what she is doing. And so the matter goes, right up to the altar. He is convinced that the reason she is willing to be his bride is that her love for him is as nothing compared to those women who are all too eager to ignore him because of the overwhelming passion they have for him.

Write a story, possibly titled “The Illusionist”, which begins, “In the Smoke Trick, as it is known to professional magicians, the performer pretends to make mistakes and thus leads his audience to believe that they know what he is really doing, which, of course, they do not.” The narrator then describes his lonely, but strangely fulfilling, way of life, which arises from his knowledge of how always to be several steps ahead of the awareness of other people. He gives

several examples, and explains that this skill makes every situation he finds himself in, his own. He is never an outsider.

Write a story titled “The Orchestra” which takes place during a performance by one of the world’s great orchestras. The narration informs us that cancer will strike one of the members that very evening, in fact, during that very performance. But it does not tell us which one. Instead, it tantalizes us by describing some of the players — their families, concerns, problems — beginning each description with the question, “Or will it be ....?” The players, of course, know nothing about the impending disease. They concentrate on playing well, they daydream once in a while, they try to do their best. We are left wondering which of the players that have been described cancer *should* strike if it must strike one of them (perhaps the one who is carrying on an affair). And which the disease absolutely must not strike.

Write a story, possibly titled “A Successful Man [or Woman]”, about a type of person who flourishes in modern academic and journalistic circles, namely, the person who throughout school has been extremely good at pleasing figures in authority, in particular teachers, college professors, publishers, committees that award important prizes. This is a person who has always been able to get all As, a person whom the Harvard admissions staff recognized immediately as Harvard material (assuming, with all the naivete of the elite schools, that getting the highest grades is proof of brilliance). This is a person who has always had what the left-of-center calls “the right views” — compassion for the down-trodden, belief in the universal goodness of man and in the liberal arts approach to the world’s difficult problems, regarding the kind of thinking that is strongly rooted in science and mathematics and engineering and business with disdain or with a brief embarrassment at his or her ignorance of these subjects. If this person enters academia, he or she writes tomes about the big safe subjects: Shakespeare, Christianity, American history and politics, in particular, the greatest presidents — Jefferson, Lincoln, F. D. R. The story should trace the person’s life, the important people known, his or her smile and bright eyes whenever he or she enters a room with the full knowledge that approval and admiration await. And then cancer strikes, and the light slowly dawns that there are things that cannot be bribed with obedience and conformity; the circle of admirers dwindles; he or she makes a few TV appearances, proclaiming the importance of not giving up. Approaching death now brings the first religious impulses the person has ever experienced, and we see that he or she has remained true to form, being now determined to win the approval of the highest authority.

Write a collection of stories in which inanimate objects speak. For example:

a story in which the bar stools in an English pub after hours compare and criticize the various bottoms that have sat on them during the day;

a story in which a leaf that has just fallen from a gingko tree laments its fate, reflects sadly on the brothers and sisters he has left behind on his branch, wonder what he did wrong to have to fall before they did, wonders if it can happen that a puff of wind might blow him back to his old, familiar place, etc

a similar story that is a conversation among grains of sawdust after an old tree has been cut down. “Well, it won’t be the same any more.” “No. I don’t know what we’re supposed to do now.” “Go back into the soil, I guess.” “Why did they have to cut down our home? We were so happy...”

a story titled “The Tree” about the life of a basically happy tree, from initial seed, through saplinghood, through early maturity and finally to grand old age. Over the years, we hear its thoughts, which are always thoughts of contentment, happiness, at just being alive, enjoying the seasons, the birds that sing in its branches, at sinking its roots deeper into the dark earth. Then, one day, men arrive with a saw. At first the tree is glad to see them, since it has no idea what a saw is, and all its life humans have come to admire the tree, sit under it on hot days. But then a big noise suddenly erupts, and soon the tree feels indescribable pain in its trunk. It feels itself toppling, has never been in such a position before, can’t understand it, feels its lifeblood (sap) draining away. Then, as the saw cuts into its limbs, we hear its frantic attempt to figure out how such a thing could be happening to it, what it had done wrong during its long, contented life.

Write a story about a man who works in his basement making versions of himself that will be more appealing to women. He sends them out, views recordings of women’s responses, then sets to work with file and sandpaper making improvements.

Write a story that takes place in a time when it has long been known what happens to each human soul after death. For dramatic purposes, we are never told exactly what does happen, although we gather, from the remarks, even jokes, about that subject by characters in the story, that it is not horrible, at least not for everyone. The story is not centered on the subject of life after death. That is merely something referred to in passing. So the story can be regarded as an attempt to answer the question of what life would be like if it were known what happens to us after death.

Write convincing examples of the speech of: a non-stop talker who is a constant interrupter; a star black player on a football or basketball team; a female high-school or college student (“...so, like, I go ... and then he goes ... and, you know? so I go ...”

This is a more difficult task than the reader might at first think. What do non-stop talkers actually *say*? Why is the speech of sports stars so numbingly inane?

Write a story perhaps titled, “A Day in the Life” about the ordinary workday of several torturers. It might contain text such as “The torture began soon after dawn ... the morning break, to give the torturers a rest ... the howls, the pleadings of the victims were no more to the torturers than steel on concrete... eventually the victim gave up and almost joined in ... the torturers just needed to earn a living, they were just doing a job ... the victim knew that soon he would have the blessing of death, but after the tea break the unbearable resumed ... “

The actual text must convey the utter routine in the torturers’ minds and the grotesque sufferings of the victim, as though this was just a daily event like any other.



*A story that must never be written.* It takes place in the 1700s. Preparations are under way for a hanging, drawing, and quartering — the gallows is being hammered together, the horses brought in and tethered and fed, the knives sharpened. The condemned man is in his cell, trying to figure out how to endure such a dreadful ending of his life; he occasionally says a few words to his guard. At a building several blocks away, an orchestra is rehearsing for an upcoming concert of beautiful baroque music; the conductor is working over passages, musicians intently follow his instructions. The music has nothing to do with the impending execution. But the sounds of the preparation of the gallows and the dismembering of the condemned, and his occasional terrified words, mix with the sounds of the music.

### **Novels**

Write a novel whose leading character is named Gavin Prospect.

### **Plays**

Write a play which, even at this late date, rattles the audience's confidence that they know what is real and what is not. For example, in the middle of a conventional-seeming play, let the attendants shout "Emergency, please leave the theater!". Then reveal to the audience that it was just part of the play. The audience, angry but determined not to be fooled again, and determined to get its money's worth, returns to their seats. Attempt the same delusion, which now, of course, becomes more difficult.

Write a play for upper class audiences, one that they will immediately understand is the kind of play that is intended for the best people and that therefore they must force themselves to sit through and tell themselves they like despite the fact that their stomachs burn with acid from the boredom of it.

Write a play or a story that begins with two guys in long, drab, gray or brown coats and fedoras, standing behind a stage curtain. One pulls the curtain back, observes for a few moments, then allows the curtain to return to its initial position, says to the other, "I think he is going to speak now." Then they both stand there, apparently waiting, looking down at the floor. Then the guy again pulls the curtain aside, observes for a few moments, lets the curtain go, says, in a deep, quiet voice, "I think it'll be soon." Etc.

Write plays in which PhDs (in psychology and sociology) are the chorus, commenting on the action. Write a modern version of an ancient Greek tragedy in which the chorus is composed of PhDs who comment expertly on the action.

Write a play or story which is a compassionate but not sentimental look at self-deluders in the arts. Set it, e.g., in a bar where aspiring opera singers are allowed to perform once a week. All are middle-aged, all are to varying degrees less than compelling singers, all believe that their time will come and that they will one day sing at the Met.

### **Other**

Write a long speech that seems to be a typical political speech but which is in fact utter nonsense. To do this, apply a literary version of so-called “impossible objects” (In Google, enter “impossible object, wiki”.) The underlying idea is that the thing being presented is locally what it should be, but globally what it cannot possibly be. Thus, a waterfall flows into a river, which eventually flows into the top of the waterfall.

So the speech, locally, should contain phrases like, “We are facing a crisis in ...”, and “Let me spell out the three options we have...”, and “I put it to you that ...”, etc. But when we read the whole speech, we find it contains undeniable contradictions.

Write the following books: (1) *Nostalgia for the Avant-Garde and Other Stories*<sup>1</sup>; (2) *A History of Bad Breath*; (3) *A History of Toilet Paper*; (4) *Virtuoso Swearing*.

Write an essay titled, “What Are Breasts For?”

### **Literature: Possible New Movements**

Many things have inspired poetry, among them bureaucracies. Some of the twentieth century’s greatest writers have been poets of bureaucracy, e.g., T. S. Eliot, John Le Carré. Kafka was not, for reasons which will become clear.

The poetry of bureaucracy expresses the emotions of bureaucrats, which are: fatigue, boredom, violent jealousy, hatred of one’s co-workers, endless frustration, and, above all, despair over the futility of life.

Appreciating this poetry requires that we appreciate bureaucratic sensuality, e.g., the taste of a dry Martini with certain types of vinegar salad dressing, which produces a stomach acidity whose bite is the perfect expression of suppressed rage and frustration, while the mild intoxication provides a local infinite to the problem at hand, i.e., an inspiration to continue struggling to achieve what, in fact, will never be achieved. Or the feeling of leaving an office building on a cold winter evening under the dull red glow of the dying sun, crossing the freezing pavements (*what can live in such stone?*), returning home through choking traffic to an empty cold apartment and the solitary pleasures one has attempted to contrive — 18th century German poetry, theory of formal grammars — while trying to forget the alarming rate at which one is growing bald, and how slim the chances are of being able to endure another year of this job or of any other job.

Every moment of such a life is piquant with despair and thoughts of suicide. Such a life, recollecting in tranquillity, can be a source of literary inspiration.

The poetry of bureaucracy is always written with the following tormenting thought in mind: “There exists a sequence of words which perfectly expresses what I want to express, and which, if

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1. See the author’s attempt in the book of this title on [thoughtsandvisions.com](http://thoughtsandvisions.com).

I could find it, would make me famous and enable me to escape from this life. But there is no way of finding what that sequence is.”

High-level political communiques between governments, and between the agencies of a single government, along with speeches by public officials, constitute a lower form of this poetry, one with a long-established tradition of criticism called interpretation. If we accept the computer as a measure of the intelligence required for a given task, then this task of interpretation is one demanding the very highest intelligence, since no computer in the foreseeable future is capable of performing it. Traditional poetry is mathematically clear by comparison.

“In his youth, at Yale in the late 1930s, literature had been [CIA Counterintelligence officer Angleton’s] great love, especially the poetry of Eliot and Pound. Now he worked on the subtlest texts of all — the deception buried in [intelligence] cases as elusive as a difficult poem.” — Powers, Thomas, “Spook of Spooks”, review of Epstein, Edward Jay, *Deception: The Invisible War Between the KGB and the CIA*, *New York Review of Books*, Aug. 17, 1989, p. 42.

The task is carried out with a similar thought as the writing of the higher forms of the poetry: “This text has a meaning, namely, the meaning its author intended it to have. If I could discover that meaning, and convince everyone else that it was the correct one, then I would be envied and promoted. But there is no way of knowing that I have discovered the correct meaning even if I do discover it.”

Imagine a whole literature built on sentences like: “I had hardly begun to piss when the second person to enter the men’s room apart from myself, entered the men’s room...”; “I never knew what the smell was that came from trains until late in life I suddenly realized it was farts.” Such a literature would also include verses like the following:

“I left my pliers on the roof;  
I wish I hadn’t done it...  
.  
.  
.  
My hand is hurting, I feel sick,  
I wish I didn’t have to live:  
Boring job, boring life,  
I’ve got no more to give.  
  
I left my pliers on the roof;  
I think they’re in a crack;  
Tomorrow I’ll go into the woods,  
And maybe I won’t come back.”

This literature would include alternative versions of the vocal works of Bach, in particular of the cantatas, in which the subject is the concerns of suburbia, e.g., “The sofa/the sofa/it cannot be repaired/Breuner’s said the so-o-o-...-o-fa/cannot be repaired.” (Those who understand the literary form I am attempting to describe know that its comic aspects are only superficial.)

An interesting and amusing genre of literature, and one that will do wonders to express — or perhaps dispel! — the depression that comes from living among too many manufactured things, can be constructed by simply carrying the description of such things to absurd lengths in the course of a narrative. (The technique has been occasionally practiced by Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., for one.) Thus, e.g., to describe a man sitting on a park bench, one begins with a few lines about the man, followed by many lines about the history of the bench — the physical process of aging in the wood and metal which has taken place since the bench was built, the year it was built, the company, the processes used, the difficulties encountered, the daily life of the workers who installed it (this one drunk, that one having difficulties with his wife, the other screwing the waitress in the coffee shop where he has breakfast, still another in a bad mood because his tools have just been stolen, etc.)

There is no reason why we can't carry on where Mallarmé left off. Imagine poetry that begins with word sounds, and proceeds according to the poet's intuition of what the next sounds should be, the poet all the while not ignoring completely the meanings of the words. For example:

“Dawn crank and nothing to start,  
Breakers, sun kist, waiting for day,  
Oh-ver not now, Oh-ver because  
Nightmare walks in penchant trousers  
We believe in transient hours  
*Because* (oh yes)  
*Because* (oh best)  
And ties undone are all of ours.”

or

“To put the hose inside the closet  
And never find it again  
Is what the gray, cold Saturday afternoon brings.  
Whirling upward, the absent leaves  
Are found behind the rotting wood,  
Abandoned shovels, levered deer.  
And onward...Bring such to positive daisies,  
Ramps of cows, airy irises,  
Till what you saw is not again what it was.”

That is, we attempt to find a sequence of syllables whose overall sound seems to us appropriate for a poem. During this process, we try to associate words — possibly nonsense words — with the subsequences of syllables. Here are a few results of such a process:

I run, I quit, I fly,  
I never fail to deify.  
When skies are torn by unkempt rains,  
And dogs are swept from unswept drains,

I never fail to deify...

In social calamity lies the rest,  
Breakers, newly formed, protest

Enlisted down the carey wall,  
Forgotten, left and bruised at all

But we can leave meaning much farther behind. Consider:

Macronym, flossberg, timely setting of the sepulcher,  
Beeswax ampule pointing to aquifer;  
Blane, brane, axin, tubular,  
Plain, rain, umbifer.

See also the first “Hypnagogic Art” chapter in this book.

## **Art**

### **Art: General Observations**

“The whole trick in art is to stay alive. Live long enough and everything happens.” Al Hirshfeld, cartoonist, *60 Minutes*, 10/17/83.

I once knew an art critic who firmly believed that non-representational art was not art. (A pedantic knowledge of the history of his subject, plus the arrogance required to maintain such opinions, enabled him to become the dean of an art school at an early age, and the director of a prestigious gallery in his middle years.) Years later, a good counterargument to that opinion occurred to me when I saw, in *Scientific American*, a color micrograph of uranium in granite, the light pinks and greens making a beautiful piece of abstract art. Suppose the photo had been painstakingly copied by a skilled representationalist painter and the result hung on a museum wall with a title like “#647”. If the critic saw it, he would presumably dismiss it as not being art (he had no knowledge of any science). Suppose he went away and, during his absence, the title were changed to “Micrograph of Uranium in Granite”. When he saw it again, would he acknowledge it to be a work of art? A strange esthetic, indeed, that is based on labels!

Nowadays, there are so many similar counterarguments to the critic’s quaint opinion, that it is hard to believe there is anyone who still seriously maintains it. For example, there is a form of liquid sculpture consisting of several different-colored, immiscible oils — green, yellow, purple — which form all sorts of interesting, fluid shapes when the glass containing them is inverted. Is such a thing “representational”? Or, if it is not even a work of art, then what is it? If it is merely something “pleasant to look at”, then it belongs in the same category as jewelry, which, by this argument, is also not art. Etc.

Is there any limit as to what can be a subject of art? Not if you can keep the context from the viewer’s awareness. Consider the intestines of someone who was slowly disembowelled while

alive. I make a photograph of them, showing the beauty of the red color, of the coiling shapes. I tell you they are of a slaughtered animal, or of an animal accidentally killed by a car.

The buzz of the avant-garde — I have turned myself inside out over the years trying to appreciate abstract painting. Have read the art books, understood that a picture doesn't have to be a picture of something, understood that a picture can be enjoyed purely for its musical qualities, have countless times attempted to allow the picture to "work on me". All in vain except for a handful of artists. Jackson Pollock is one: it seems impossible to me that one cannot be moved by the organic rhythms of his work; two computer artists are also exceptions: Milton Komisar and D. P. Ali: the works of both likewise are to me immediately compelling, the former because of the organic rhythms in his work, the latter because of the geometrical rhythms. But that is about it, except for a few abstract paintings seen at outdoor exhibitions, e.g., in Westport, CT. For me, abstract painting is like free verse in the sense that it is easy to generate such paintings, but very difficult to generate such paintings that have the quality of making the viewer want to come back to the painting again and again. Similarly, the vast majority of free verse is simply prose claiming to be something it is not. And yet, there is free verse that we most certainly want to come back to again and again, e.g., that of T. S. Eliot and Mark Strand.

And yet I have known people with no talent for art, no unusual sensitivity or intelligence that I could detect, no particular interest in or knowledge of the great art of the past, who rhapsodized over abstract drawings and paintings (usually at gallery openings). A woman who owns a store that sells reproductions tells me that Rothko's paintings are "very emotional" for her.

What do these people have that I don't have? My answer, slowly arrived at after all these years, is not flattering but is what I at present believe. These people have the gift of being excited over their awareness of how exceptional they are if they like these works of art. "If I like this — *especially* since I don't understand it, and can't begin to say what is *good* about it — that will mean I am far more advanced than those boring suburbanites and others who hate this kind of thing. It will be proof of how modern and open-minded I am! It will show that I am truly exceptional. How exciting this art really is!"

You are absent-mindedly looking at a canvas lawn chair, an object which is ordinarily a "nexus of concerns" as a certain type of intellectual would say. But now, because you have your mind on other things, and are not even intending to sit in the chair, you see the green and white stripes on the canvas for the first time. You see them as the patterns of color they are. This kind of absent-minded viewing of a painting seems to make the paintings of, e.g., Morris Louis ("Moving In") suddenly understandable. You feel the colors of the stripes warm against your cheek.

Rothko — Consider the following musical composition. A single note is played. It starts out softly, increases in volume, then slowly tapers off to nothing. The note might be electronic, or played on an organ or other instrument. I think it is safe to say that most music lovers listening to this piece will have a reaction to it. They will read meaning into it. But that is the same thing as reading meaning into, e.g., the sound of winter wind in trees, or the sound of surf. Or a blue sky, or the look of the sky at night.

Or consider a single note as above, and then, one or two other notes played over it, with dynamics as above. The note then becomes what is called a “drone”; this new composition will, I am sure, arouse reactions in at least some music lovers that they will express by saying, e.g., “It has great depth,” “It sounds like Fate,” etc.

But again I say that this music is the equivalent to listening to wind in trees, or surf, or looking at the sky. It is the musical analogue of Rothko’s color field paintings.

There are naive, less-than-bright people who can be led down any garden path if the language is right. Such are most admirers of Rothko’s paintings. They have heard Rothko’s theories, they know something about his life, they see what the theories say the paintings are, and they are moved to tears.

Rothko had little artistic talent. He was a tormented soul who, like many Jewish Outsiders, knew that his one task in life was to become known for doing something that no one else could do. He convinced himself that art — an art that avoided the demands of skill and talent, and let him write new rules on his own terms so as to suit his meager abilities — was the only way he could accomplish the life’s purpose that consumed him. His paintings are the last desperate attempt of a guy who couldn’t paint.

Anyone who has ever struggled to understand Abstract Expressionism and what came after, needs to read Tom Wolfe’s extraordinarily insightful, and funny, *The Painted Word*.

Was abstract painting a logical “next step” that simply turned out to be wrong? Most artists and intellectuals can understand the logic that led to abstract art, namely, that in the late 19th and early 20th century painting seemed to be less-and-less representational (consider, e.g., cubism). So why not take the next step and abolish representation altogether? Nothing could be more ... obvious. But after almost a century, abstract painting remains on the fringe. It should have succeeded. But it didn’t. Twelve-tone music was a similar next step. See the chapter, “Music”, in this book.

Several years ago I bought a traditional still life of red pears and white jug from the elderly painter mentioned elsewhere in this book. I already owned a number of reproductions of famous paintings, including Picasso’s “Woman With a Book”, and thought at first that it wouldn’t be fair to the old man to hang his painting in the same room with a Picasso. But I couldn’t help wondering how it would compare and was amazed to find that if any painting suffered from the comparison, it was Picasso’s, which suddenly seemed little more than a cartoon. I don’t mention this to cast doubts on Picasso’s reputation but to remind the reader that the twentieth century did not put an end to all the schools of art that preceded it.

In the July 11, 2013 issue of the *The New York Review of Books* there appeared a large reproduction of the painting, *The Lady With the Glove* (1869), by Charles Carolus-Duran<sup>1</sup>. A beautiful woman (who was the artist’s wife), dressed in black, is seductively removing a glove from her hand. I was unable to keep from returning again and again to look at her expression, trying to fathom all that it contained. I kept thinking, “This is what modernism has replaced. This is what

we have been taught to regard as art that is hopelessly inferior to Warhol's Coke bottles and Johns's flags, and countless painters' blotches and stripes and geometric fragments. *We've been had!*"

I had never heard of the painter before. For some reason, *The Review* printed his name in a typeface so small you could hardly find it on the page — perhaps to compensate for having given such prominence to a painting by a nobody.

Why have we allowed ourselves to be led down the garden path by the modernists? It is our business — always — to attempt to judge each work of art, each school of art, *on its merits*. We should be capable of appreciating New England water colors and paintings of children; we should make it our business to try to understand what so-called "academic art" in the 19th century was trying to do. We should above all revere the talent of the portrait painter (like Carolus-Duran). In fact, I am often tempted to say that a painter who cannot paint portraits that stop us in our tracks cannot be a great painter.

A question that is worthwhile — and amusing — to raise among any group of people who are interested in art is the following: is the modern, wealthy art buyer, a better connoisseur of art than, say, the typical wealthy art buyer of the Renaissance? The answer is almost certainly no (see essays by *Time* art critic Robert Hughes). What would amaze us about the Renaissance buyer would be the depth of his knowledge and the fineness of his appreciation of the art he owned; we would sense his attitude as being, "I am rich enough to buy things that are *this* beautiful." He would consider the art he owned, as well as the artists he chose to patronize, as another measure of the caliber of his taste and refinement. In short, for him, money would be a means for acquiring beauty, the value of which would go without saying. With very few exceptions, the situation for the modern buyer is exactly the reverse: beauty (art) is a means for acquiring money. The proof lies in the attitude of the wealthy art buyer toward his city. A person for whom art is a means for showing the caliber of his taste, will be concerned that his city demonstrate this taste as well; one for whom art is merely an investment, will have little concern with how his city looks, as long as his house can be suitably insulated from it.

There is, however, an opposing view:

"...difficult to substantiate is the idea that early Renaissance patrons were knowledgeable about the art they consumed. To be sure, they were invariably concerned about the choice of saints to be represented, and much less often, about the selection of religious narrative subjects. But in Florence major issues of aesthetic judgement, for example the choice of artists by public competition or the selection of the best place to display Michelangelo's *David*, were routinely decided by committees of experts, that is to say by those with professional experience in producing art. If Florentine businessmen were involved at all, this seems to have been because their practical expertise and administrative skills were essential for the successful achievement of expensive projects that could take years to bring to completion. This was surely why Lorenzo de' Medici, then de facto ruler of Florence, sat on a committee to consider various designs for the facade of the cathedral; but the idea that he himself submitted a project...is without foundation. The sophisticated connoisseur of modern art is not to be found in the fifteen century, indeed scare-

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1. The reproduction was in a full-page ad for the exhibit, *Impressionism Fashion & Modernity* at Art Institute Chicago.



cely before the seventeenth.” — Hope, Charles, “The Myth of Florence”, review of Levey, Michael, *Florence: A Portrait*, *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 31, 1996, p. 56.

“Throughout most of history the creative intellectual was at his best in societies dominated not by ‘men of words’ but by men of action who were culturally literate. In Florence of the Renaissance, Cosimo the Elder, a banker who dreamed of having God the Father on his books as a debtor, revered talent the way the pious reverence saints. Though he was first in the state, and unequalled in fortune and prestige, he played the humble disciple to scholars, poets, and artists.” — Hoffer, Eric, *The Temper of Our Time*, Harper & Row, N.Y., 1969, p. 82

We laugh at those cultures which believe that being photographed steals one’s soul, yet precisely that happens when an artist permits himself to be interviewed, because from that moment on (if he is honest in the interview), not only his works but he himself — his past, his aspirations, his artistic values — become mere commodities, competing with similar commodities.

A photographer whom you know immediately demands your attention: “Evans was, and is, interested in what any present time will look like as the past.” — Sante, Luc, “The Eye of Walker Evans,” *The New York Review of Books*, Oct. 22, 1998, p. 25.

Is it possible that some ditch-diggers chose that work because they are at heart primitive sculptors? To drive wooden stakes into soft ground, to carve the sides of a rectangular hole with a sharp spade, so that the dirt becomes shiny, to create a pile of fresh, dark, brown, rich-smelling earth, to shape and smooth wet concrete with a trowel — certainly these are the activities of a sculptor!

### **Art: Exercises**

Much of the time, what the art buyer is buying is the artist’s confidence that his art would some day have value. He is buying a symbol of courage and individuality and creativity he does not himself possess. Make this experiment: in two different towns, offer for sale similar bad works by the same artist. In one town portray the artist as a charismatic character, superbly confident, constantly oppressed by authorities of one kind or another. In the other town portray him as meek, self-doubting, the opinion of authorities still divided as to his worth. Note in which town the works fetch the higher prices.

Have a contest, “Find the Reality”. An abstract expressionist work is selected, and then the prize is given to the person who can find the best match in reality for the painting. Then another work is selected, etc.

### **Film: Observations**

At the time of this writing (November, 2011), the American Masters series on Public Television is presenting a documentary on Woody Allen, and God only knows how often the word “genius” occurs in it. Personally, I think he is the World’s Most Overrated Director. With a few exceptions, his films are the fantasies of an oversexed adolescent boy, then middle-aged man, then old man. They are the films of a man who, early in his career, wanted to be a film maker, and who then decided that his originality would consist in presenting fantasies based on his life. I cannot think of another film maker of whom this can be said. His films are the films of a man who needs to believe he is a filmmaker. Claims were made that the documentary was the first intimate look at Allen, the first time that he had opened himself up. But that is naive. He has been revealing himself throughout his career. He always plays the same character, and this character is not merely a persona. It is presentation of the man himself. Chaplain’s Little Tramp, on the other hand, *was* a persona.

There is something phoney about Allen. This great left-wing artist, with all the appropriate sympathies, runs off with the adopted daughter of the woman who had been his lover and closest companion for 12 years. I am suspicious about the hair. Already in his thirties, a bald spot was visible, the cow-lick in front was thinning. And yet, contrary to the fate of the rest of us with the same problem, the bald spot never seemed to get larger. Then in old age, it began to shrink, and the hair became thicker and fuller. Hmmm. The films in which he attempts to imitate the style of some of the great directors he admired, e.g., Bergman, are usually an embarrassment — consider, *Manhattan*.

What he was good at — and this the documentary makes clear — was writing jokes (he was already making a living at this when he was just 16) and performing as a standup comedian. Furthermore, there is no question but that many *scenes* in his films are memorable, e.g., the famous “I have a gub” scene in *Take the Money and Run*, the scene in *Annie Hall* in which he tells his anxious parents and the doctor they have taken him to, that the reason he doesn’t do his homework is that the universe is expanding, and he can’t see the point; the scene in *Annie Hall* in which the famous media philosopher Marshall McLuhan, who happens to be standing in line at a movie theater, thoroughly puts in his place a person who is pretentiously, and erroneously providing an interpretation of his thought; the scenes in *Sleeper* in which he pretends to be a robot.

But the *films* are much less successful than naive movie-goers believe. *Annie Hall* has become dated, as many sophisticated film-goers agree. If anyone says that *all* film comedies from the seventies and earlier are dated, he or she needs to see *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) again, or *A Shot in the Dark* (1964) or *The Ladykillers* (1955). Some of us have seen, and enjoyed, these films many times. Can those who proclaim Allen’s genius say the same thing for his old films?

### **Film: Farewell to the Film Classics**

It is becoming more and more difficult to gain access to the film classics. Fewer and fewer companies rent DVDs of any kind. The companies that offer streaming have a pathetically-small inventory of the classics, e.g., *Brief Encounter* or *Great Expectations* (both directed by David Lean in the mid-1940s), or *I’m All Right Jack*, or ...

It is as if public libraries and new and used book-stores were disappearing, and publishers no longer published any of the literary classics.

Yet I am sure that it would only take a few hundred million dollars of a multi-billionaire’s wealth to set up a streaming archive containing at least the overwhelming majority of classic American, English, and European films. I am reasonably confident that, once established, the

archive would be self-sustaining, even given the relatively low number of persons who wanted to stream (for a modest fee) the classics.

Until that billionaire comes along, however, fewer and fewer of the classics will be accessible to film lovers.

### Film: Projects

One way to diminish the power of the media is by reminding the audience again and again that they are not looking at people and events in the outside world, but merely at electronic constructs. This could be done by forcing the audience always to have the mechanism that creates the illusion before their eyes. Instead of showing the television image, or along with it, show the codes that produce it, e.g., 00100110 means light purple, 010100 is something rectangular, etc, or show the compound sine waves that produce the video and audio images and provide a means of interpreting them approximately. Interfere constantly with the *illusion*.

“The more stern European branch [of minimalism], structural/materialists, tries to sustain anonymity and an even more total rejection of photographic illusion’s seductive attractions. Broadly, the filmmakers try to develop a constant but altering tension between the apparent ‘reality’ of images and the material of their production (grain, light, apparent movement, color, flatness, shape). In process, the manner by which a film was executed becomes itself the subject. Spectators find themselves reminded repetitively of their removed, non-empathizing relationship to the projected experience.” — Fell, John, *A History of Films*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, N.Y., 1979, p. 453.

“Photography without a camera”: a group of people with strong interests in photography go on a walk and simply point out to each other what they think would make good photos, making no attempt to actually record the images.

Make a book, ala Andre Kertesz’s *On Reading*, called *The Eyes of the Blind*, in which the *individuality of blind eyes* is shown, e.g., in blind persons on the street.

Make a series of photographs titled “Rooms” whose purpose is to capture the essence of rented rooms, e.g., in a college town. For each room, have one or more photos of the lighted room seen at night, the illumination, at least as seen from the street, sometimes a strange blue-green, even gray; then several photos of the interior, typically showing the few comforts, the implied loneliness, yet the refuge afforded from an anonymous world. No occupants to be shown.

Make a short film of a runner running in the countryside, with the harpsichord cadenza in the first movement of Bach’s *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5* as the background music<sup>1</sup>. The challenge

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1. Without question, the best performance for the purpose of this film that I know of is that of James Levine playing harpsichord on the CD *Bach: Music from Ravinia*, BMG Classics, bar code 9026-61635-2. But regardless of the performance chosen, the cadenza *must* maintain a constant rhythm — no rubatos!

is to avoid the clichés and pretentiousness that threaten such a treatment of the subject. The runner's experiences (initial energy, enthusiasm, then increasing physical discomfort, pain, then exhilaration at overcoming these in the end) should, in not too subtle a way, be shown to be expressed by the music. A tentative scenario is the following. On a sunny, breezy day, a lone runner — thin, perhaps in his late thirties or forties, wearing loose white T-shirt, blue shorts and well-worn running shoes — is seen running along a dirt road in the country. His face is expressionless throughout, but we get the impression that he is probably a computer professional or scientific researcher. Ahead we see that trees line both sides of the road. In the distance we get a glimpse of the ocean. Once inside the trees, the road becomes hilly, and the film-maker's challenge is to roughly relate the ascending and descending parts of the music with the terrain, but to do so in a way that makes clear that film-maker was not without a sense of humor, e.g., in relating parts of the music to steep portions of the path that force the runner to run on tiptoe. The double-time part of the cadenza then focuses on a rocky part of the road and expresses the deft footwork required of the runner. We sense that, on the whole, the altitude of the road/path is increasing. Then, just at the return to main theme, the runner emerges from the wood onto an open bluff with the entire ocean spread below him and as the cadenza concludes, the camera pulls back so that by the time the orchestra returns, he has become a speck running in a glorious immensity.

Make a film consisting of nothing but trees and their sounds: tall trees in the light of evening, leaves rustling; trees in the heat of summer days, leaves barely moving; trees crackling under coatings of ice in winter; trees in storms; trees burning in forest fires; burned, dead trees in the winter; trees with children playing under them, etc.

Make a film titled "Parks" consisting of nothing but scenes of people enjoying themselves in various beautiful parks, e.g., Central Park in New York City, St. Stephen's Green in Dublin, Ire.

Make a film titled *Vivaldi's Bassoonist*, about a tall, quiet, beautiful girl in Vivaldi's orchestra of orphaned and homeless girls at the Ospedale della Pietà<sup>1</sup> in Venice in the early 1700s. She is a superb bassoonist but she falls in love with a dashing count. She decides to give up the bassoon and run off with the count (or perhaps the count makes it a condition of his having a relationship with her that she give up her instrument). Vivaldi is heart-broken, pleads with her to change her mind, shows her the partially-completed new concerto he is writing for her. But she leaves anyway. The count eventually rejects her for a wealthy young woman, and she returns to the orchestra. Vivaldi is happy again, she plays the concerto he has written for her, sad at seeing the count's empty chair in the audience, but realizing that she is loved by many people.

The girl should be played by someone who looks like a young Anjelica Huston; she should always seem to have a melancholy air about her, except during the time she believes the count is in love with her. The count should be played by someone who looks like Johnny Depp. Vivaldi

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1. "Vivaldi [1678-1741] wrote no less than 38 concertos for bassoons. This astounding total lacks any biographical explanation. We must assume that there was a good bassoonist among Vivaldi's acquaintances and that there were young ladies in the *scuola* of La Pietà who mastered the instrument so well that their leader was stimulated to compose so many bassoon concertos." — Liner notes for *5 Concerti for Diverse Instruments*, nonesuch (LP), H-1104 (Mono), H-71104 (Stereo)

should be played by a man a little below average height, with a shock of red hair (he was known as “the Red Priest”). He should be constantly busy, constantly overwhelmed by his musical duties, composing in every spare minute. He should have a short temper, especially with church officials and others with no understanding of music.

Cinematography should make the most of the beauties of Venice, interiors and costumes should be authentic, but costumes must *not* all look as though they have never been worn before! If nothing else, the film should portray the ubiquitous presence of music in the city in the early 1700s —how there was always a reason to have music: festivals, religious and otherwise, operas, concerts, entertainments for the nobility. Concerts should be historically accurate, with members of the audience in the upper tiers and boxes sometimes throwing orange peels and other scraps of food they were eating, down on the heads of those standing below, occasionally even letting fly with gobs of spit. (See, e.g., Kendall, Alan, *Vivaldi*.)

Contrasts that can add to the impact of the film: the contrast between the beautiful young woman and the large, awkward instrument she plays. The contrast between Vivaldi’s age and hers: our not knowing just what Vivaldi’s feelings toward her are: is she merely a talented soloist that he can write concertos for, or is he in love with her? Does he himself know? The contrast between the beautiful music, beautiful city, and the vulgar behavior of people in concerts. The contrast between the pleasure-abhorring doctrine of the Church, and the year-round festival that was Venice in the early 18th century..

*Descriptions of a Few Scenes:*

*Scene: the girl<sup>1</sup> first meets Vivaldi*

Opening: Venice seen from above and from afar on a sparkling, beautiful day; camera descends on an imposing building, goes into large room with shelves containing manuscripts; at a desk on the left, writing rapidly, is a red-haired man. Sometimes he waves his left hand, half-conducting, grunts something that is apparently the music he is writing. There is a knock on the door.

“Enter!”, he says, not looking up. The door is cautiously opened. The face of a beautiful young woman with black hair is seen. She: “Maestro? Scusi.” He tells her to enter, waving her in with the fingers of his free hand. “Yes?” he asks, still writing furiously, not looking up. She: “You said I should see you...” He finally looks up, is clearly struck by her beauty. He, looking down at his manuscript: “When did you arrive?” She tells him. He, looking up again: “They gave you a room?” She says yes, thanks him. “Do you play an instrument?” She shakes her head sadly. He: “Do you like music?” She: “But of course, maestro! Everyone likes music!” He, back to his work, mutters, “If only...”

He looks up, now fully paying attention to her. “If you could play any instrument, which would it be?” She doesn’t know. He tells her to see his assistant, who will let her try some of them .

*Scene: she chooses to play the bassoon*

She and assistant in rehearsal room. Instruments everywhere. He picks up a violin, plays a few notes, hands it to her, she clumsily places it under her chin, scrapes the bow across the strings, gets a few squeaks. Then the cello. Then the flute. Only the sound of air when she tries. Then, finally, the bassoon. On his playing the first note, she perks up. He hands the instrument to her

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1. We must decide on a name for her. It must be graceful, and one that a girl from her humble background might have had.

carefully. She takes it clumsily but lovingly. At first, only the sound of air. He gives her some instructions. Then, suddenly, a loud, deep tone. She pulls back from the mouthpiece, clearly surprised and delighted. Looks at it. Brings it to her mouth, tries again. A different, equally strong tone. Etc.

*Scene: Vivaldi first hears her practicing*

Vivaldi with an armful of music manuscripts in a hallway, arguing with some sort of official. Eventually he breaks away, hurries down the hallway, when suddenly he hears sounds of a bassoon. Clear notes, beautiful tone, a few signs of real technical accomplishment. He stops abruptly, backs up, knocks on the door, opens it without waiting, sees the young woman and her instructor. He gestures, says to her, "Go on, let me hear you play." She does, and it is clear that he recognizes the treasure that has stumbled into the Ospedale.

*Scenes: she becomes a member of the orchestra*

She shyly taking her place in the orchestra, the other girls gathering around, animated talking. She playing in the woodwind section, etc.

*Scene: Vivaldi tells her he wants her to play one of his existing bassoon concertos*

She shyly entering Vivaldi's composing room, he having summoned her. He tells her that he wants her to play one of the bassoon concertos he has written and that are in the orchestra's repertoire. She hesitating, he waving aside her concerns.

*Scene: she performs the concerto, and first catches sight of the count*

Her first performance. Vivaldi, who is the conductor, introduces her. Am not sure at present what the music should be for this. A Vivaldi expert can advise. But it must not be as technically demanding as the third movement of RV 497 in the final scene (see below). *Note 1:* a concerto consists of three movements, normally fast, slow, fast. Halfway into the first movement, she notices the count in his seat, he obviously delighted at the sight of this beautiful young woman who is such an accomplished musician. She tries not to look at him during the rest of the performance. It will not be possible, dramatically, to film the playing of an entire concerto because that will take too much time, so some sort of compression will be necessary. Use members of audience talking among themselves excitedly about this beautiful new performer, etc.

She receives enthusiastic applause after third movement. Vivaldi embraces her, tells her he is going to write a concerto especially for her.

*Scene: the count introduces himself*

The count comes up to her backstage at the end of the concert. Kisses her hand. She is flattered, embarrassed.

*Scene: the count begins to court her*

His courting her. Makes a little joke about how playing the bassoon makes her a wonderful kisser. She smiling shyly. The girls in the orchestra are jealous. She is in seventh heaven.

Shot of them in a beautiful black gondola in one of the canals, she obviously in seventh heaven.

He takes her to his parents' estate in the country. [Would this have been done, she being a commoner?] Mother unsure about her. The girl plays a solo. Everyone is impressed. But we observe that he is noticing a young woman of his own class.

*Scene: she tells Vivaldi she is leaving the orchestra*

Vivaldi in his studio, busy as always. She: "Scusi, maestro, but ..." She tells him she is in love and wants to be with the count. He asks her who he is, then says he knows all about him. "Pah!" Points at two thick manuscripts on his work table. He: "Do you see that? Those are the first two movements of a concerto I have been writing for you." Points to sheets of white manuscript paper in front of him. "And I was just about to start on the third movement. I have it all here." Points to his head. "It was to be one of my best. But now... why should I bother?" She is crestfallen, but does not change her mind. Keeps telling him how sorry she is, how she recognizes all he has done for her.

*Scenes: she and the count in the social swirl in Venice.*

They run into the wealthy young woman, she notices his attention toward her. Her jealousy, confusion, later tears. Their fights. The final breakup.

*Final scene: performance of the concerto Vivaldi has written for her*

Concert hall, packed. A young aristocrat sitting, eyes on stage. Another young aristocrat rushes up, apologizes for being late, the first says he has missed the first two movements (he doesn't say of what). They talk animatedly, then the first one shushes the other, tells him the third movement is about to begin, adding, "It's the concerto he wrote for the soloist!"

We see Vivaldi with baton raised, the orchestra starts playing, and only a moment before she starts playing do we see that it's our bassoonist.

Without question the music must be the third movement of the Concerto in A Minor for Bassoon RV 497 (not RV 498 or any other RV!) We see her perform the entire movement — the repeated "descending chimes" of the orchestra (the metaphor will become clear when you listen to this movement), should bring tears the first time you (the film makers!) hear this movement, especially in the context of the story. She performs flawlessly, but without once looking at the count's empty chair.

The bassoon playing ends a few measures before the orchestra concludes, and so the camera pulls back slowly, shows the obvious enthusiasm of the crowd.

When the orchestra finishes playing, the crowd goes wild, we see a tear in her eyes, as she only now looks at the count's empty chair, but realizes there are others who love her.

As she basks in the applause, the camera closes in on Vivaldi, smiling, applauding, and we are unsure if the reason is that this extraordinary performer has returned to his orchestra, or if he in fact is in love with her, or both.

In the chapter of this book titled "Hypnagogic Art" several "movie paintings" are described. The form has unlimited possibilities, whether or not the particular scenes come from hypnagogic images or not. Following are a few examples. Each scene runs for several minutes, and must be shot from real life, of unsuspecting subjects.

“Bus Driver” — we observe a bus driver at work much as a child would observe him: we see for the first time (or second in the case of some of us) the inexplicable mystery of his turning the wheel (how does he know exactly when?), of shifting gears (how does he know exactly when?), reaching for the handle to open the door, knowing that after the door is closed, he must move his hand to the little handle (directional signals), look up (apparently into the mirror, but why?), look to the left, then turn the mighty wheel while at the same time somehow making the engine roar...

“Working” — through partially opened curtains we see an engineer working at home late at night; he sits under a stand-lamp in his living room with pad and pencil and calculator, a few books on the small table at his elbow.

“Reading”— similar to “Working”, except subject in this case must be a woman. Again, must be shot from real life, of an unsuspecting subject. A wealth of further ideas is available from Andre Kertesz’s book, *On Reading* (Penguin Books, N.Y., 1971).

“Homeless” — the camera follows the life of a homeless person through 24 hours, with an emphasis on the person’s most difficult task: enduring hour after hour of *idleness*. Long close-ups of face, hands. Some viewers will consider the film to be a definition of time.

Make a film titled, “A Blinded Animal Comes to Terms with his Blindness”

Make a film titled, “Fruit Flies Sing a Chorus From Bach’s B Minor Mass”. The screen must be filled with fruit flies, lined up, heads toward the camera, their tiny mouths moving as they sing part of a choral section from the “B Minor Mass”. The sound of their voices must be that of the actual human chorus, but two octaves higher (because they are tiny creatures), though the tempo should not be sped up.

Make a science fiction film in which human beings are seen through the eyes of aliens, and do it so effectively that on leaving the theater people look at each other with the same sense of strangeness and revulsion as the aliens looked upon the humans. The film would show, probably for the first time to many of its viewers, how extremely odd, in fact comic, the phenomenon of *human walking* really is. Also, how odd, how comic, that we have hair on the top of our heads.

“It is part of the philosophic dullness of our time that there are millions of monsters walking about on their hind legs, observing the world through flexible little lenses, periodically supplying themselves with energy by pushing organic substances through holes in their faces, who see nothing whatever fabulous about themselves.” — Gardner, Martin, *The Annotated Alice*, New American Library, N.Y., 1960, “Introduction”.

Make a film whose aim is to arouse such disgust at human beings that the members of the audience know to the depths of their souls that the human race must be ended. Include, e.g.:  
Various people idly, deliciously, picking their noses;



A man doing boring work at a desk and amusing himself by farting — enjoying not only sound but smell;

Various drunks vomiting in public; have long, lingering shots of the sputum hanging in a long thread from the sides of mouths; close-ups of the vomit itself;

Show kids torturing, squashing insects;

Show the scene from *Schindler's List* in which the German officer idly shoots Jews in the public square from the window of his apartment;

Show various executions, mutilations (e.g., the cutting off of a hand of a thief in an Islamic country); tortures (including, e.g., the scene from the film, *Algeria* and the Chinese torture of a man with a rope around his neck who can postpone hanging as long as he can keep his feet on the side of a sharpened post); dramatizations can be used as long as they are extremely realistic;

Toilet-up views of various people having a bowel movement;

An old, white-haired, red-faced, bald, fat guy in a coffee shop who brings a white bread sandwich and something in a white paper cup to a table. From a black leather portfolio he takes perhaps twenty or thirty typed pages, places them carefully, perfectly squarely, on the table-top. Then he reaches down behind him with one hand, perhaps reaching for his wallet. His hand stays there, however. A smile spreads across his face. The camera slowly reveals that he has a couple of fingers up the crack of his ass, scratching.

Make a film, “Back Yards”, showing all sorts of back yards, including those in cities.

Make a documentary, “Birds Going to Sleep”, showing various species in the process of falling asleep. Follow it with a second documentary, “Birds Waking Up”.

Make a film, “Watching Paint Dry”, possibly using stop motion, with microscopic shots showing the paint surface’s evolving texture, color, etc., as the sun moves across sky. Show little things — seeds, small insects — landing in it and getting stuck. Do everything possible to make this supposedly supremely dull subject interesting.

Make a film, “Living Among Monsters”: A beautiful, young woman is having a nap in her back yard in the afternoon. We hear the faint sound of something sliding over leaves. Camera reveals huge snakes stirring slowly in the vicinity of the young woman, yet they are apparently indifferent to her — may in fact even be protecting her. Peaceful afternoon sounds fill the air as she sleeps.

Make a docudrama about medieval sects as described in Norman Cohn’s *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. It must be realistic, and in black and white. Show compassion for the plight of the members of the sects and for the foolishness of their solution. Also show how similar to these sects are their modern versions, e.g., Marxism, various cults.

Make a documentary, “War From the Point of View of Bullets”, consisting of a series of sequences as follows: first, we are looking down the length of a gun barrel from the end of a bullet; all is black except for the tiny circle of daylight at the far end; then suddenly we are moving rapidly down the barrel, the circle of daylight is growing rapidly larger; now we are outside, racing toward the target; now we are closing rapidly on a uniform, on the buttons of a uniform, just a little to the left of a pocket button over the heart; now we are inside the soldier’s body, plowing through tissue; now we are in the heart, where we come to a stop; the shaking around us (i.e., the heart beat) continues for a few seconds, then stops; we see the final quiverings of tissue; then all is still. Or, in the case of an artillery shell, we see the gun barrel as before from the inside; then we are rising rapidly above the countryside, we see roads, farmers’ fields below, a river sparkling in the sun; then we are descending, slowly at first, then rapidly faster; now we are clearly heading for an ancient castle, faster and faster, we flash past the walls, hit the ground; there is a blinding white flash, now the camera follows, in separate frames seen simultaneously, the various pieces of shrapnel; in this frame, the camera follows shrapnel and a broken piece of timber, in that one, the fragments of a stone, in this other one a severed arm or head.

Make a film titled “Kids” which consists of nothing but candid shots of kids, with absolutely no Ph.D. commentary. It should show the many behaviors which everyone who loves kids is familiar with: the infant crying because its mother has left the room for a few minutes, then being comforted by the father, who picks it up, walks around with it, talks to it, then the instantaneous change of emotion as soon as something interesting comes along, e.g., a doggie; kindergartners and first and second graders singing, some of the littlest ones only giving the music occasional attention as they look around, sometimes waving to mom; nose-picking; thumb-sucking; an early reader absorbed in his book; little ones laughing uncontrollably, their bellies heaving; a child watching a bug; a child working on something, tongue in corner of mouth; the whole marvelous world of children at play — kids climbing things; kids playing together, the intensity and complexity of it — a child picking something which maybe he shouldn’t off the sidewalk; kids standing with a finger in their mouth; kids walking along and following, with one hand, a curving fence or bush; kids watching TV; a child sleeping.

Make a film, “Dawn Comes Up Over the Cemetery”. First, we see an old guy walking along tree-shaded residential streets on sunny afternoons; we see him looking at the houses and gardens, listening to the birds; we understand that, after a difficult life full of turmoil and frustrated hopes, this is the one pleasure he has discovered. Then we see dawn slowly breaking over a country cemetery; we hear the birds, see creatures stirring, observe leaves moving in the morning breeze. Slowly, slowly, the camera lets us see day come to life in this rough, green, silent, place. That’s it.

Make one or more films specifically aimed at an audience of depressed, failed intellectuals. It might be argued that such films have already been made, e.g., the Inspector Morse series on PBS, and Kieslowski’s *Red*. The project here is, first, to ask what sort of film (or other work of art) would bring such a person solace for an hour or two, and then to create the films.

We may speculate that a film version of Camus’s novel, *La Chute*, would probably fall into the category, as would film versions of some of Georges Simenon’s novels, in particular, those deal-

ing with lonely murderers living in big cities. In general, the hero would probably have the following characteristics:

He lives alone in a rundown apartment, which is all he can afford, since most of his meager income goes to alimony payments. He is good at something but, being original, he is constantly being fired or threatened with being fired. His only home is a local coffee shop or bar where, however, few patrons know him. His attempts to find female companionship inevitably end in failure. He is surrounded by furnishings, commodities, buildings, all of which literally and figuratively belong to someone else. It is almost always raining where he lives. He is always depressed.

Open a film with a scene that, the audience soon realizes, represents the experience of a blind man getting up in the morning. Keep the screen black, or gray, throughout, but let other voices be heard in the room, convey his thoughts as he gropes for clothes, shoes, items to take with him when he leaves for his days activities.

Make a film (or painting or sculpture) of museum visitors: a girl looking for a painting; a mother pushing a stroller and looking for her husband; a pensive, unsure, man attempting to improve himself by looking at great works of art; lovers looking at paintings (but holding hands, obviously there for a stronger emotional reason than art); people in the museum cafeteria, happily talking to each other about other things after the work of acquiring all that culture; the expressionless faces of attendants, guards.

Make a film like the previous, except have all the visitors gradually be revealed to be famous artists and writers from the past, e.g., Poe, Wilde, Rembrandt, Picasso.

Make a film that opens with two para-gliders soaring over the side of a range of beautiful, steep mountains that drop down to the sea. It is late afternoon of a clear, sunny day. The para-gliders, one flown by a young man, the other by a young woman, soar leisurely back and forth over the tree- and rock-covered slopes below. Then, the man calls indistinctly to the woman and points down, and the two descend toward what seems to be a large, white, rectangular building, with several additional, similarly-shaped buildings attached. First the man lands, on a grass embankment at the front, i.e., downhill, side of the building. He waits for the woman, who soon comes in a few yards from him. The golden-red sunlight of late afternoon casts the shadows of the two on the long grass. We now see that the building is obviously a mansion, but there is no sign of life. The windows are all closed, shades pulled down, there is not a sound to be heard except for the crashing of waves far below. The couple disengage themselves from their harnesses, fold the glider fabric, place harness and frame on top of each, and then walk cautiously toward the front door.

Make a film, "The Telephone Booth". A standard aluminum-and-glass telephone booth is shown by the side of road in the midst of nowhere. Behind it a low line of trees, nondescript

buildings in the far distance, snow-covered ground. Icy wind blowing. Door of the booth part way open. Sound of a dog barking heard very faintly. The wind causes the door to creak slightly. A car goes by. A distant brief racket as of, perhaps, an old motor running briefly. Children's voices. The wind. A car passes. A black dog lopes along the road, stops to sniff at the booth. Now it is night. Clear, icy stars. A woman's voice calling a child. Long silence. Then the phone rings four times. Then nothing.

### **Sculpture, Painting, Photography: Projects**

Make representational sculptures, in traditional materials, matching the following titles:

- “Bored College Student Attempting to Study”
- “Boy Attempting to Walk with Sprained Knee”
- “Boy Picking His Nose”
- “Girl Scout Looking for Her Glasses”
- “Woman Sitting on Toilet”

Make a series of busts of famous people each of which shows how the person would look as a shrunken head.

Even though the concept is well-known, it is still appealing (to some of us), and that is, the quoting of the subject matter *in* the materials, e.g.:

Carve a pine tree in pine wood, with details down to the pine needles;

(Re-)paint real flowers where they are growing in real gardens or in the wild, not necessarily using realistic colors;

Make one or more sculptures of a sculptor at work, e.g., at work creating the sculpture that is being viewed.

Capture moths and butterflies and tie them, in a pleasing arrangement, to the flowers in a garden, using sufficiently long thread so that they can fly within a limited range. Place food, water within their reach.

Make a work of conceptual art consisting of dropping pieces of chocolate on a snake.

Make a painting: “Bach Learns That There Is No God”.

Design a steam-escape mechanism for a steam-radiator so that we hear the voices of Chinese girls in the whistling sound it makes.

Make a painting: “Self Portrait, Taking a Nap” (One of the rarer titles in this genre)

Make a painting, “The Amateur Musicians”. A string quartet or quintet is shown near the front bay window of a restaurant. At least part of the word “Restaurant” can be seen, written backwards from our point of view, on the window. There are sheets of music on the floor next to some of the chairs. The music stands are clearly old ones, and not all in good repair. Some of the sheets of music on the stands are at a slight angle, seemingly in danger of falling off. The violinist, who is nearest us in the little irregular circle of players, has made a mistake, and is grimacing. The violist and violinist on either side of him are frowning, the one looking at him critically out of the corner of his eye. In the small audience in the foreground, a middle-aged woman has turned toward her neighbor, hand in front of her mouth, so she can express her amusement at the struggles of the performers. The painting should be done in the old style — say, 18th century.

Do a series of photographs or paintings of people looking at paintings in art galleries and museums. (Why hasn’t such a series been done before, many times?)

Make a series of paintings representing the facial expressions of people walking in the dark in their house or apartment.

Make rooms, with furnishings, appropriate lighting, designed to forcefully suggest various types of hopelessness, depression.

### **Art: Possible New Movements**

Nowadays you could start a revolution in art with the simple idea that a work of art should be beautiful.

“I believe that certain physical relationships [in cities] work well because they are consistent with human psychological needs that are probably universal and haven’t changed over time. A consideration of these issues leads ineluctably to the condition we call beauty, which for too long has been dismissed as an insoluble mystery of ‘taste’, or worse, relegated by the academic avant-garde to the dumpster of irrelevance. When intellectuals take the position that beauty is a subject beneath discussion, it seems to me that a culture is in real trouble. I wish to readmit the discussion of beauty to intellectual respectability...” — Kunstler, James Howard, *Home from Nowhere*, Simon & Schuster, N.Y., 1996, pp. 18-19.

The computer and other types of modern machine are helping to put talent into its proper place. Most people are aware of the enormously expanded range of sounds, and enormously

increased rate of producing them, which the computer has made possible. Any parent with a child in Little League is familiar with the pitching machine, which can deliver a variety of different pitches at various speeds, simply by adjusting a few controls. No doubt a machine could easily be built today which could hit any of the common golf shots, using standard clubs, far more accurately and reliably than a human player. I recall reading, years ago, about a machine that could carve in wood a duplicate of an existing duck hunter's decoy, simply by having the operator repeatedly go over the surface of the original with a probe. Such a device could certainly be adapted, and no doubt already has, for making wooden carvings of human figures directly from the model. (As late as Rodin's time, the suspicion that a piece of sculpture was merely a copy of its original, e.g., by plaster-of-paris cast, could render the sculpture all but worthless. Nowadays we have outgrown such superstitions.)

A movement, or genre, in photography that might be called "Photographs of Melancholy Places". Some examples: a dark residential street (possibly a dead-end) on a cold fall or winter night, all the houses dark except for one with a small rectangle of blue light in a second-story window. (Who lives there? What are they doing? Are they depressed?)

Another example: a wide street in a major city, again on a cold, dark night, no lights, but a pile of concrete rubble on one corner on the left, signs of construction on the street, maybe a lonely yellow warning-ribbon above part of the pavement.

Another example: a room full of junk in a shabby lower-class house; a kitchen with an oilcloth on the table, a dim bare bulb overhead (vaguely bluish), a 1940s radio set on the counter; walls bare, a few cracks, areas of peeling paint; a calendar on the wall; sitting at the table is a middle-aged woman staring blankly.

Another example: a section of an underground railroad terminal late at night; multiple tracks pass in parallel; bright yellow-white lights; no humans; vertical support beams have a branching three-pronged Y near top; if there were an accompanying sound recording, all that would be heard would be a distant clang once in a while; if there were an accompanying recording of smells, all there would be would be the faint smell of railroad soot. The whole image should express a sigh of resignation: "So it is..."

A new kind of art, yet to be named. Example: you take someone to see a shabby, old, three-story building at the edge of a steep, dirt bank of a large creek. You are on the opposite bank. There is a kind of bigness, hollowness, in the space above the creek between you and the building. Behind the building is a leaf-covered hill with slim trees. The season is fall, the air is cold, cloudy. White paint is peeling on the side of the building. It is not clear if the building is occupied or not. Some windows have shades, but these are not pulled down evenly: in one window the bottom of the shade is at an angle from the sill. It is essential that you and the person you have brought both have headaches, perhaps are on the verge of getting the flu, because the cold, pasty air on your flushed skin is part of the experience. You stand on the opposite side of this creek, the waters echoing as it rushes along. In front of you, on your side of the creek, is a wooden frame rack, and on it an aluminum cylinder perhaps nine inches in outer diameter, two feet long, with flanges on each end. There are three evenly spaced holes in each flange. But the top of the rack is such that the cylinder is tilted downward to the left at an angle of, say, thirty degrees. You look at the building while you are standing a few feet behind the cylinder and rack.

*Literature and Art*

So, characteristics of this art form are that the artist stumbles on a locale and an experience, then does what's necessary to bring other people to experience it.