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READING LIKE A WRITER

A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them

FRANCINE PROSE

‘Passionate, perceptive and engaging. A celebration of attentive reading, and a guide to how we can do it wisely.’ Amanda Craig

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ONE

Close Reading

CAN CREATIVE WRITING BE TAUGHT?

It’s a reasonable question, but no matter how often I’ve been asked it, I never know quite what to say. Because if what people mean is: Can the love of language be taught? Can a gift for storytelling be taught? then the answer is no. Which may be why the question is so often asked in a skeptical tone implying that, unlike the multiplication tables or the principles of auto mechanics, creativity can’t be transmitted from teacher to student. Imagine Milton enrolling in a graduate program for help with *Paradise Lost*, or Kafka enduring the seminar in which his classmates inform him that, frankly, they just don’t believe the part about the guy waking up one morning to find he’s a giant bug.

What confuses me is not the sensibleness of the question but the fact that it’s being asked of a writer who has taught writing, on and off, for almost twenty years. What would it say about me, my students, and the hours we’d spent in the classroom if I said that any attempt to teach the writing of fiction was a complete waste of time? Probably, I should just go ahead and admit that I’ve been committing criminal fraud.

Instead I answer by recalling my own most valuable experience, not as a teacher but as a student in one of the few fiction workshops I took. This was in the 1970s, during my brief career as a graduate student in medieval English literature, when I was allowed the indulgence of taking one fiction class. Its generous teacher showed me, among other things, how to line edit my work. For any writer, the ability to look at a sentence and see what’s superfluous, what can be altered, revised, expanded, and, especially, cut, is essential. It’s satisfying to see that sentence shrink, snap into place, and ultimately emerge in a more polished form: clear, economical, sharp.

Meanwhile, my classmates were providing me with my first real audience. In that prehistory, before mass photocopying enabled

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students to distribute manuscripts in advance, we read our work aloud. That year, I was beginning what would become my first novel. And what made an important difference to me was the attention I felt in the room as the others listened. I was encouraged by their eagerness to hear more.

That's the experience I describe, the answer I give to people who ask about teaching creative writing: A workshop can be useful. A good teacher can show you how to edit your work. The right class can form the basis of a community that will help and sustain you.

But that class, as helpful as it was, was not where I learned to write.

LIKE most—maybe all—writers, I learned to write by writing and, by example, by reading books.

Long before the idea of a writer's conference was a glimmer in anyone's eye, writers learned by reading the work of their predecessors. They studied meter with Ovid, plot construction with Homer, comedy with Aristophanes; they honed their prose style by absorbing the lucid sentences of Montaigne and Samuel Johnson. And who could have asked for better teachers: generous, uncritical, blessed with wisdom and genius, as endlessly forgiving as only the dead can be?

Though writers have learned from the masters in a formal, methodical way—Harry Crews has described taking apart a Graham Greene novel to see how many chapters it contained, how much time it covered, how Greene handled pacing, tone, and point of view—the truth is that this sort of education more often involves a kind of osmosis. After I've written an essay in which I've quoted at length from great writers, so that I've had to copy out long passages of their work, I've noticed that my own work becomes, however briefly, just a little more fluent.

In the ongoing process of becoming a writer, I read and reread the authors I most loved. I read for pleasure, first, but also more analytically, conscious of style, of diction, of how sentences were formed and information was being conveyed, how the writer was structuring a plot, creating characters, employing detail and dialogue. And as I wrote, I discovered that writing, like reading, was done one word at a time, one punctuation mark at a time. It required what a friend calls "putting every word on trial for its life": changing an adjective, cutting a phrase, removing a comma, and putting the comma back in.

I read closely, word by word, sentence by sentence, pondering each deceptively minor decision the writer had made. And though it's impossible to recall every source of inspiration and instruction, I can remember the novels and stories that seemed to me revelations: wells of beauty and pleasure that were also textbooks, private lessons in the art of fiction.

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This book is intended partly as a response to that unavoidable question about how writers learn to do something that cannot be taught. What writers know is that, ultimately, we learn to write by practice, hard work, by repeated trial and error, success and failure, and from the books we admire. And so the book that follows represents an effort to recall my own education as a novelist and to help the passionate reader and would-be writer understand how a writer reads.

WHEN I was a high school junior, our English teacher assigned a term paper on the theme of blindness in *Oedipus Rex* and *King Lear*. We were supposed to go through the two tragedies and circle every reference to eyes, light, darkness, and vision, then draw some conclusion on which we would base our final essay.

It all seemed so dull, so mechanical. We felt we were way beyond it. Without this tedious, time-consuming exercise, all of us knew that blindness played a starring role in both dramas.

Still, we liked our English teacher, and we wanted to please him. And searching for every relevant word turned out to have an enjoyable treasure-hunt aspect, a *Where's Wally* detective thrill. Once we started looking for eyes, we found them everywhere, glinting at us, winking from every page.

Long before the blinding of Oedipus or Gloucester, the language of vision and its opposite was preparing us, consciously or unconsciously, for those violent mutilations. It asked us to consider what it meant to be clear-sighted or obtuse, shortsighted or prescient, to heed the signs and warnings, to see or deny what was right in front of one's eyes. Teiresias, Oedipus, Goneril, Kent—all of them could be defined by the sincerity or falseness with which they mused or ranted on the subject of literal or metaphorical blindness.

It was fun to trace those patterns and to make those connections. It was like cracking a code that the playwright had embedded in the text, a riddle that existed just for me to decipher. I felt as if I were engaged in some intimate communication with the writer, as if the ghosts of Sophocles and Shakespeare had been waiting patiently all those centuries for a bookish sixteen-year-old to come along and find them.

I believed that I was learning to read in a whole new way. But this was only partly true. Because in fact I was merely relearning to read in an old way that I had learned, but forgotten.

We all begin as close readers. Even before we learn to read, the process of being read aloud to, and of listening, is one in which we are taking in one word after another, one phrase at a time, in which we are paying attention to whatever each word or phrase is transmitting. Word by word is how we learn to hear and then read, which seems only fitting, because it is how the books we are reading were written in the first place.

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The more we read, the faster we can perform that magic trick of seeing how the letters have been combined into words that have meaning. The more we read, the more we comprehend, the more likely we are to discover new ways to read, each one tailored to the reason why we are reading a particular book.

At first, the thrill of our own brand-new expertise is all we ask or expect from Dick and Jane. But soon we begin to ask what else those marks on the page can give us. We begin to want information, entertainment, invention, even truth and beauty. We concentrate, we skim, we skip words, put down the book and daydream, start over, and reread. We finish a book and return to it years later to see what we might have missed, or the ways in which time and age have affected our understanding.

As a child, I was drawn to the works of the great escapist children's writers. I liked trading my familiar world for the London of the four children whose nanny parachuted into their lives with her umbrella and who turned the most routine shopping trip into a magical outing. I would gladly have followed the White Rabbit down into the rabbit hole and had tea with the Mad Hatter. I loved novels in which children stepped through portals—a garden door, a wardrobe—into an alternate universe.

Children love the imagination, with its kaleidoscopic possibilities and its protest against the way that children are always being told exactly what's true and what's false, what's real and what's illusion. Perhaps my taste in reading had something to do with the limitations I was discovering, day by day: the brick walls of time and space, science and probability, to say nothing of whatever messages I was picking up from the culture. I liked novels with plucky heroines like Pippi Longstocking, the astringent Jane Eyre, and the daughters in *Little Women*, girls whose resourcefulness and intelligence don't automatically exclude them from the pleasures of male attention.

Each word of these novels was a yellow brick in the road to Oz. There were chapters I read and reread so as to repeat the dependable, out-of-body sensation of being *somewhere else*. I read addictively, constantly. On one family vacation, my father pleaded with me to close my book long enough to look at the Grand Canyon. I borrowed stacks of books from the public library: novels, biographies, history, anything that looked even remotely engaging.

Along with pre-adolescence came a more pressing desire for escape. I read more widely, more indiscriminately, and mostly with an interest in how far a book could take me from my life and how long it could keep me there: *Gone With the Wind*, Pearl Buck, Edna Ferber, fat bestsellers by James Michener, with a dash of history sprinkled in to cool down the steamy love scenes between the Hawaiian girls and the missionaries, the geishas and the GIs. I also appreciated these books for the often misleading nuggets of information they provided about sex in that innocent era, the 1950s. I turned the pages of these

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page-turners as fast as I could. Reading was like eating alone, with that same element of bingeing.

I was fortunate to have good teachers, and friends who were also readers. The books I read became more challenging, better written, more substantial: Steinbeck, Camus, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Twain, Salinger, Anne Frank. My friends and I, little beatniks, were passionate fans of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti. We read Truman Capote, Carson McCullers, and the proto-hippie classics of Herman Hesse, Carlos Castaneda—*Mary Poppins* for people who thought they'd outgrown the flying nanny. I must have been vaguely aware of the power of language, but only dimly, and only as it applied to whatever effect the book was having on me.

ALL of that that changed with every mark I made on the pages of *King Lear* and *Oedipus Rex*. I still have my old copy of Sophocles, heavily underlined, covered with sweet, embarrassing notes-to-self ("irony?" "recognition of fate?") written in my rounded, heartbreakingly neat schoolgirl print. Like seeing a photograph of yourself as a child, encountering handwriting that you know was once yours but that now seems only dimly familiar can inspire a confrontation with the mystery of time.

Focusing on language proved to be a practical skill, useful the way sight-reading with ease can come in handy for a musician. My high school English teacher had only recently graduated from a college where his own English professors taught what was called New Criticism, a school of thought that favored reading what was on the page with only passing reference to the biography of the writer or the period in which the text was written. Luckily for me, that approach to literature was still in fashion when I graduated and went on to college. At my university there was a well-known professor and critic whose belief in close reading trickled down and influenced the entire humanities program. In French class, we spent an hour each Friday afternoon working our way from *The Song of Roland* to Sartre, paragraph by paragraph, focusing on small sections for what was called the *explication de texte*.

Of course, there were many occasions on which I had to skim as rapidly as I could to get through those survey courses that gave us two weeks to finish *Don Quixote*, ten days for *War and Peace*—courses designed to produce college graduates who could say they'd read the classics. By then I knew enough to regret having to read those books that way. And I promised myself that I would revisit them as soon as I could give them the time and attention they deserved.

ONLY once did my passion for reading steer me in the wrong

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direction, and that was when I let it persuade me to go to graduate school. There, I soon realized that my love for books was unshared by many of my classmates and professors. I found it hard to understand what they *did* love, exactly, and this gave me an anxious shiver that would later seem like a warning about what would happen to the teaching of literature over the decade or so after I dropped out of my Ph.D. program. That was when literary academia split into warring camps of deconstructionists, Marxists, feminists, and so forth, all battling for the right to tell students that they were reading "texts" in which ideas and politics trumped what the writer had actually written.

I left graduate school and became a writer. I wrote my first novel in India, in Bombay, where I read as omnivorously as I had as a child, rereading classics that I borrowed from the old-fashioned, musty, beautiful university library that seemed to have acquired almost nothing written after 1920. Afraid of running out of books, I decided to slow myself down by reading Proust in French.

Reading a masterpiece in a language for which you need a dictionary is in itself a course in reading word by word. And as I puzzled out the gorgeous, labyrinthine sentences, I discovered how reading a book can make you want to write one.

A work of art can start you thinking about some aesthetic or philosophical problem; it can suggest some new method, some fresh approach to fiction. But the relationship between reading and writing is rarely so clear-cut, and in fact my first novel could hardly have been less Proustian.

More often the connection has to do with whatever mysterious promptings make you want to write. It's like watching someone dance and then secretly, in your own room, trying out a few steps. I often think of learning to write by reading as something like the way I first began to read. I had a few picture books I'd memorized and pretended I could read, as a sort of party trick that I did repeatedly for my parents, who were also pretending—in their case, to be amused. I never knew exactly when I crossed the line from pretending to actually being able, but that was how it happened.

Not long ago, a friend told me that her students had complained that reading masterpieces made them feel stupid. But I've always found that the better the book I'm reading, the smarter I feel, or, at least, the more able I am to imagine that I might, someday, *become* smarter. I've also heard fellow writers say that they cannot read while working on a book of their own, for fear that Tolstoy or Shakespeare might influence them. I've always *hoped* they would influence me, and I wonder if I would have taken so happily to being a writer if it had meant that I couldn't read during the years it might take to complete a novel.

To be truthful, some writers stop you dead in your tracks by making you see your own work in the most unflattering light. Each of us will meet a different harbinger of personal failure, some innocent genius

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chosen by us for reasons having to do with what we see as our own inadequacies. The only remedy to this I have found is to read a writer whose work is entirely different from another, though not necessarily more like your own—a difference that will remind you of how many rooms there are in the house of art.

AFTER my novels began to be published, I started to teach, taking a succession of jobs as a visiting writer at a series of colleges and universities. Usually, I would teach one creative writing workshop each semester, together with a literature class entitled something like "The Modern Short Story"—a course designed for undergraduates who weren't planning to major in literature or go on to graduate school and so would not be damaged by my inability to teach literary theory. Alternately, I would conduct a reading seminar for MFA students who wanted to be writers rather than scholars, which meant that it was all right for us to fritter away our time talking about books rather than politics or ideas.

I enjoyed the reading classes, and the opportunity to function as a sort of cheerleader for literature. I liked my students, who were often so eager, bright, and enthusiastic that it took me years to notice how much trouble they had in reading a fairly simple short story. Almost simultaneously, I was struck by how little attention they had been taught to pay to the language, to the actual words and sentences that a writer had used. Instead, they had been encouraged to form strong, critical, and often negative opinions of geniuses who had been read with delight for centuries before they were born. They had been instructed to prosecute or defend these authors, as if in a court of law, on charges having to do with the writers' origins, their racial, cultural, and class backgrounds. They had been encouraged to rewrite the classics into the more acceptable forms that the authors might have discovered had they only shared their young critics' level of insight, tolerance, and awareness.

No wonder my students found it so stressful to read! And possibly because of the harsh judgments they felt required to make about fictional characters and their creators, they didn't seem to *like* reading, which also made me worry for them and wonder why they wanted to become writers. I asked myself how they planned to learn to write, since I had always thought that others learned, as I had, from reading.

Responding to what my students seemed to need, I began to change the way I taught. No more general discussions of this character or that plot turn. No more attempts to talk about how it *felt* to read Borges or Poe or to describe the experience of navigating the fantastic fictional worlds they created. It was a pity, because I'd often enjoyed these wide-ranging discussions, during which my students said things I would always remember. I recall one student saying that reading the stories of Bruno Schulz was like being a child again, hiding behind

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the door, eavesdropping on the adults, understanding a fraction of what they were saying and inventing the rest. But I assumed that I would still hear such things even if I organized classes around the more pedestrian, halting method of beginning at the beginning, lingering over every word, every phrase, every image, considering how it enhanced and contributed to the story as a whole. In this way, the students and I would get through as much of the text as possible—sometimes three or four, sometimes as many as ten, pages—in a two-hour class.

This remains the way I prefer to teach, partly because it's a method from which I benefit nearly as much as my students. And there are many stories that I have taught for years and from which I learn more each time I read them, word by word.

I've always thought that a close-reading course should at least be a companion, if not an alternative, to the writing workshop. Though it also doles out praise, the workshop most often focuses on what a writer has done wrong, what needs to be fixed, cut, or augmented. Whereas reading a masterpiece can inspire us by showing us how a writer does something brilliantly.

Occasionally, while I was teaching a reading course and simultaneously working on a novel, and when I had reached an impasse in my own work, I began to notice that whatever story I taught that week somehow helped me get past the obstacle that had been in my way. Once, for example, I was struggling with a party scene and happened to be teaching James Joyce's "The Dead," which taught me something about how to orchestrate the voices of the party guests into a chorus from which the principal players step forward, in turn, to take their solos.

On another occasion, I was writing a story that I knew was going to end in an eruption of horrific violence, and I was having trouble getting it to sound natural and inevitable rather than forced and melodramatic. Fortunately, I was teaching the stories of Isaac Babel, whose work so often explores the nature, the causes, and the aftermath of violence. What I noticed, close-reading along with my students, was that frequently in Babel's fiction, a moment of violence is directly preceded by a passage of intense lyricism. It's characteristic of Babel to offer the reader a lovely glimpse of the crescent moon just before all hell breaks loose. I tried it—first the poetry, then the horror—and suddenly everything came together, the pacing seemed right, and the incident I had been struggling with appeared, at least to me, to be plausible and convincing.

Close reading helped me figure out, as I hoped it did for my students, a way to approach a difficult aspect of writing, which is nearly always difficult. Readers of this book will notice that there are writers to whom I keep returning: Chekhov, Joyce, Austen, George Eliot, Kafka, Tolstoy, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Mansfield, Nabokov, Heinrich von Kleist, Raymond Carver, Jane Bowles, James

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Baldwin, Alice Munro, Mavis Gallant—the list goes on and on. They are the teachers to whom I go, the authorities I consult, the models that still help to inspire me with the energy and courage it takes to sit down at a desk each day and resume the process of learning, anew, to write.

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TWO

Words

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, I HAD A PIANO TEACHER WHO tried to encourage her uninspired students with a system of rewards. A memorized Clementini sonatina or a completed theory workbook earned us a certain number of stars that added up to the grand prize: a small, unpainted plaster bust of a famous composer: Bach, Beethoven, Mozart.

The idea, I suppose, was that we were meant to line up the statues on the piano as sort of an altar to which we would offer up our finger exercises in the faint hope of winning these dead men's approval. I was fascinated by their powdered wigs and their stern—or in the case of Chopin, dreamy—expressions. They were like chalky, bodiless dolls I couldn't imagine dressing up.

Unfortunately for my piano teacher and me, I didn't much care about winning the dead composers' good opinions, perhaps because I already knew that I never would.

I had my own private pantheon made up not of composers but of writers: P. L. Travers, Astrid Lindgren, E. Nesbit, the idols of my childhood. Theirs was the approval I longed for, the company I longed to join as they floated above me, giving me something to think about during those dreary practice sessions. Over the intervening years, the membership of my literary pantheon has changed. But I have never lost the idea of Tolstoy or George Eliot nodding or frowning over my work, turning thumbs up or down.

I have heard other writers talk about the sensation of writing for an audience made up partly of the dead. In her memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam describes how her husband, Osip, and his friend and fellow poet, Anna Akhmatova participated in a sort of otherworldly communion with their predecessors:

> *Both M. and Akhmatova had the astonishing ability of somehow bridging time and space when they read the work of*

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dead poets. By its very nature, such reading is usually anachronistic, but with them it meant entering into personal relations with the poet in question: it was a kind of conversation with someone long since departed. From the way in which he greeted his fellow poets of antiquity in the Inferno, *M. suspected that Dante also had this ability. In his article, "On the Nature of Words" he mentions Bergson's search for links between things of the same kind that are separated only by time—in the same way, he thought, one can look for friends and allies across the barriers of both time and space. This would probably have been understood by Keats, who wanted to meet all his friends, living and dead, in a tavern.*

Ahkmatova, in resurrecting figures from the past, was always interested in the way they lived and their relations with others. I remember how she made Shelley come alive for me—this was, as it were, her first experiment of this kind. Next began her period of communion with Pushkin. With the thoroughness of a detective or a jealous woman, she ferreted out everything about the people around him, probing their psychological motives and turning every woman he had ever so much as smiled at inside out like a glove.

So who are the writers with whom we might want to have this out-of-time communion? The Brontës, Dickens, Turgenev, Woolf—the list is long enough to support a lifetime of solid reading. You can assume that if a writer's work has survived for centuries, there are reasons why this is so, explanations that have nothing to do with a conspiracy of academics plotting to resuscitate a zombie army of dead white males. Of course, there is the matter of individual taste. Not all great writers may seem great to us, regardless of how often and how hard we try to see their virtues. I know, for example, that Trollope is considered to have been a brilliant novelist, but I've never quite understood what makes his fans so fervent. Still, our tastes change as we ourselves change and grow older, and perhaps in a few months or so Trollope will have become my new favorite writer.

Part of a reader's job is to find out why certain writers endure. This may require some rewiring, unhooking the connection that makes you think you have to have an *opinion* about the book and reconnecting that wire to whatever terminal lets you see reading as something that might move or delight you. You will do yourself a disservice if you confine your reading to the rising star whose six-figure, two-book contract might seem to indicate where your own work should be heading. I'm not saying you shouldn't read such writers, some of whom are excellent and deserving of celebrity. I'm only pointing out that they represent the dot at the end of the long, glorious, complex sentence in which literature has been written.

With so much reading ahead of you, the temptation might be to

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speed up. But in fact it's essential to slow down and read every word. Because one important thing that can be learned by reading slowly is the seemingly obvious but oddly underappreciated fact that language is the medium we use in much the same way a composer uses notes, the way a painter uses paint. I realize it may seem obvious, but it's surprising how easily we lose sight of the fact that words are the raw material out of which literature is crafted.

Every page was once a blank page, just as every word that appears on it now was not always there, but instead reflects the final result of countless large and small deliberations. All the elements of good writing depend on the writer's skill in choosing one word instead of another. And what grabs and keeps our interest has everything to do with those choices.

One way to compel yourself to slow down and stop at every word is to ask yourself what sort of information each word—each word choice—is conveying. Reading with that question in mind, let's consider the wealth of information provided by the first paragraph of Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

> *The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind. Bailey was the son she lived with, her only boy. He was sitting on the edge of his chair at the table, bent over the orange sports section of the* Journal. *"Now look here, Bailey," she said, "see here, read this," and she stood with one hand on her thin hip and the other rattling the newspaper at his bald head. "Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is aloose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it. I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did."*

The first simple declarative sentence could hardly be more plain: subject, verb, infinitive, preposition. There is not one adjective or adverb to distract us from the central fact. But how much is contained in these eight little words!

Here, as in the openings of many stories and novels, we are confronted by one important choice that a writer of fiction needs to make: the question of what to call her characters. Joe, Joe Smith, Mr. Smith? Not, in this case, Grandma or Grandma Smith (no one in this story has a last name) or, let's say, Ethel or Ethel Smith or Mrs. Smith, or any of the myriad terms of address that might have established different degrees of psychic distance and sympathy between the reader and the old woman.

Calling her "the grandmother" at once reduces her to her role in the family, as does the fact that her daughter-in-law is never called

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anything but "the children's mother." At the same time, the title gives her (like The Misfit) an archetypal, mythic role that elevates her and keeps us from getting too chummy with this woman whose name we never learn, even as the writer is preparing our hearts to break at the critical moment to which the grandmother's whole life and the events of the story have led her.

The grandmother didn't want to go to Florida. The first sentence is a refusal, which, in its very simplicity, emphasizes the force with which the old woman is digging in her heels. It's a concentrated act of negative will, which we will come to understand in all its tragic folly —that is, the foolishness of attempting to exert one's will when fate or destiny (or as O'Connor would argue, God) has other plans for us. And finally, the no-nonsense austerity of the sentence's construction gives it a kind of authority that—like *Moby Dick*'s first sentence, "Call me Ishmael"—makes us feel that the author is in control, an authority that draws us farther into the story.

The first part of the second sentence—"She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee"—locates us in geography, that is, in the South. And that one word, *connections* (as opposed to *relatives* or *family* or *people*), reveals the grandmother's sense of her own faded gentility, of having come down in the world, a semi-deluded self-image that, like the illusions of many other O'Connor characters, will contribute to the character's downfall.

The sentence's second half—"she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey's mind"—seizes our own attention more strongly than it would have had O'Connor written, say, "*taking* every chance." The verb quietly but succinctly telegraphs both the grandmother's fierceness and the passivity of Bailey, "the son she lived with, her only boy," two phrases that convey their domestic situation as well as the infantilizing dominance and the simultaneous tenderness that the grandmother feels toward her son. That word *boy* will take on tragic resonance later. "Bailey Boy!" the old woman will cry after her son is killed by The Misfit, who is already about to make his appearance in the newspaper that the grandmother is "rattling" at her boy's bald head. Meanwhile, the paradox of a bald, presumably middle-aged boy leads us to make certain accurate conclusions about the family constellation.

The Misfit is "aloose"—here we find one of those words by which O'Connor conveys the rhythm and flavor of a local dialect without subjecting us to the annoying apostrophes, dropped *g*'s, the shootin' and talkin' and cussin,' and the bad grammar with which other authors attempt to transcribe regional speech. The final sentences of the paragraph—"I wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did"—encapsulate the hilarious and maddening quality of the grandmother's manipulativeness. She'll use *anything*, even an imagined encounter with an escaped criminal, to divert the family

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vacation from Florida to east Tennessee. And her apparently unlikely fantasy of encountering The Misfit may cause us to reflect on the peculiar egocentrism and narcissism of those people who are constantly convinced that, however minuscule the odds, the stray bullet will somehow find *them*. Meanwhile, again because of word choice, the final sentence is already alluding to those questions of conscience, morality, the spirit and soul that will reveal themselves as being at the heart of O'Connor's story.

Given the size of the country, we think, they can't *possibly* run into the criminal about whom the grandmother has warned them. And yet we may recall Chekhov's remark that the gun we see onstage in an early scene should probably go off by the play's end. So what *is* going to happen? This short passage has already ushered us into a world that is realistic but at the same time beyond the reach of ordinary logic, and into a narrative that we will follow from this introduction as inexorably as the grandmother is destined to meet a fate that (we *do* suspect) will involve The Misfit. Pared and edited down, highly concentrated, a model of compression from which it would be hard to excise one word, this single passage achieves all this, or more, since there will be additional subtleties and complexities obvious only to each individual reader.

Skimming just won't suffice if we hope to extract one fraction, such as the fraction above, of what a writer's words can teach us about how to use the language. And reading quickly—for plot, for ideas, even for the psychological truths that a story reveals—can be a hindrance when the crucial revelations are in the spaces *between* words, in what has been left out. Such is the case with the opening of Katherine Mansfield's "The Daughters of the Late Colonel":

> *The week after was one of the busiest weeks of their lives. Even when they went to bed, it was only their bodies that lay down and rested; their minds went on, thinking things out, talking things over, wondering, deciding, trying to remember where . . .*

Again, the story begins with a simple declarative sentence that establishes a sense of competence and control: a story is about to be told by someone who knows what she's doing. But if you read it quickly, you might skip right past the fact that there is no object for that temporal preposition *after*. The week after . . . what? Our heroines—two sisters, whom we have not yet met, who have not been named for us (Josephine and Constantia) or referred to in any way except as *they*—cannot supply the necessary words, *after their father's funeral*, because they have not yet been able to convince themselves that this momentous and terrifying event has really occurred. They simply cannot get their minds around the fact that their feared, tyrannical father, the late colonel, could be gone and is

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no longer dictating exactly what they will do and feel and think every moment of every day.

By leaving out the object of *after* in the very first sentence, Katherine Mansfield establishes the rules or the lack of rules that allow the story to adopt a distanced third-person point of view along with a fluidity that lets it penetrate the dusty, peculiar recesses of the two sisters' psyches. The second and final sentence of that paragraph is all participles—thinking, wondering, deciding, trying to remember—that describe thought rather than action, until the sentence exhausts itself and peters out in an ellipsis that prefigures the dead end that the sisters' attempts to think things through will ultimately reach.

These two low-key sentences have already ushered us into the paradoxically rich and claustrophobic realm (both outside and inside the sisters) in which the story occurs. They enable us to see their world from a perspective at once so objective and so closely identified with these child-women that everything about their actions (giggling, squirming in their beds, worrying about the little mouse scurrying about their room) makes us think they *might* be children until, almost five pages into the story, the maid, Kate, comes into the dining room, and—in just two words—the story dazzles us with a flash of harsh sunlight that reveals the age of the "old tabbies":

> *And proud young Kate, the enchanted princess, came in to see what the old tabbies wanted now. She snatched away their plates of mock something or other and slapped down a white, terrified blancmange.*

(Note, too, how ingeniously and economically that "terrified blancmange" reflects the mental state of the "old tabbies" in the trembling of the gelatinous pudding.)

Mansfield is one of those stylists whose work you can open anywhere to discover some inspired word choice. Here, the sisters hear a barrel organ playing outside in the street and for the first time realize that they don't have to pay the organ-grinder to go away so his music won't annoy Father. "A perfect fountain of bubbling notes shook from the barrel-organ, round bright notes, carelessly scattered." And how precise and inventive are the words in which the women respond to Father's live-in nurse, who has stayed on after his death. Nurse Andrews's table manners alarm and enrage the sisters, who suddenly have no idea how, economically, they are supposed to survive without their father:

> *Nurse Andrews was simply fearful about butter. Really they couldn't help feeling that about butter, at least, she took advantage of their kindness. And she had that maddening habit of asking for just an inch more bread to finish what she had on her plate, and then, at the last mouthful, absent-mindedly—of*

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course it wasn't absent-mindedly—taking another helping. Josephine got very red when this happened, and she fastened her small, bead-like eyes on the tablecloth, as if she saw a minute strange insect creeping through the web of it.

Again, it's a matter of the word by word—this time, of adjectives and adverbs. Though we remain in the third person, the *simply fearful* and *maddening* are the sister's words. We can hardly miss the rage and despair being generated by that "just an inch more bread," that "absent-mindedly—of course it wasn't absent-mindedly." And we can see with absolute clarity the look of horror, concentration, and suppressed disgust on Josephine's face as she "fastens her small bead-like eyes" on the "minute strange insect" she imagines crawling through the web of the tablecloth. Along the way, *web* informs us that the cloth is made of lace.

"The Daughters of the Late Colonel" rewards rereading at different points in our lives. For years, I assumed I understood it. I believed that the sisters' inability to supply an object for that *after*, to comprehend their father's mysterious departure, had to do with their eccentric natures, with their childlike inability (or refusal) to face the complexities of adult life. And then I happened to reread it not long after a death in my own family, and for the first time I understood that the sisters' perplexity is not so unlike the astonishment and bewilderment that all of us (regardless of how "grown-up" or sophisticated we imagine ourselves to be) feel in the face of the shocking finality, the absence, the mystery of death.

THOUGH their subject matter, their characters, and their approaches to fiction could hardly seem more different, both Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Mansfield share a certain pyrotechnical aspect, deploying metaphors, similes, and sharp turns of phrase that are the literary equivalent of a fireworks display. But there are also writers whose vocabulary and whose approach to language is plain, spare, even Spartan.

Alice Munro writes with the simplicity and beauty of a Shaker box. Everything about her style is meant to attract *no* notice, to make you *not* pay attention. But if you read her work closely, every word challenges you to think of a more direct, less fussy or tarted-up way to say what she is saying.

Hers is such a seemingly effortless style that it presents another sort of challenge: the challenge of imagining the drafts and revisions, the calculations required to end up with something so apparently uncalculated. This is not spontaneous, automatic writing but, again, the end product of numerous decisions, of words tried on, tried out, eliminated, replaced with better words—until, as in the opening of "Dulse," we have a compressed, complete, and painfully honest

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rendering of the complexities of a woman's entire life, her professional and romantic circumstances, her psychological state, as well as the point at which she stands along the continuum from the beginning of life to the end:

> *At the end of the summer Lydia took a boat to an island off the southern coast of New Brunswick, where she was going to stay overnight. She had just a few days left until she had to be back in Ontario. She worked as an editor, for a publisher in Toronto. She was also a poet, but she did not refer to that unless it was something people knew already. For the past eighteen months she had been living with a man in Kingston. As far as she could see, that was over.*
>
> *She had noticed something about herself on this trip to the Maritimes. It was that people were no longer so interested in getting to know her. It wasn't that she had created such a stir before, but something had been there that she could rely on. She was forty-five, and had been divorced for nine years. Her two children had started on their own lives, though there were still retreats and confusions. She hadn't gotten fatter or thinner, her looks had not deteriorated in any alarming way, but nevertheless she had stopped being one sort of woman and had become another, and she had noticed it on this trip.*

Observe the relative intimacy that results from the writer's choosing to call our heroine by her first name, the rapid deft strokes—in language almost as plain as that of the newspaper—with which the essential questions (who, what, when, where, if not why) are addressed. Lydia has the resources to take a boat somewhere just to stay overnight, but not enough leisure or freedom to extend her vacation past the few days she has left. We hear not only about her work as an editor but also about her vocation, and the fact that there might be people around her who might know, or not know, that she is also a poet. In one sentence, we are informed about her romantic life and the undramatic resignation ("As far as she could see, that was over.") with which our heroine looks back on eighteen months spent living with a lover whom she chooses to think about not by name but only as "a man in Kingston."

We discover her age, her marital status; she has two children. How much verbiage could have been squandered in summarizing the periodic "retreats and confusions" that have stalled Lydia's grown children in their progress toward adulthood. And how much less convincing and moving the last part of the passage would be if Munro had chosen to couch her heroine's assessment of her mysteriously altered effect on others ("people were no longer interested in getting to know her") in words that were more emotional, more highly charged, more heavily freighted with self-pity, grief, or regret.

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Finally, the passage contradicts a form of bad advice often given young writers—namely, that the job of the author is to show, not tell. Needless to say, many great novelists combine "dramatic" showing with long sections of the flat-out authorial narration that is, I guess, what is meant by telling. And the warning against telling leads to a confusion that causes novice writers to think that everything should be acted out—don't tell us a character is happy, show us how she screams "yay" and jumps up and down for joy—when in fact the responsibility of showing should be assumed by the energetic and specific use of language. There are many occasions in literature in which telling is far more effective than showing. A lot of time would have been wasted had Alice Munro believed that she could not begin her story until she had *shown* us Lydia working as an editor, writing poetry, breaking up with her lover, dealing with her children, getting divorced, growing older, and taking all the steps that led up to the moment at which the story rightly begins.

Richard Yates was equally direct, as devastating, and similarly adept at making everything turn and balance on the apt word choice. Here, in the opening paragraph of *Revolutionary Road*, he warns us that the amateur theatrical performance in the novel's first chapter may not be quite the triumph for which the Laurel Players are hoping:

> *The final dying sounds of their dress rehearsal left the Laurel Players with nothing to do but stand there, silent and helpless, blinking out over the footlights of an empty auditorium. They hardly dared to breathe as the short, solemn figure of their director emerged from the naked seats to join them on stage, as he pulled a stepladder raspingly from the wings and climbed halfway up its rungs to turn and tell them, with several clearings of his throat, that they were a damned talented group of people and a wonderful group of people to work with.*

When we ask ourselves how we know as much as we know—that is, that the performance is likely to be something of an embarrassment—we notice that individual words have given us all the information we need. *The final dying sounds . . . silent and helpless . . . blinking . . . hardly dared to breathe . . . naked seats . . . raspingly*. Even the name of the group—the Laurel Players—seems banal. Is that laurel as in the *tree*, or as in the laurel *wreath* with which the Greeks honored victory, or an unthinking conflation of the two in some arty theatrical terminology? Then come the director's throat clearings and, in indirect dialogue, the equivalent of the group's first bad review. The fake enthusiasm and bravado of that "*damned* talented" (as opposed to merely "talented"), the immediate retreat into the noncommittal "wonderful," and the repetition of "group of people" tells us, sadly, all we need to know about these actors' gifts and the likelihood that their dreams will come true. Meanwhile, we're very aware of what the

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director's not saying, which is that their performance was brilliant, or even passably good.

Some writers can write both meticulously and carelessly, sometimes on the same page. At lazy moments, F. Scott Fitzgerald could resort to strings of clichés, but in the next paragraph he could give a familiar word the sort of new slant that totally reinvents the language. That reinvention occurs, beginning with his use of the word *deferential*, in the description of the rose-colored grand hotel that opens *Tender Is the Night*:

> *Deferential palms cool its flushed façade, and before it stretches a short dazzling beach. . . . Now, many bungalows cluster near it, but when this story begins only the cupolas of a dozen old villas rotted like water lilies among the massed pines between Gausses Hôtel des Étrangers and Cannes, five miles away.*

Each adjective (*flushed, dazzling*) strikes us as apt. And the simile "rotted like water lilies" will come to seem increasingly applicable to much of what happens in a novel that is partly about the dissolution and decay of romance and beauty.

Students instructed to ransack *The Great Gatsby* for its narrator's unreliability, for a historical portrait of a bygone era, and for a discussion of social class and the power of lost love might miss the word-by-word gorgeousness of the first time Nick Carraway sees Daisy and her friend Jordan. Every word helps to render a particular moment in, or out of, time, and to capture the convergence of beauty, youth, confidence, money, and privilege. Fitzgerald not only describes but makes us experience what it looks and feels like to be *in* a beautiful room by the sea:

> *The windows were ajar and gleaming white against the fresh grass outside that seemed to grow a little way into the house. A breeze blew through the room, blew curtains in at one end and out the other like pale flags, twisting them up toward the frosted wedding-cake of the ceiling, and then rippled over the wine-colored rug, making a shadow on it as wind does on the sea.*
>
> *The only completely stationary object in the room was an enormous couch on which two young women were buoyed up as though upon an anchored balloon. They were both in white, and their dresses were rippling and fluttering as if they had just been blown back after a short flight around the house. I must have stood for a few moments listening to the whip and snap of the curtains and the groan of a picture on the wall. Then there was a boom as Tom Buchanan shut the rear windows and the caught wind died out about the room, and the curtains and the rugs and the two young women ballooned slowly to the floor.*

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You could almost get a sense of the passage by sorting the words according to what part of speech they represent, the participles and verbs (*gleaming, rippling, ballooned*), the adjectives and adjectival phrases (the white windows and skirts, the fresh grass, the pale flags of the curtains, the frosted wedding cake of a ceiling), the nouns (the *whip* and *snap* of the curtains, the *groan* of the picture, the *caught wind*, the *boom* of the shut window). But you can imagine the same words grouped in far less felicitous combinations. There are at least two places in which words are, as with the deferential palms, used in ways that seem surprising, even incorrect, but absolutely right. It's not exactly a *shadow* that the wind casts over the sea, or the breeze over the rug, but we know what the writer means; there's no better way to describe it. Nor is there a more vivid way to create the image than the seeming improbability of the two women slowly ballooning back to earth without ever having left their couch.

That daring deployment of the incorrect word also occurs in the first sentence of Joyce's "The Dead," in which we are told that Lily, the caretaker's daughter, is literally run off her feet. We know it isn't *literally*. The mistake is one that Lily herself might make, which puts us momentarily in her point of view and prepares us for the ways in which the story will play with viewpoint, with notions of truth and untruth, and with the ways that class background and education affect how we use the language. Such "wrong" words are neither mistakes nor the product of the lazy writer's assumption that one word is as good as another. Nor are they the consequence of a bullying attempt to will the square peg of a wrong word into a round hole of the sentence. Rather, they are the results of conscious, careful deliberations of writers who thought a thousand times before they purposely misused a word, or gave another word a new meaning.

Some writers simply cannot be understood without close reading, not only those like Faulkner, who requires that we parse those wonderfully convoluted sentences, or like Joyce, whom Picasso called "the incomprehensible that everyone can understand," or like Thomas Pynchon, who requires us to put up with long stretches of narrative in which we may have absolutely no idea what is going on, even on the plainest narrative level. I'm talking about more deceptively straightforward stylists who also happen to be masters of subtext, of that place between the lines where so much of the action occurs.

One such writer is Paul Bowles, whose stories you might easily misread if you read them for plot, of which they have plenty, or for psychological truth, which is mostly of the sort that you would rather not think about for too long, if at all. I always feel a little guilty asking students to read Bowles's "A Distant Episode," the literary equivalent of a kick in the head. I justify it to myself by saying that the story is about language as one way to predict when the kick in the head is coming, language as the essence of the self that registers the fact that one's head is getting kicked.

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