WHY WRITING MATTERS

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author's note

This short book has been long a'borning. It was engendered by my column in the *New York Times* "Writers on Writing" series called "From Echoes Emerge Original Voices" (June 21, 1999), which described a course I was then teaching called "Strategies in Prose." The fifth chapter here reprints a version of that syllabus. That "strategy" in turn produced "In Praise of Imitation," an article in *Harper's Magazine* as long ago as July 2002. It further served as a basis for the introductory material to a textbook titled *The Sincerest Form: Writing Fiction by Imitation* (McGraw-Hill, 2003). The opening passage of Chapter 2 repeats some of the argument of *The Sincerest Form;* it has been my hobbyhorse for years.

I first taught "Strategies in Prose" at Bennington College in the early 1980s, then variations on that theme at Columbia University and the University of Michigan in the decades since. By now I've preached this particular gospel to hundreds of undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom have gone on to successful careers as writers and some of whom have taught the course in

their respective institutions. In 2015—just short of half a century after my first foray into the classroom—I retired with the jaw-cracking title of Robert Frost Distinguished University Professor of English Language and Literature, and Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts at the University of Michigan. Enough's enough.

Yet the art of writing still seems to me to be grounded in an act of imitation: mimesis rules the form. It's time now to revisit the idea of reproduction and yoke it to the larger question of originality. Though I intend to concentrate on the creative mode in language, the issue feels germane as well to any discussion of music or the visual arts, not to mention our culture writ large. We value, as a culture, both the mass-produced artifact and the craftsman-like "one of a kind." The false opposition of *teacher* and *student* seems a case in point. If one ideal of democracy is full participation and "the more the merrier," there's a concomitant ideal of being singled out and standing up alone. How to reconcile that thesis and antithesis is my project here.

Excerpts from these chapters have been published in *AWP: The Writer's Chronicle* (February 2018) and my column, "Talking about Books," of *Michigan Today* at the University of Michigan. At the excellent urging of John Donatich and Sarah Miller of Yale University Press, I have expanded the topic to address the more general titular question of "why writing matters" at all. Its role is worth the pondering; its history, the recounting. To have had the occasion to do so has been, for me, a gift.

preface

Writing matters. Why? This is not a rhetorical question, and the fact we need to ask it may come as a surprise. But for reasons large and small it remains a question in contemporary culture, and one that should be answered in the pages of a book. That a book *has* pages, and that the pages contain words built out of letters, seems self-evident, a thing we take for granted—like electric light or running water or the need for heat in winter.

It was not always so. Writing is the junior sibling—the great-great-grandchild, even—of speech. Shouts and screams came first. Unnumbered eons passed before the sounds that men and women make became a sound transcribed. A murmur or a growl or pointed finger or chest-thump sufficed to beguile an intimate or to warn an enemy. Only long years later did the words *I love you,* or *Keep your distance, stranger,* take shape as articulate speech. And all of this was fleeting; before the invention of writing, spoken discourse could not last. For African griots or the Rig Veda or the epic poems of Homer, the mode of transmission was oral and

subject to forgetfulness or change. We have no way of knowing how much of the language is lost.

Writing matters. Why? Although symbolic expression has been with us as a species since the dawn of what we call "recorded" time, the practice of writing is much less ancient than that of pictorial art. More than thirty thousand years ago the clan in Altamira in the north of Spain learned to decorate their rock-roof with images of bison, but the letters *b-i-s-o-n* had not as yet been shaped. Indeed, our ability to picture a *boar* or *cow* or *boat* or *crow* because of an agreed-on arrangement of letters is a gift that keeps on giving; it's imagination linked to knowledge and a central mode of growth. It's one of the ways we preserve our shared culture, a signal to the future and a record of the past.

So somewhere in some distant place and time some someone made a mark on stone or wood or ice or clay or sand and somebody else understood it and the process of writing began. It's been with us ever since. We may "read" the tides or clouds or tracks of game for what they say of water or weather or the likelihood of food. A pattern of hooves or alignment of rocks may tell the experienced hunter which way to look for sustenance or shelter, but a sign that reads "McDonald's" or "Welcome to Kansas City" requires, of its witness, a different kind of skill. By now the gift of literacy is one we have come to rely on and, as a species, prize. The elders of the tribe still school their children carefully in *A,* then *B,* then *C* . . .

Writing and reading are, of course, two sides of the same coin. The latter depends on the former; the former makes no difference

where the latter ability does not exist. Those words describing its absence—*illiterate, analphabetic, abecedarian*—are terms of pity if not shame. Conjoined, however, the two skills herald learning, and it's no accident that burned or banned books assault the very notion of civilization itself. To hold an object in one's hand that forms a collection of symbols in recognized sequence, then to read those lines aloud or in attentive silence is—and has been long acknowledged as—a mark of education. It's one of the ways we distinguish ourselves from animals and plants. To paraphrase Descartes (or offer up a variation on his theme), "I write, therefore I am."

Like the carpenter or blacksmith, that member of a clan who could decipher writing had a particular function and was set apart. In the inner temple or the council house, the one who could read signs and portents was one who commanded respect. And ownership or stewardship of other people's written discourse was seen as doubly special, a mark of high-born status. To possess a text and be empowered to read it was, early on, a sign of privilege, of wealth and social standing. The "personal library" used to belong only to the chosen few: scholars or clerics or kings.

Now everyone who's anyone has—or is supposed to have—access to a book. What you hold here in your hand is neither a vanishing species nor a threatened rarity; though we may lament the loss of widespread bookishness, there are more volumes now in print and for sale than ever in our history before. And though the system of transcription may have altered—moving from hieroglyph to emoji, from an illuminated *Book of Hours* to a near-instantaneous tweet—the intention of it stays the same: language

composed to be looked at and by its witness absorbed. This isn't a function of whether we hold in our palm a book or digitally transmitted pixels; what counts are the words in prearranged sequence, the paragraphs and ideas . . .

Further, one of writing's crucial components is, in effect, that of outreach; it permits communication with someone far away or from another time. You don't have to know a person "in person" to benefit from their experience, or to take comfort from a page. A distant stranger or as-yet-unborn reader can profit from instruction, once it's written down. This is why, perhaps, the burning of the library in Alexandria (in 48 BCE) remains a scar in our collective consciousness and on the body politic; it heralded collapse. Five centuries thereafter, the so-called Dark Ages went dark in part because the few remaining books were hidden away, unavailable, and the "renaissance" or rebirth of European civilization came about in part because old texts were rediscovered and brought again to light.

Although oral traditions are central to the preservation of culture, it's also true that the oral tradition has been supplanted by print. Where once we passed on knowledge by reciting it, then memorizing what was said, we now have the additional resource of language in writing preserved. If—to take only a single example—our Constitution were a verbal agreement, and not set down on paper, it would have small present claim on our judiciary. Hammurabi's code (a codex in the Akkadian tongue inscribed in cuneiform for the sixth Babylonian king nearly four thousand years ago) established the kingdom-wide value of goods and penalties for bad behavior because it was marked on a 7.5-foot stone stele. The

Dead Sea Scrolls inform us of the mores of those who read them, just as they informed their readers of a system of belief. When Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, they were—or so the story goes—incised on a tablet; when Martin Luther objected to aspects of Catholic practice, he put those objections in writing and nailed them to the Wittenberg church doors.

The sacred scrolls and secret texts of almost every culture share the fact of being written, no matter with which symbols or in which alphabet. To nullify an oath or treaty is harder once the treaty or oath has been signed. When a word has been transcribed on paper or parchment or marble or slate, it lays claim to consequence. Written language has a gravitas only rarely accorded to speech.

These are sweeping assertions, brave claims. They need some spelling out. This book will be an effort to demonstrate, in writing, why writing does and should matter. I have spent my life engaged by it, as a writer of fiction and nonfiction. There are other forms of expression, of course (poetry, playwriting, history, biography, autobiography, etc.) and I have tried my hand at each, but my focus here will be on the genre of prose fiction. It's the creative mode with which I'm most familiar and for which my heartbeat beats.

This is not, in the strict sense, a scholarly text. A "Note on Sources" ends the book, but most of my citations are part of common parlance and readily available. Other authors have weighed

in elegantly and extensively on the history of language, the evolution of writing, the acquisition of reading, on vision and revision, the way words are coined or change. So though I look at the tradition, I do so only glancingly; I'm more concerned with where we find ourselves at the present moment than with where we've been.

Nor will this book be predictive; we cannot know for certain what the digital revolution entails. In 1455, the German blacksmith, goldsmith, printer, and publisher Johannes Gutenberg engendered (or at any rate facilitated) an enormous change in Western culture with his deployment of movable type and what became known as the Gutenberg Bible. Thereafter, copies could be multiple, and the "volume" of writing increased. But no matter how prescient, the printer could neither have guessed at nor imagined the desktop 3-D version of his printing press, a commonplace today. So we at the birth (or at most the infancy) of the computer age cannot predict what will come next; suffice it to say that the blog and tweet and viral posting and Snapchat and Kindle have altered the nature of language transmission as did Gutenberg before.

We live in the forest and can see only the trees.

Certain trees, however, reward close scrutiny. In the chapters that follow I plan to examine aspects of teaching and being a student, of several seminal texts in our culture, of imitation, originality, and the creative process writ both small and large. The "root" of writing is deep-buried and must be preserved. To continue with if not belabor the comparison, there are some trees now almost altogether extinct in America—the chestnut, the Dutch elm—that once were omnipresent. Yet the green canopy survives and, in some places, thrives.

Why Writing Matters, therefore, is intended both as explanation and an exhortation; the next time you pick up a pencil or pen—or turn on your cellphone or iPad—remember you join in a long-standing practice and a time-honored tradition. It will help to know a little more about the terms of that tradition—what the Palmer Method consists of, for example, and why it lost its currency, or what we mean when we "subscribe" to an idea or magazine or "underwrite" a loan. That "mark on stone or wood or ice or clay or sand" became a mark on paper, and the word "paper" derives from papyrus, a tall aquatic plant of the sedge family that grows in the Nile Valley. When pressed and rolled and written upon, it gave us this enduring thing: spoken language transcribed, a *lingua,* a tongue. And by another alchemy, that tongue when written down became the writer's voice.

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why writing matters

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I teachers

Two of my models are *Teacher,* by Sylvia Ashton Warner (1963) and a collection of talks by Eudora Welty called *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984). Both are splendid books and both of them committed to advance by indirection; they wind their way from personal experience to general assertion and the overarching issue: how does one study, how teach? Pedagogy is their subject: learning to read and to write. The first person enters in, as it must in any autobiographical account, but in neither instance does the writer insist on stage center. I hope, in the pages that follow, to follow where they led.

A first emblem of instruction takes place when I was fourteen. (There are other and previous ones, of course, but childhood memories or the acquisition of and devotion to language are not my present point.) In the Fieldston School, in Riverdale, New York, our ninth-grade teacher was a man by the name of Dean Morse. My image of him is clear but blurred: youngish, wearing glasses and a Harris Tweed jacket and brown polished shoes. Though to my adolescent eyes he seemed august and well-established, I imagine he was not yet thirty-five. Most of the faculty at Fieldston had been teaching there for years, and Mr. Morse was a relative stranger; I don't think he lasted all that long and don't know what became of him or if he remained in the "trade." I was his student in the sense that there were twenty of us in the room, jockeying for position and hoping turn by turn to earn or escape his attention.

All this happened more than sixty years ago. But I remember, vividly, a conversation we once had.

The Scarlet Pimpernel, by Baroness Orczy, was published in 1905. A best-seller of the period, set in the brutal aftermath of the French Revolution, it compelled my youthful admiration. So did the 1934 movie version starring Leslie Howard and Merle Oberon. A kind of precursor of Clark Kent and Superman, the Pimpernel was a seemingly vacuous English nobleman who in fact worked as the daring secret rescuer of blameless French folk in distress. His indolence was a disguise, his heroism real. His wife thought him superficial; there were romantic depths. As a boy, I dreamed of great adventure, and I'd pop up behind the couch in my parents' living room, or emerge from behind a half-closed door, to declaim:

They seek him here, they seek him there
Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
Is he in heaven or is he in hell?
That damned elusive Pimpernel.

I loved the book. At semester's end, a group of us—school-supervised—went on a camping trip to Lake Saranac in upstate New York. Paddling inexpertly in the constant rain, we yawed our way from cove to cove and set up camp in a series of lean-tos; Mr. Morse served as our no-doubt reluctant chaperone. That night, around the campfire—after we'd eaten the near-raw hamburgers and burned hotdogs and scorched buns and washed them down with lukewarm Coca-Cola—I told our group of the Pimpernel's brilliance and quoted my quatrain. "They seek him here, they seek him there . . ."

"It's a great novel," I said. Our teacher disagreed. I went on and on, or so it seems in memory, perorating on the excellence of Orczy's text, until finally he took off his glasses and, wiping them, said, "Read it again."

That summer I did, and he was right. *The Scarlet Pimpernel* embodies the very essence of escapist fiction; it's a bodice-ripper; it candy-coats reality; it's full of coincidence and unearned attitude and empurpled prose. There are, of course, certain books that appeal to the young and the mature reader equally—think of the work of Lewis Carroll, Charles Dickens, or Mark Twain. There's much entertainment value in "the Pimpernel"; it's a perennial crowd pleaser, with its swordplay and narrow escapes. (Witness the more recent movies and television serial and Broadway show of that title; an audience still seeks "him everywhere"

more than a century after the dandy's fictive birth.) That I dislike the novel now should not gainsay that once I found it fine.

But my teacher's soft impeachment has stayed with me through all the decades since; it was one of my first lessons in the art of reading and, by extension, writing. Whether or not he's still alive to register my thanks, Mr. Morse deserves them; the distance between the eleven-year-old who first applauded Orczy's work, and the fourteen-year-old who learned to dismiss it is the distance, in effect, between the unlettered and instructed reader. *Read it again!*

In twelfth grade—Fieldston called it the "sixth form"—I studied literature with a senior member of the faculty, Elbert Lenrow. His was an established reputation, and we knew we were lucky to be in the room where Mr. Lenrow taught his fabled class. The course was a survey of sorts, and an ambitious one; we read selections of Greek tragedy and comedy, the *Odyssey* and *Iliad,* the *Aeneid,* Chaucer, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe's *Faust.* It would take a goodly while in college before I encountered a text to which I had not been at least briefly introduced in high school, and Mr. Lenrow's aesthetic was a discriminating one.

He was, I learned later, a balletomane and opera buff, one of those bachelors of independent means who taught not for the paycheck but for the reward of it, and he managed to bring Michel de Montaigne and John Stuart Mill and Samuel Taylor Coleridge to life. We read Albert Camus and Ernest Hemingway also, but his heart was in the classics, and for the bulk of a wide-ranging year he lectured on "old" books. Mr. Lenrow was big-

stomached, sparse-haired, and like Mr. Morse wore glasses—often as not on the bridge of his nose or perched athwart his forehead while he peered around the room. We students sat at facing tables, seminar-style, waiting to respond to his passage-specific queries. He was exigent, impatient, and he could be brusque. In retrospect it's clear, however, that he gave us the gift of attention, suggesting in his seriousness that we could be serious too.

Our teacher sweated easily, and I can picture still the half-moons at the armpits of his shirts. They were expensive shirts. He asked us to write sonnets and Socratic dialogues; he made us read aloud from masterworks as well as the apprentice efforts we clumsily composed. Several faculty at Fieldston wrote and published poetry or short stories; his was an unswerving devotion to the work of others. Whether we were reading *Beowulf* or "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" or "Dover Beach," he brought the texts to life. I was impressed by each of my teachers of English, but Elbert Lenrow stood unchallenged as and at "the head of the class."

This was ratified, for me, in 1966. At the august age of twenty-three, I applied for a faculty position at Bennington College. The novelist Bernard Malamud was taking a leave of absence, and in my youthful arrogance I believed I could replace him. Astonishingly, the members of the Department of Language and Literature agreed I should be interviewed, and in a snowstorm I arrived in the small town of North Bennington, Vermont. It was my first such academic encounter; I did not know what to expect.

We met in the house of Stanley Edgar Hyman, the Department "Secretary"—a post that rotated annually, since the college did not

believe in department chairs, and no one wanted the job. Six or seven faculty trudged to his door, complaining about the weather and congratulating each other on having dug out from the storm. Bennington had a non-resident term, mid-winter, and only a rump caucus of the department attended; Malamud himself was not in town. It was clear as clear could be that the decision as to hiring lay principally in the hands of the poet Howard Nemerov.

Aristocratic yet seedy, gimlet-eyed yet withdrawn, this heir to a Fifth Avenue furrier's fortune and brother to Diane Arbus did not suffer fools gladly. Too, he thought most he encountered were fools. He had recently served as poet laureate consultant to the Library of Congress; in 1988 he would do so again. Nemerov was unimpressed by my credentials—an undergraduate degree from Harvard, a graduate degree from Columbia, a first novel soon to appear. He stared out the window, sighing; he poured himself a second glass of scotch. Others in the room asked questions; I bumbled and stumbled my way through the interview while the afternoon wore on. Then, almost as an afterthought, the poet asked where I went to high school.

I said, "Fieldston." He had too. He asked if I had ever studied with Elbert Lenrow; I said, "Yes." For the first time fixing his gaze on me, Nemerov asked what I thought of the course. By then I had despaired of gaining favorable attention or of being hired, and so I told the truth: "Best damn class I ever took."

"No further questions," said the soon-to-be-anointed winner of the Pulitzer Prize and Bollingen Prize for poetry. He donned his snow boots and muffler and gloves and walked out of the house. I had passed the test.

I'm aware that all this smacks of "the old boy's club" and preferential treatment and would no doubt not happen today. But there was a snowstorm and remedial whiskey and mine was a replacement appointment, not a full-fledged faculty search. Too, something in my answer did trigger Nemerov's approval, or at least his gambler's guess that I had been well trained. I had known enough to know I had had a great teacher; he could trust me for the rest.

"I'm going to begin by telling you I hear voices." So starts a lecture given in April 1991 at the George Edward Woodberry Poetry Room in Lamont Library, Harvard. It was offered by my old—then still vigorous—professor William Alfred, and I can quote it now because his voice has been preserved by an admiring cadre of students who produced a memorial CD. Stentorian if scratchily, the poet speaks. His "Keen for Bridget Kelly" includes the phrase, "I am disgusted by the inadequacy of tears, the mourner's armband," and ends with the elegiac, "It is amazing you should come to die. What in Christ's name is there to say but this?"

William Alfred (1922–1999) was an iconic figure to those fortunate enough to study with him. I did so as an undergraduate at Harvard in a large lecture course on the History of Drama, then a smaller set of courses on the Anglo-Saxon language and alliterative patterns from which our poetry is in important part derived. He became my informal tutor in "the writers' trade," an inspirational figure for me and many other students in the 1960s, as well as the decades beyond. Seamlessly—or so it seemed—he merged a

commitment to scholarship with a readiness to act as father-confessor to those who sought him out. His infectious love of language, his learning worn lightly and self-deprecating humor, were, it seemed to us, exemplary: we wanted to know what he knew.

A poet and playwright—most notably for *Hogan's Goat* (which, not incidentally, starred a young Faye Dunaway)—William Alfred stood with one foot in the academy and one in the professional world. Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop counted themselves his friends. So did the street people of Cambridge, whom he would daily bless. A fervent Catholic, he brought the Greek playwrights and Henrik Ibsen to life, yet was also au courant with the latest doings on Broadway. To be invited to his house or join him for a campus walk was to feel empowered; to hear him talk of childhood in Brooklyn or service in the army was to enlarge one's horizon. His unfailingly generous spirit, his sweet concern for the plaints and ambitions of students, his selfless dedication to the enterprise of teaching, were and are a model for unnumbered acolytes. I count myself among them. Like Dean Morse and Elbert Lenrow, he gave us the gift of attention; in William Alfred's company there was never a trace of impatience, and always he contrived to make those who joined him at table feel welcome. I have not heard his living voice for decades yet it continues to sound in my ears: a clarion call.

All this has been occasioned by an email I today received from a student (who shall remain nameless, and in truth I didn't remember her name) to whom I once was generous in 1972. Her claim—no doubt hyperbolic—is that my encouragement sustained her through almost fifty years in the pre-publication

wilderness. Her soon-to-be-published first book, she wrote, owes much to my help way back when. This sort of recognition delights an old professor, but I refer to it because it seems to me emblematic of the teacher-student relation when successful; we carry—every one of us—some memory of something said in class or private that made a *difference* once. William Alfred, were he still alive, would feel just as surprised if not embarrassed by the paean of praise in these first three paragraphs as is his student by his own student's letter of thanks. To learn or read long after the fact that something you once said or wrote retains enduring currency is to feel rewarded. There's a "strange comfort afforded by the profession"—the title of a short story by Malcolm Lowry—and when we acknowledge indebtedness we join a long line of adepts who once received instruction at a master's feet. Then, in that master's honor, we try to do the same.

When talking of contemporary poets, William Alfred spoke of "that terrible failure of confidence which comes when you see something new." In his "Keen for Bridget Kelly" he memorializes a figure long gone, but she has not "come to die" because the language lives.

In the early 1960s, Harvard College tolerated the practice of creative writing but did not construe it a legitimate course of study. I majored in another discipline and only toward the end of my time there took a writing course. My teacher was Mr.—not *Professor*—Theodore Morrison, a wiry man with a shock of white hair and map of New England inscribed on his face. He carried a

green bookbag and rode a bicycle to class in all sorts of weather; he told me he didn't mind winter but disliked mud season, the spring. When not residing in Cambridge, he lived in Ripton, Vermont, a village in the hills above Middlebury where the Breadloaf Writers' Conference takes place (and for which he served as director from 1932 to 1955).

He was, it turned out, a close associate of Robert Frost's, whose private secretary was Kathleen Morrison, "Ted's" wife. He published several novels and books of poetry and a critical study of Chaucer; his friends included such literary luminaries as Bernard de Voto and Wallace Stegner, but he was a modest man and not given to name-dropping. In class, he was (to use a later formulation) "laid back" and largely non-directive, yet he scrutinized our prose and poetry effusions with close care.

Back then I was beginning what would become my first book. I describe this at brief length in the ensuing pages (in the passage on John Updike) but in the fall of senior year I was working on *The Martlet's Tale* and trying on prose styles for size. The novel takes place in Greece, on the island of Rhodes. It was lyrical in the extreme. I wrote a rhapsodic passage in which I celebrated village life—the fishermen returned to shore after a long day of work on the water, and dragging their hand-built caïques up the beach to safety on the shingle and emptying their holds of smelt and sea urchins and fish for purchase and spreading out their nets to dry and building a fire with which to roast a portion of the catch and drinking ouzo and retsina wine and tuning and plucking their bouzoukis while they serenaded the countless stars above, the moon rising, the smoke rising, the song rising, their women beside

them on blankets joining in the chorus and finally, as midnight drew nigh, taking their loved ones back to the huts beneath low-hanging olive trees where they, limbs entwined, embracing, fell together into their small little beds . . .

Mr. Morrison was kind. He praised the scene, the detailing, the romantic flair of it. I preened. And then he said, "I only have one question. Nick, do the beds need to be both small *and* little?"

At which point my whole verbal house of cards collapsed. I had been, I recognized, as enthralled by my descriptive prose as once, no doubt, was the Baroness Orczy, and with the same rose-colored, not to say purple, results. All these decades later, when I write "small" and "little" in an adjacent phrase, I cringe as when I learned from Theodore Morrison that less is decidedly more.

In his old age, he withdrew to Amherst, Massachusetts. He would die at eighty-seven, in 1988. Near the beginning of that decade, *Harvard Magazine* published a profile of Morrison in retirement, where—when asked if he had any regrets—he suggested he might have better spent his time producing his own creative work than enabling that of others. I was moved; I wrote him, declaring I was certain I was not alone in having profited from his instructor's generosity. I had in fact dedicated an early novel "To Theodore Morrison" and continued, I wrote, to learn from his example.

Almost by return mail, he answered, saying that he'd followed my career, was pleased by it: the handwriting small but legible, firm and unchanged, filling the page. In gratitude I wrote him back and enclosed a copy of my most recent book, a collection of short stories called *About My Table.* Again, with dizzying promptness, he responded: He admired story B, he liked story A well

enough, if he understood what I was getting at in story C, it might have been useful to deploy a third-person narrative; he did not care for story D. He applauded the second paragraph of page 43, he disagreed with my choice of adjectives on page 179. And so on and so forth.

I imagine he must have been lonely and grateful for something to do. Nor can I pretend I agreed with all his critiques. But the care he'd lavished on his letter was nothing short of inspirational. Once a teacher always a teacher: it's a hard habit to break.

What follows are three memories of three major authors who influenced me greatly, though each in different ways. I'm aware that my models all are male—less surprising, perhaps, in the time of which I write than would be the case in the academy today. And there are many women who became close colleagues, from whose instruction I have profited in the world of words. But it's the flat fact of my education that the seven figures who inhabit this chapter on teaching each and all are men.

The first—John Updike—taught me what a master-disciple relation entails; the second—John Gardner—taught me about colleagueship; the third—James Baldwin—exemplified what open-handed generosity can mean. If I had to reduce their teachings to a single statement, I learned from the first about an intensity of attention to language, from the second about unswerving devotion to craft. From the third I learned that prose, no matter how carefully composed or revised, must stand in the service of faith: a faith that writing, in times of trouble, might count.

Each of these appreciations has been previously published. The most recent incarnation of my memory of Updike appeared in *John Updike Remembered: Friends, Family and Colleagues Reflect on the Writer and the Man,* edited by Jack A. De Bellis (2017); the first memory of Gardner comes from my Editor's Introduction to his posthumously published *Stillness and Shadows, Two Novels by John Gardner* (1986); and my passage on James Baldwin is in *Running in Place: Scenes from the South of France* (1989). There is of course—in each of the portraits—much more and else to say. But, beyond slight emendation, I see no reason to alter the wording of these tributes and reprint them here.

I have been the full-fledged student of a writer only once. John Updike was, I think, one of the most literate and able critics of our time. His breadth of reading, acuity of insight, and grace of expression must give most scholars pause; he would no doubt have been made welcome at any institution in any of the fifty states. But he remained at a stiff arm's remove from academe, earning his living by the pen alone. In the summer of 1962, however, his resolution wavered and he agreed to teach—at Harvard Summer School. I wanted to remain in Cambridge and therefore applied for the course. It was an offhand decision; I barely had heard of his name. When he accepted me into his fiction workshop, it would have been ungrateful to drop out.

In retrospect, I see more clearly how lucky and right was that choice. The first word I wrote for Updike was the first of my first novel. Like any self-respecting undergraduate, I intended to be

either a poet, folk singer, or movie star. I considered "prose" and "prosaic" to be cognate terms. (They are, admittedly, but I know something more by now about the other three professions and would not trade.) The young man's fancy is poetic, and his models are Rimbaud or Keats. Mine were, at any rate; my first compositions were suicide notes. But I was signed up for a writing workshop with no idea of what to write and not much time to decide. The day of that decision is vivid to me still.

A friend and I were strolling around a lake in Wellesley; we'd been reading for final exams. I heard him out as to his future; then he had to listen to me. I had tried my hand already at the shorter stuff, I said; I was going to write a novel. That was what a summer should consist of—something ambitious, no piddling little enterprise like Chekhov's but something on the scale of, let's say, *Moby-Dick.*

Yet before I wrote my masterpiece I had to plan it out. What do first novels consist of, I asked—then answered, nodding sagely at a red-haired girl in a bikini emerging from the lake. First novels by men are either the myth of Narcissus or the parable of the Prodigal Son—but generally inadvertent. Their authors do not understand they fit an ancient mold. I already knew enough about Narcissus, I confessed, and therefore would elect the latter; I'd rewrite the parable. The difference was that my revision would be conscious, whereas most young novelists fail to see themselves in sufficiently explicit mythic terms.

That was not my problem, but there were problems to solve. I knew nothing about the landscape of the Bible, for instance, and should find a substitute. My friend lit a cigarette; we considered.

It happened that I'd been to Greece the previous summer and traveled wide-eyed for weeks. I would replace one location with the other. The parable has three component parts: the son leaves home, spends time away, and returns. My novel too would have three components, with Rhodes and Athens as its locales. My Greek protagonist would go from the island to city and, as in the parable, "eat up his substance with whores."

The girl in the bikini trailed drops of water where she walked; she shook her long hair free. I instructed my friend that *hetarae* in Athens had "Follow Me" incised backward on their sandals, so that they could print directions in the dust. She rounded a bend in the path. The question of contemporaneity engaged me for three minutes. I knew enough about modern-day Greece to fake it, possibly, but knew I'd never know enough about the ways of antique Attica; the sign on the prostitute's sandal exhausted my store of lore. It would take less research to update the parable. So there, within ten minutes, I had it: a contemporary version of the tale of the Prodigal Son that followed the text faithfully and yet took place in Greece. The rest was an issue of filling in blanks; I started to, next week.

I have told this tongue-in-cheek, but it is nonetheless true. The epigraph of *The Martlet's Tale* is the first line of the parable; the great original is buried in my version, phrase by phrase. I revised the novel many times and by the time I'd finished was no longer a beginner. Looking back I'm astonished, however; it all fell so neatly in place. The editor at J. B. Lippincott ushered me into his office and agreed to bring out the book. "You're a very fortunate young man," he said, but I thought his politeness routine. I took success for granted when it came. My photograph in magazines

seemed merely an occasion for judging the likeness; a long and flattering review in the *New York Times* on publication day was no more than an author expected; I ate expensive lunches with the cheerful certainty that someone else would pay.

In some degree, moreover, this very blindness worked to my advantage. I had been accustomed to a schoolboy's notion of success. I would have dealt with failure far less equably. Had Updike not encouraged me, I cannot say for certain if I would have persevered; there were many wind-scraps in the wind, and I followed the favoring breeze. Harvard does prepare you for the world in this one crucial way: if you succeed within its walls, you assume that you will when outside. When I handed in *The Martlet's Tale*'s first chapter, and my professor's reaction was praise, I concluded that the rest must follow as the night does day. I suppose I stood out in his class. I certainly tried to; his wary approval meant much. I wrote a second chapter and was hooked.

The hook went deep. Through later years and decades, he remained my model. His was the opinion I most valued, the endorsement I most sought. We saw each other frequently to start with, less frequently as time went on and I moved away from Vermont. The last encounter was by happy accident, at an exhibition in Manhattan we both were walking through. I'd lunched with John not long before, at a pre-arranged meeting in Boston, but this felt somehow more important because unscheduled: the chance to look at art with him and see, from a shared vantage, what he saw.

As always he instructed me: the context he established, the minutiae he observed, the things he was aware of that I would have failed to register. Each time we paused to focus (on photographs

of post-Katrina New Orleans, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), he pointed out something I might not have noticed, or surely not so rapidly and surely not so well. *Just Looking* and *Still Looking,* his collections of art criticism, attest to his alertness and wide-ranging eye.

Once I drove him on a road near Bennington I'd driven over often—past a house I passed on an almost daily basis and that to my certain knowledge he had never seen before. John made a remark about the "shuddering roof line" of the ancient structure, and then the way the shutters were hung, and I realized to my respectful shame that he in one assessing glance had captured what in hundreds of trips I myself had failed to see. Henry James's injunction—"Try to be one of those on whom nothing is lost"—fit Updike perfectly; nothing escaped his attention.

So my relation to him, always, was that of admiring acolyte—and though in later years I did muster reservations and oppositional opinions, he was my master, first and last. He was, I think, not sorry to claim me as his student, and I was always proud to claim that as my role. There are letters exchanged, books signed and sent, postcards and photographs shared. His archive at Harvard's Houghton Library is vast, and I play only a modest part in it, but one of his last letters to me is a text I cherish and reprinted in my book on elder artists: *Lastingness: The Art of Old Age* (2011). In it Updike resoundingly writes: "Aesthetic flourishes fade and wrinkle, though they may get attention when new. A blunt sincerity outlasts finely honed irony, I would think."

His work was full of "aesthetic flourishes" and "finely honed irony"; in the end there was "a blunt sincerity" as well. R.I.P.

fuse. This is doubly a danger for the writer, since privacy is the sine qua non of his work and he has had no training in the actor's life.

By midnight I had dropped my guard; by two o'clock he had too. Elena, my wife—eight months pregnant—went to sleep. Since I had to teach next morning, I tried to call a halt; I had to prepare for my class.

Nonsense, said John, we'd have another bottle and he'd help me through the morning session—what was it on, by the way? "Virginia Woolf," I said, and construed his nodding to mean knowledge of her work. So we talked till four or five and met again at ten o'clock; I weaved my way to class.

In the event I did most of the teaching. Perhaps I knew more about Virginia Woolf; certainly I felt more responsible to the students than did their visitor. I lectured with a panicky inventiveness, stopping only for questions or breath. The session went well; I knew that. But Gardner assured me, with what I later came to recognize as characteristic hyperbole, that it was the best talk he'd ever attended—at least, on any author after Malory. He knew something more than I did, maybe, about Apollonius of Rhodes, but my talk took the modern-day cake. I was gratified, of course, and all the more so when his wife said he repeated the praise to her later; we had become "fast friends." The next night, after his reading, I asked if he wanted a job.

I was in the position to hire him but did not believe he'd accept. It was more an offhand courtesy, a variety of "If you'd ever care to come back through . . ." To my surprise he said yes. He was tired of his present appointment, possibly; his family hoped to move east. At the end of *Stillness*—a posthumously published autobiographical

novel—he records the accidental-seeming sequence that brought him to Vermont. We were in his motel room; he was changing shirts. This completes my introductory image: a white-fleshed, big-bellied man with his pants' legs rolled up, his pipe smoking on the coverlet, and papers all over the bed. Students clustered at the motel entrance, waiting to whisk him away. The last thing that he handed me was a drawing of himself as gnome, peeping out from bushes with the block-letter legend, "Should Nicholas require John Gardner, he can be reached at . . ." his number and address in Illinois. I did require him, and he could be reached.

For three years thereafter, we saw each other continually. His presence was a gift. He ballyhooed my work in public and berated it in private. Day in, week out, we wrangled over prose. There was nothing polite or distanced about his sense of colleagueship; if he hated a line he said so, and if he hated a character he said so all the more loudly. At this remove it's hard to remember what we discussed at such length: profluence, *energeia,* walnut trees. I spent three days hunting through graveyards and telephone books in order to prove that Sherbrooke with an *e*—the surname of a character in the novel I was writing—would be more likely than Sherbrook without. He came up with a whiskey bottle spelled Sherbrook; I pointed to a Sherbrooke township southeast of Montreal. We co-taught classes and founded a summer writing workshop together. Out of many memories I will here cite two.

October Light was accorded the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1976. The presentation ceremony took place in New York, and John's publishers made it an occasion. They hosted a supper party afterward, and a suite was reserved in Gardner's

name at the Algonquin Hotel. He asked Elena and me to be his companions that night. He wore the dungarees we'd seen him wear all month; the two of us dressed to the nines. He was energetic, affable—but most of all, and in a way that's impossible to overstate, he was serious. Where other writers would have rested on their laurels, he was busy lobbying for his present project—an opera. He was no good at small talk, too abrupt; he was busy all night long. This helps explain his torrential outpouring those years; he did not stop. His first question to me, always, was "What are you working on?" *October Light* was finished, therefore irrelevant.

The occasion was a success. There were important and beautiful people, good speeches and fine wines. At night's end we repaired to the Algonquin, where they nearly refused him a bed. He had a typewriter and briefcase as luggage, no credit cards or cash. We somehow convinced the desk clerk that Alfred Knopf himself would foot the bill, and were escorted to the suite. There were flowers and fruit, bottles waiting on ice; we ordered brandy as well. As the bellhop left, John sat. The couch was vast. He sank in its plush lushness, and mice scrambled from his feet.

They were gone quickly; they scurried to some other section of the suite. But in that first instant I thought they emerged from his boots. We laughed. We placated Elena and informed the bellhop on his return that he should make certain hereafter to clear away the cheese. Yet the image remains and retains its first power to shock: I saw his power in the process of collapse. The telephone rang.

At home he would answer, "Hello, Gardners." That was, he explained, a way of being noncommittal; it was a large family, and you never knew which one the caller intended. It was also a

way of keeping celebrity seekers at bay; you didn't have to say, "John Gardner" and could therefore always say he wasn't in.

It rang again.

He answered, "Hello, Gardner." He seemed forlorn; the brandy and Book Critics Circle Award had no power to invigorate. He was white and tired and, for all our efforts at support, alone.

Within the year, he was operated on for cancer. His first marriage had ended; his second—to a Bennington graduate, the poet L. M. Rosenberg—was in the offing, and he had moved from Vermont. They took him to Johns Hopkins Medical Center for emergency surgery; on Christmas I flew down. At dawn on Christmas Day the airports are deserted, so I had an empty, easy flight and arrived in Baltimore by nine.

He had not expected me and was watching television. His usual pallor was more pronounced still and made the sheet seem colorful. When he saw me, he blushed. It was, I teased him, the first and only time he'd been caught in the act of watching TV; James Page, the protagonist of John's *October Light,* had shot out the television screen in his house. So it would not have been pleasure but embarrassment that caused him to flush—but it was all right, I assured him, his secret addiction was safe. I blathered on like that until we felt at ease with silence; against hospital rules he lit up his pipe; all was well. I presented Christmas tokens; he complained about the trouble he was having with a paragraph; he had worked at it for three days now, but it wasn't right. The medicine tray held his IBM Selectric typewriter, and the window ledge was heaped with twenty-weight bond. (The next time I visited him at Hopkins he was sitting up in bed and busily at work—irritable,

almost, at the interruption. The third time Elena came too, and we could not find him; he was in the reaches of the hospital basement, having commandeered a Xerox machine.) But that first instant when I watched him through the open door remains the image here. I knew—to see him reaching for the TV monitor and then for his pipe, turning even this cell into a work space, disorderly—he would survive.

His work will. Novelist, poet, critic, playwright, librettist, scholar, translator, fabulist: at forty-nine years old, he had the exuberance and protean energy of men not half his age. He was involved in the theater, in music, woodworking, publishing, teaching, painting: any number of pursuits and none of them casual or slapdash. His paintings were intensely seen; his boxes and furniture served. I remember dropping by his house in Bennington to find so many bookshelves fabricated in one day that I thought the pipe smoke he stood wreathed in had caused my eyes to blur. He did seem, somehow, multiple. The first musical selection of the memorial service on East Main Street in Batavia—the town in upstate New York where he was born and buried—was a cassette of John and his son Joel, performing on their French horns. They played "Amazing Grace."

More than half my life ago, I was a near neighbor of James Baldwin. We'd met in the winter of 1970, briefly, in Istanbul. I had been working on the screenplay for the film of my first novel, and the director knew Baldwin, and Baldwin was in town. We had a drink together and went to *Fortune and Men's Eyes,* a play he

ing, his alert intelligence. In the literal sense, I was no longer a student, but Baldwin remained a teacher at least as much as—his own early training—a preacher. "Understand me," he would say. "It's important you understand." And it *was* important, and in that mesmeric presence you thought you understood . . .

My pleasure in our meetings is easily explained. Here was the spokesman of his generation and color speaking directly to me. That he took my opinions seriously, that he read and respected my work, or appeared to, that he wanted us with him as often as possible—all this was flattering. When we parted late at night, Jimmy would say, "See you two tomorrow." If we came for lunch instead, he urged us to stay on for dinner; when a friend passed through Saint-Paul, he would insist we meet.

Why he wanted to spend time with us is, I think, less clear. Each friendship partakes of the reciprocal trade agreement, and I can only speculate as to Baldwin's motives in the trade. He was the most sociable of solitaries; though constantly attended and attended to, he held himself apart. He wanted to hear "news from home." Elena had worked several years in a rehabilitation agency for drug addicts in New York, whose clientele was largely black; she moved easily through his old streets. Though she was without exception the single woman in his house—and in a party of a dozen men—she was given pride of place. She sat at his right hand. They liked each other, I believe, with unfettered immediate liking; she treated him with just the right mixture of impatience and respect. They embraced each other, meaning it; they huddled in corners together. There was nothing exclusionary about his attitude to women; though surrounded by adoring boys he was also a "family man."

I mattered to him, I suppose, as a practitioner of a shared trade. He told me he was starved for the chance to talk books, for a discussion, say, of Henry James with someone who had read him. We talked the way most writers do, in a kind of shorthand and sign language. We asked each other, always, how the work had gone that day, how this paragraph was progressing, or that character and scene . . .

Jimmy's acolytes believed the process sacramental, as if behind his study door strange rituals took place. He would shut himself away at midnight and somehow produce an object to which accrued money and fame. They had little sense, I think, of how much it was costing him to keep them all in style, of the anxious private wrangling in the watches of the night. His acclaim had diminished of late, and he knew I knew it. The alchemy of which his friends were confident was less mysterious to me and therefore more compelling; he worked at continual risk. And I was moved by his intensity, his struggle with a form that had come to seem elusive. *Beale Street* is not as finely honed as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or *Giovanni's Room.* That Baldwin had been consequential to a multitude of readers made all of this more poignant; he had made himself the benchmark to be passed.

Much of what I knew of the plight of the black American I had learned from reading him. And what sometimes seemed like paranoia could be argued as flat fact. The deaths of Malcolm X, of Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, George Jackson, the named and nameless legion in what he called "the royal fellowship of death"; his own impending fiftieth birthday; the sickness of a beloved friend and mentor, the painter Beauford Delaney—all

weighed heavily that winter. "This face," he'd say, and frame it with his slender glinting fingers. "Look at this crazy face."

In the early 1970s Richard Nixon reigned unchallenged. The Watergate scandal was building but the hearings had not yet begun. Each day brought more darkness to light. One litmus test for national allegiance, perhaps, has to do with political scandal; the French took corruption for granted, but we were transfixed. We rushed out for the paper and listened to the radio daily, but a "smoking gun" or upheaval in the political affairs of France could trigger no equivalent concern.

We waited like literal exiles for the summons to return. We discussed America with the fervor of the unrequited lover, curdling into scorn. We went for walks; we dawdled over drinks; we visited each other ("Hey, baby, what's up?" "Hey, darlin,' where've you *been?")* often and often those months.

Elena and I had been at his house in Saint-Paul-de-Vence two or three times in a row; it was our turn, therefore, to invite the Baldwin clan. We did so, one Thursday, for lunch. They said they would come, happily; they were seven, maybe nine. The two members of his party I remember as men passing through were a dancer called Bertrand and a publisher named Willi. The former was lean, lithe, beautiful, and black; he danced at the Folies-Bergère. The latter was mountainous, white. We had been warned about his appetite by Baldwin's cook days before: Willi was a voracious eater who had sent her to the market three times that afternoon.

Elena planned a *navarin;* we made an extra pot. A *navarin,* though simple, takes time to prepare; we started the previous day. We peeled turnips and carrots and leeks. We cubed the lamb and

browned it, then fashioned the *bouquet garni*. Our landlady knocked. She was hoping we might join her tomorrow for lunch; there were people she thought we should meet. Lilo Rosenthal was eighty years old; she owned the property of which we occupied the gatehouse, and she was being generous to her youthful tenants. But we made our excuses, inviting her in; as she could see we too were preparing a meal. We would therefore be unable to join her, for we owed a friend a thank-you *navarin.* I remember not naming his name. Part of this was inverse snobbery, a distaste for glitter by association, and part the suspicion that, had Lilo known Baldwin was coming, we should have had to invite her. They would have been water and oil.

At any rate, she told us, she hoped we would take in our wash. It hung on the clothesline outside. She intended to walk by the gatehouse and let her friends take photographs; they were passionate photographers. Her friends were distinguished, she said. They were the last of the Hapsburgs and the last of the Hohenzollerns, respectively. Or perhaps they were the last of the Schleswigs and Holsteins, or collateral branches instead. In any case they were old and distinguished and would not appreciate the laundry on our line. She hoped we would ready the place.

We promised. We made the second *navarin,* brought an extra dozen bottles from the *cave,* bought three additional *boules* from the baker, and waited for Jimmy to come. He himself did not drive. He had, however, purchased a brand-new Mercedes, dark brown and substantial, just short of stretch-limousine size. His driver would be working that day, he had assured me, and he was bringing Bertrand, Daro, Philippe, Billy, Willi, and Bernard.

At the appointed hour we were ready; a car came. The day was overcast. What pulled into the parking space between our gatehouse and the villa was not Jimmy's Mercedes but an ancient gray Renault. It was followed, funereally, by a Deux Chevaux. Lilo Rosenthal appeared. Her guests emerged. They were slow and small and bent. The process of arrival took some time. The doors opened, faltered, closed. The last of the Hapsburgs and the last of the Hohenzollerns wore dark suits and carried cameras and advanced with umbrellas and canes. They shuffled off together to their hostess's house.

As soon as they were out of sight we heard another car. The deep-throated growl of gears, the high hum of power in harness, the trumpeting bravura of the horn—and Baldwin's Mercedes roared up. It spat the raked gravel; it rocked on its brakes; it fairly pirouetted in the sudden sun. Four doors flung wide in unison; our company had come!

They were dressed for the occasion, grandly. They wore boaters and foulards. Their boots gleamed. Bertrand especially was splendid; he emerged twirling his scarf and waist-sash of pink silk. He did a few dance steps and flung his hat high and extended his hands for applause. We applauded. Jimmy embraced us; we, him. The chauffeur was not happy with the switchbacks of the entry drive. "They're badly banked," he said. He had brought his lunch along and elected to stay with the car. He stood, arms folded, glowering down through the olive groves; he was Danish, thick and stolid and impervious to charm. "What a charming place," the publisher proclaimed. We piloted them in.

This was not easy; they swarmed. They raced to the crest of the meadow and walked tiptoe along the rim of the irrigating cistern

The habit begins in the cradle; we copy what we watch. That delighted codger lifting arms and clapping hands while a grandchild does the same is teaching by repeated gesture: *How big is baby? So-o-o big!* We learn by the example of others to walk and dress and brush our teeth and play tennis or the violin; it's how we learn to spell and drive and hunt and fish and swim. It's the way we first acquire language and, later, languages. *How does the cow go? Moo-Moo!* In every act of reading there's an agreement, however unspoken, that we follow where the author leads; the very act of printing books consists of repetition. And if what we study is writing, it's surely how we learn to write; all writers read all the time.

Often this process of replication is unconscious or only partly conscious. We hear a phrase and repeat it; we memorize the lines of a joke or ceremony or play. Those authors we admire have a habit of seeing, of *saying* the world, and when we lift our heads from the lines of a page we're likely to see as they saw.

In *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary,* "imitation" is defined as follows:

> 1. An imitating; a copying. 2. That which is made or produced as a copy; an artificial likeness. 3. Properly, a literary work designed to reproduce the style or manner of another author. 4. *Biol.* Mimicry. 5. *Music.* The repetition in a voice part of the melodic theme; phrase or motive previously found in another part. Imitation is *strict* when the original theme or phrase and its repeated form are identical in intervals and note values, *free* when the repetition has some modification.

As the fourth of these brief definitions suggests, the act of mimicry is well established in nature. The coat of mountain goats

and skin tint of chameleons blend in with the rock face or leaf. A mockingbird borrows its song. The human race reproduces itself, as do snow leopards and snow peas; the Human Genome Project undertakes to map that process of transmission: how and why. But this chapter deals not so much with imitation in the biological sense as in its dictionary meaning of "a copy; an artificial likeness." Though the salmon and the polar bear may inherit via instinct their patterns of behavior, those who "reproduce the style or manner of another author" must study what they do.

In music and the visual arts, "strict" or "free" repetition is common; both ear and eye acknowledge variations on a theme. We salute the work of others in a melodic arrangement or a composition structured as a predecessor painted it; this process of "quotation" is familiar. Variation inverts, reverses, modulates, or changes rhythm while remaining wedded to a musical motif; it's the very essence of improvisation in jazz. In museums all over the country there's someone bent over an easel, doing their best to reproduce what's framed and on the wall. The techniques of mimicry—and its silent partner, mime—prove crucial to the actor's craft, advancing center stage.

In most forms of performance, indeed, we take such skills for granted, and personal expressiveness may even be a mistake. The members of a dance troupe must follow their choreographer's lead, moving in trained unison, and woe betide that member of the string section of an orchestra who chooses an exotic bowing. To be singled out while joining in a chorus is to risk correction; when you march you should do so in step . . .

I'm not suggesting here that protective coloration need be drab, or that not to be noticed is best. But for many centuries and

in many different cultural contexts the standard of imitation and close reproduction held sway. It was how to learn a trade. An apprentice in a studio would have mixed paint for years or cleaned the varnish rags and swept wood shavings from the floor for what must have felt like forever; only after years and years might the young artisan depart from the studio model and start to work alone. The French instrument maker J. B. Vuillaume took his pattern for violins and violoncellos unabashedly from his much-admired predecessor Antonio Stradivari. This is not forgery so much as emulation, a willing admission that others have gone this way before . . .

So why should we exempt the art of writing from, as *Webster's* describes it, "An imitating, a copying"? We've grown so committed as a culture to the ideal of originality that the author who admits to working in the mode and manner of another author will likely stand accused of being second-rate. But to imitate is not to be derivative; it's simply to admit that we derive from what was accomplished by others.

Janus is the two-faced god who gave his name to January; poised at the turning of the year, he looks both forward and back. The artist must deploy just such a doubling vision—the microscope and telescope conjoined.

"Hello."

"Hell*o*."

"Good morning."

"Good morning to *you.*"
"How do you want to spend this day?"
"Oh, getting and spending."
"I've heard that before."
"Where? When?"
"Let me try to remember."
"Try to remember . . ."
"The kind of September."
"I've heard *that* before."
"This can't go on."
"It can."

"The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." In adolescence I was taught this is the most efficient sentence to contain our entire alphabet. The nine words use thirty-five letters with, admittedly, some repetitions: two "h's," "r's," "t's," and "u's"; three "e's"; four "o's." *Hey presto,* we have included all twenty-six letters of the English alphabet, a pangram from "a" to "z."

But it still seems repetitive; why not reduce the number by two? The word "the" recurs in its entirety. "*A* quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog" would incorporate only thirty-three letters and seven repeats. Or alter placement and add a comma: "Quick, a brown fox jumps over the lazy dog." Or shift the terms of engagement: "A quick brown dog jumps over the lazy fox." Or: "Lazy, a quick brown fox jumps over the dog." There are, in effect, several variations on the theme, but those who still take typing tests or align print fonts in rows have used this first

formulation since time out of mind. On February 10, 1885, the *Boston Journal* cited it as "A favorite copy set by writing teachers for their pupils." Thereafter, dozens of papers and journals displayed the same thirty-five letters: "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog."

I learned this in "Shop," or more precisely, in my high-school printing class. All these decades later, I can conjure up the ink we used, the wooden racks and metal fonts and turpentine-soaked rags. Painstakingly, while other students learned to cook or handle a jigsaw or potter's wheel, a group of us would set headlines for the *Fieldston News* by hand. I still can see the printing press on those late autumn afternoons, the flickering light bulbs, the stacks of paper waiting to be trimmed. I hear the soft clicking of lead set in place, the loud clank and whir of the plates. I touch and taste the smell of it: the stained blue smocks, the clatter of pulleys and pedals, the arm of the girl at my left . . .

Things change. The computer on which I compose this has a capacity that Gutenberg could not have imagined when, in the mid-1400s, he commenced to use moveable type. Today, "Project Gutenberg" allows the reader access to almost all books in the public domain, and soon enough we'll carry entire civilizations—the contents of the British Museum and the Library of Congress—in a single hand. A smart phone or Kindle provides "palm-reading" in a manner no fortune teller foretold; the printing press and linotype have gone the way of parchment and quill pens. Where they exist, they do so as specialty objects, and those who preserve and still use them are harkening back to a long-distant past.

to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Or Zadie Smith's *On Beauty,* which finds its inspiration in E. M. Forster's *Howards End.* Or Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot,* derived from the action of Jane Austen's novels. To take just one more example, Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey and Maturin books constitute an uninterrupted foray into the imaginative discourse of a world at war two hundred years ago; large swatches of the story borrow from naval accounts.

In film, as well, the use of "backstory" is common. *Clueless* tells a contemporary version of Jane Austen's *Emma* that resonates once it is viewed as referencing that work. *Shakespeare in Love* is highly allusive, a good-humored salute to the language of Elizabethan England; its jokes require knowledge of the great plays and playwright it spoofs. *West Side Story* takes its scenario from *Romeo and Juliet,* several recent movies build on *West Side Story,* and so on down the line. The category "Original Screenplay" is no more Oscar-worthy than the category "Adaptation"—itself the title of a prize-winning film by Charlie Kaufman based on *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean.

Broadway revivals are an annual affair, and most successful plays or musicals hire a second cast for the national tour. A "one-off" is a rarity, and what any playwright hopes for is an extended run. Yet even when the aim is full fidelity to an "original" production, the show will vary from night to night and actor to actor; no live performance replicates in every detail the previous or next. In this sense there's a single text—the written language preserved on the page—and a multitude of versions played out by a multitude of actors on the revival stage. Interpretative productions ("Let's

do *Lysistrata* as a trans-gender manifesto!" "Let's do *Dr. Faustus* in antebellum costume!") are everywhere performed.

Imitation is, as well, a time-honored practice in verse. Robert Lowell used precisely that word to describe his own effort of translation from languages he read only a little and sometimes not at all. His book *Imitations* (1962) is a series of original poems inspired by and freely rendering the work of other poets. We call a sonnet "Petrarchan" or "Shakespearean" in honor of those who popularized the particular rhyme scheme and stanzaic pattern; we write in the "Miltonic" or "Spenserian" or "Eliotic" mode. The poet William Butler Yeats called apprenticeship a "singing school," and much of his own verse deploys traditional forms. Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman—two widely admired "originals" of the nineteenth century—have influenced modern practitioners in direct lines of descent. Whether the genre be poetry or prose fiction, one task of the writing teacher is to point out antecedents: "Tom, you might want to look at what Dick did with this plot device; Harriet, you might (re)read the ballad by X, which your Y appears to follow." More often than not the student has no notion that it's been tried before.

"I want to copy you."
"Why?"
"I like your style."
"I like *your* style."
"They used to say, I think, 'Copy that.' "

"Copy *that!*"
"I *do* want to copy you."
"You too?"
"You two? You can say that again."
"This is ridiculous."
"No. But repetitive."
"You can say that again."
"I just did."

"Call me, Ishmael" is the opening sentence of a novel by Peter de Vries (1910–1993). In *The Vale of Laughter* (1967)—itself a comic reference to "the vale of tears"—he begins with, "Call me, Ishmael. Call me anytime, day or night." The narrator here refers, and not obliquely, to the first three words of Herman Melville's book about a peg-legged mariner and white whale. "Call me Ishmael"—one of the most famous opening lines in the history of literature—was a narrator's imperative to the nineteenth-century reader, sounding a clarion call. By inserting a comma into *Moby-Dick*'s first sentence, however, the twentieth-century author fashions a request from one character to another. No member of the crew of Melville's foredoomed whaling ship would have had a telephone. We get the joke.

De Vries used this strategy often. With several other titles—*Without a Stitch in Time* (1972), *I Hear America Swinging* (1976), and *Sauce for the Goose* (1981)—he took a phrase and twisted it for comic effect: adding or substituting a word or letter to a well-worn formula. Further, he titled a 1983 novel *Slouching towards*

Kalamazoo, which is a good-humored salute to William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," and its final question: "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

The beast is not so much born as wittily reborn, refashioned with a wink. Add a comma, change the name of a city, and two of the dark masterworks of English literature become an inside joke. When Joan Didion calls a collection of essays *Slouching towards Bethlehem,* her 1968 description of life in Southern California is titled without irony; we accept the reference at face value. Yeats and William Shakespeare—to take just two examples—have provided numberless titles for other authors' texts. I won't provide those authors' names or the dates of publication, because the list would grow too long, but here are just a few from Shakespeare: *Remembrance of Things Past, Salad Days, Nothing Like the Sun, Fools of Fortune, Pale Fire, Brave New World, Not so Deep as a Well, The Dogs of War, The Ides of March, The Sound and the Fury, The Moon Is Down, Cold Comfort Farm,* and *Infinite Jest.* Here are a few from Yeats: *Things Fall Apart, No Country for Old Men, The Golden Apples of the Sun, Coat upon a Stick, The Dying Animal, About My Table, When the Green Woods Laugh,* and *The Widening Gyre.*

Peter De Vries was marching to a different drum, and those readers who might recognize the phrase "a different drummer" may remember that it comes from *Walden* and Henry David Thoreau. There's a 1962 novel with *that* titular phrase by William Melvin Kelley, a 1971 RCA recording with the same phrase by Buddy Rich, the "Big Band" drummer; there's—to take, again, just two examples—a "Different Drummer Tattoo Parlor" in

Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and a cooking school, "Different Drummer's Kitchen," in Albany, New York. Our speech, our shops, our books and recordings all incorporate such referents: what we hear and say and write is almost unavoidably a form of repetition: "variation on a theme."

Try to write a paragraph with no such echo or association. Try to have a conversation using no word you've not used before. Try to listen to a song or look at a picture that reminds you of nothing you've previously heard or seen, and you'll perceive the problem. Everything is interlinked and has some prior resonance; all of us live with the past. We are creatures with retentive memories, and those who have no such facility—who live in the perpetual present—are limited and even, in a strict sense, maimed. Amnesia strips us of our memory, but the sentient individual is full of "echo or association," a phrase I've now used twice in this one paragraph. We repeat others and then repeat ourselves.

More broadly, we move from the copyist's task to our own original vision. All teaching strategies are predicated on instruction by way of repetition: *Repeat, class, after me.* No one seeks to be original when learning scales, or how to use a grindstone, or where the comma belongs in a dependent clause. We take for granted, as a culture, that certain skills need to be learned, and we do so via emulation, moving from the copycat's game of "Simon Says" to the youthful author's earnest effort: "Simon Writes." There's nothing shameful—indeed, much to be admired—in homage to a master or a rehearsal of what went before.

In time to come, I'd venture, a hundred folk will use the phrase "catch-22" for every one who knows that it was once the title of a book by Joseph Heller. Most of us know such phrases as "nature and nurture" or "Yankee Doodle Dandy," but few remember their first use in what would become familiar speech. Francis Galton and George M. Cohan, for those who insist on attribution, are credited with the respective three-word formulae, but the founder of eugenics and the Broadway showman are no longer with us. Their language, however, lives on.

Metaphoric speech is difficult to track. Who first described the snake as the embodiment of evil or decided that a dove or lamb should serve as a symbol of peace? Was it Homer or some unnamed predecessor who imagined "rosy-fingered dawn" and "the wine-dark sea"? And wit is just as hard to source: who first invented "knock-knock" jokes or the story that begins, "A man walks into a bar"? Long before the world of Twitter feed or Instagram (both newly current terms), a joke would spread like wildfire from friend to friend and town to country, told happily and often and almost always without ascription. A few routines—"Who's on first?" or "Take my wife"—are attached to the comedians who made them popular, but Abbott and Costello or Henny Youngman used writers who have vanished from the scene. You cannot copyright titles, but how would or should one go about a claim of ownership for phrases such as "yellow-bellied" or "hunky-dory" or, less colloquially, "high-minded" and "good as gold"?

There's a test, still, in certain schools, where the student is asked to identify—on the basis of a paragraph or two, a stanza or

three—the name of the progenitor of an unattributed text. It's the dream of writers to be thus recognizable, to be idiosyncratic and identifiable in a way that argues authorship, even if the piece be left unsigned. No one else could compose this, we declare, in that particular way. And expertise consists of saying. "Ah yes, this fragment must come from the pen of George Eliot, that canvas is surely a Peter Paul Rubens" or—contrarily—"No, that couldn't be Laurence Sterne, that wouldn't be Salvador Dalí; the artistic signature's not right." Think of those musicians who sue each other over authorship of a brief musical phrase, a set of chord changes, or—astonishingly, of late—the painter who had to defend himself in a lawsuit brought by a collector, who had been sold a forgery of the selfsame painter's work. He said, "I never painted that," and the outraged collector-investor said, in effect, "Yes, you did." It's a vexed topic, always; trouble awaits the dancer who executes a different step from those around her in the chorus line, or the violist who plays *forte* while the rest of the string section is playing *piano* as per the conductor's baton. Although we exalt originality, we call it into question every day.

With the passage of time, moreover, copyright laws and the ownership of language come to matter less. Nomenclature—branding—loses its importance. Attribution fades. To quote two otherwise dissimilar writers, we move from Shakespeare's "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet" to Gertrude Stein's "A rose is a rose is a rose." Both these statements argue that the thing itself is irreducible, and the name by which we know it is, if not irrelevant, a secondary concern. What do we really know of Sophocles or Sappho or Marie de France or even J. D. Salinger

and the reclusive Thomas Pynchon; what if anything do we know of the authors of the Beowulf epic or the Bible and Mahābhārata and *The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon*?

More important, perhaps, who cares? Why should it matter that Ernest Hemingway wore a beard and Emily Dickinson a white dress; what difference does it make to our understanding of their excellence to know that the aforementioned T. S. Eliot was a not-so-closeted anti-Semite and Franz Kafka a practicing Jew? It can be useful to know the private lives of public men and women, for there are ways in which the former does inform the latter. But in some central way the dream of common parlance is a dream of anonymity, and to enter into our collective discourse—think "catch-22," think "Yankee Doodle Dandy," think "nature and nurture"—is not to need to be named.

In his great short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote," Jorge Luis Borges suggests that his character Pierre Menard, far from being derivative, is in fact superior to Miguel de Cervantes because, knowing what that author knew, he can nonetheless repeat it. Yet he does so with an enlarged consciousness, with everything echoic and, in effect, doubly resonant. This incorporation of the past is essential, I think, to both the present and future of verbal art. It's impossible, or at the least implausible, to be original from first to final line. In human if not genomic terms, there's nothing new under the sun. I could, I suppose, write a novel that deals with the love affair and mixed resulting DNA of two monkeys with a banana peel as a fetishistic worship-object in a space capsule while the Astronaut and Astronaughty catapult through the universe, traversing Mars and Venus—but