Theatre of the Mind  Splotting  Character  Want  Seduction

Theory of Story  Obsession
Want  Pointing out the View  Choice

Choreography  Sense of the Senses

THEATRE OF THE MIND  Evoking
Significant Detail  Thingness  Generosity

Character Want/Don't Want  Writer Want/Don't Want
WANT/DON'T WANT

Reader Want/Don't Want  Reader Character
You Are Your Choices  CHARACTER  Story Character
Writer Character

Page Turnability

PLOD, PLOT, PLOTZ, SLPOT
Hope vs. Fear  Profluence

The Space Break  Iterative

STORY TIME  Compression  THIS INK BLACK MAGIC
Scene  Elongation  Summary
Scroll Back  Loop

Costly To Break This Contract  Thought

Authorial Distance  POV
Writer Obsession  First, Second, Third, OM

Passion  OBSESSION  The-me
Character Obsession  Competition  Negative Capability

Lit of Illumination  WHAT  Heart Reading  Talent

Inner Dialect  Which Story to Write

FICTION WRITING-UG 1550-001 Fall 2014

Thurs 6:20-9:00, 1 Washington Place, # 601
Office hours: Thurs 5-6 by appointment, 1 Washington Place, #620

Spain’s e-mail: clspain@msn.com

Kneeded:

Open mind, obsession to learn, humbleness mixed with airgants (it takes a certain arrogance to imagine anyone would want to give up part of their life to read what you have written), a sense to be humored humbled bumbled.

Aim we for:

The goal of this class is to present the (mostly) verifiable, repeatable, teachable, learnable and nearly non-negotiable elements of The Theory of Story--elements that repeatedly (and verifiably) wake a WANT in the READER to reach for next page and next page and next.

Mustards:

Submit 3 fictions (one a GSE constraint story, more on later), double-spaced and numbered, up to 12 pages long, with a mistspelling in first sentence of each. If part of a larger word work accompany submission with synopsis of project.

Be sure 15 copies arrive in class one week before your work is up for discussion. Extra stories to be left in my box where they can be picked up, with much shame, by anyone who missed class.

Keep all published fiction I hand out in a binder. We will analyze these stories more than once. Fill out all assigned story questionnaires for published work, hand in on time.

Fill out assigned story questionnaires for drafts submitted by your peers. Accompanying each of these questionnaire should be a written critique of 150-200 words. These (peer draft) questionnaires are brought to class in duplicate--one handed to author, one to me.

Choose an “almost fav” published story, bring in 15 copies.

Participate in in-class exercises.

Fill out a Guaranteed Story Engine Questionnaire. Meet with Story Editor to discuss, write this “constraint story” (counts as one of your three fiction submissions).

Grading? Grating? Greating?
WHAT I SAID WHEN GALLATIN ASKED IF WORKSHOPS SHOULD BE LETTER GRADED OR PASS FAIL:

The most difficult task for the workshop instructor interested in teaching students how to create art—as opposed to how to critique art—is convincing them to take chances, to give themselves permission to fail. It is only with this permission that students have any hope of startling themselves with something new and different, with something that we might be lucky enough to call art. It is my experience that it is often the best students—academically speaking, 4.0 speaking—that are the most difficult to convince that embracing the possibility of failure is a good thing. These students are unaccustomed to failure, in fact have designed their lives to exclude the possibility of getting spanked with anything but an "A". They tend to be great essay writers and lousy artists. If they sense an "A" hovering like a halo on the horizon, as well as an "F" looming like an executioner's axe, what is the likelihood that they will ever take a chance? If I use letter grades I must acknowledge that what I am attempting to teach is not how to create art, but how to create competent copies of what we call art. I am more likely to foster quasi-plagiarist writing than anything that might ever delight the student or delight me.

Even if we convince students to take chances, to risk failure, the pitfalls of assigning letter grades in workshops remain, not the least of which is the subjectivity of evaluation that every teacher worth their salt must vouchsafe. If I assign letter grades I must acknowledge this assumes I will always be able to identify what good art is, and that I will be able to evaluate it at first glance. Anyone who has ever published a book—or seen their script translated to screen or hung a painting in an exhibition—and who has been excoriated and lavishly praised for the same piece of work will testify to the capriciousness of that game.

I had an independent study student who wrote a novella length piece of fiction that I judged wonderful; not perfect yet, but first class bold and courageous work, work that I call art. He was also taking a writing class in CAS and his teacher hated—my student said hated—this same work, and had him scared to death that he was going to get whacked with a lousy grade. There is no point in debating whose evaluation of the student's work was correct. What is important is to recognize that the threat of a lousy grade had a negative impact on this student's creativity, that it was more likely to stunt him, blunt his risk taking, limit his work.

What do I fear? I fear that when one decides to assign letter grades in a workshop one shifts from being a teacher of the methods of art to being a critic of art. And then I offer a worst case scenario of what critics do:

From what fabulous meeting of a slug with a pea-cock, from what genital antithesis, from what fatty oozings can have been generated this thing called M. Gustave Courbet? Under what gardener's cloche, with the help of what manure, as a result of what mixture of wine, beer, corrosive mucous and flatulent swelling can have grown this sonorous and hairy pumpkin, this aesthetic belly, this imbecilic and impotent incarnation of the Self? --
attack engineered by Alexandre Dumas (Fils).

It seems to me that we must trust that the only reward with any lasting value is the reward of the process, the thrill of creating something that was not there before. This is what we are interested in, yes? The reward of an "A", the reward of a computer generated imprint of ink on white paper, the reward of this something that looks like a famished two-story alpine hut, seems such a meager gift compared to what you might be able to give a student if you can convince them to risk failure, to dance the thinnest ice, to create art.

Gallatin said letter grades.

This initially annoyed me, but now, years later, after having had some serious slackers in workshops, I have come to appreciate grades as an effective way to motivate workshop members who have a tendency to shirk on their share of the load.

Imagine this workshop as a journey in a prairie schooner that departs from a jumping-off place called Some Of Us Don’t Know Shit About How Fiction Works, crosses some parched prairies, some high mountains, to arrive fourteen weeks later at a distant destination called With Any Luck Now More Of Us Know More About How Fiction Works. Imagine dangerous and roiling river crossings (this when we read your work), wayward wagon wheels, imagine getting bogged down in a Texas loblolly. Imagine most of the workshop members in thigh-deep mud, leaning into the wagon wood, sweat glistening on their faces, struggling to shoulder the wagon free. Imagine one or two workshop members deciding they are above it all, choosing not to get dirty, sitting on the wagon feed box.

So ..... bout those grades:

Turn in three drafts, numbered and double-spaced, on time: 3.14159265/3.1415926510

Complete all Story Questionnaires in duplicate, turn in day of discussion: 20/20

Write critiques of the work of your peers (150-200 words) in duplicate, turn them in day of discussion: 25/25

Bring in copies of almost fav story: 10/10

Talk way too much--blah, blah, blah, your peers’ eyes glaze over: 0/10

Talk none at all: 0/10.

Talk just right: 10/10.
If you talk way way way too much, or unnecessarily repeat what someone has already said, or talk way way way too slowly: -10
Don’t act like a jerk (this means you are respectful of your peers and their work): 10/10

If, despite the request to not act like a jerk, you are nasty, mean, vindictive: -50

Attendance: 20/20

Spain likes your fictions or not: 0/0

So, perfecto is ..... 98.1415926510

Worst you can possibly get is -60

Workshops work because of synergy; if you can't commit to going shoulder to shoulder for a semester, bail now. One excused absence will not effect your grade. Excused means you email me by noon on the day you miss class to let me know you will not be coming because you accidentally chopped off your arm, foot, nose. Two excused absences and I have the option of lowering your grade.

Any unexcused absence will (most-likely-probably) result in lowering of your grade. If you do miss class and you want credit for your story questionnaires and written critiques you must email them to author and cc Spain by Thursday midnight after the Thursday class you miss. Don’t be late to class. If you have a job or any other regular commitment that you know will make you regularly late, bail now. Anyone coming in after 6:30 will be humiliated and if that happens often it will affect your grade.

Incompletes:

Only given to students who suffer compound fractures or similarly catastrophic fates.

ON ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:

“Yes, the Harrow,” said Spain. “The name fits. The needles are arranged as in a harrow, and the whole thing is driven like a harrow, although it stays in one place and is, in principle, much more artistic. Anyway, you’ll understand in a moment. The Condemned Writer is laid out here on the Bed. I’ll describe the apparatus first and only then let the procedure go to work. That way you’ll be able to follow it better. Also a sprocket in the Inscriber is excessively worn. It really squeaks. When it’s in motion one can hardly make oneself understood. Unfortunately replacement parts are difficult to come by in this place. So, here is the Bed, as I said. The whole thing is completely covered with a layer of cotton wool, the purpose of which you’ll find out in a moment. The Condemned Writer is laid out on his stomach on this cotton wool—naked, of course. There are straps for the hands here, for the feet here, and for the throat here, to tie him in securely. At the head of the Bed here, where the Condemned Writer, as I have mentioned, first lies face down, is this small protruding lump of felt,
which can easily be adjusted so that it presses right into the Condemned Writer’s mouth. Its purpose is to prevent them from screaming and biting their tongue to pieces. Of course, the Condemned Writer has to let the felt in their mouth—otherwise the straps around their throat will break their neck.” “That’s cotton wool?” asked the Student and bent down. “Yes, it is,” said Spain smiling, “feel it for yourself.” He took the Student’s hand and led the Student over to the Bed. “It’s a specially prepared cotton wool. That’s why it looks so unrecognizable. I’ll get around to mentioning its purpose in a moment.” The Student was already being won over a little to the apparatus. With the Student’s hand over the Student’s eyes to protect them from the sun, the Student looked up at the height of the apparatus. It was a massive construction. The Bed and the Inscriber were the same size and looked like two dark chests. The Inscriber was set about two meters above the Bed, and the two were joined together at the corners by four brass rods, which almost reflected rays from the sun. The Harrow hung between the chests on a band of steel.

Spain had hardly noticed the earlier indifference of the Student, but he did have a sense now of how the latter’s interest was being aroused. So he paused in his explanation in order to allow the Student time to observe the apparatus undisturbed. The Condemned Writer imitated the Student, but since the Condemned Writer could not put his/her hand over his/her eyes, he/she blinked upward with his/her eyes uncovered. “So now the Condemned Writer is lying down,” said the Student. He/she leaned back in his/her chair and crossed his/her legs “Yes,” said Spain. He pushed his cap back a little and ran his hand over his hot face. “Now, listen. Both the Bed and the Inscriber have their own electric batteries. The Bed needs them for itself, and the Inscriber for the Harrow. As soon as the Condemned Writer is strapped in securely, the Bed is set in motion. It quivers with tiny, very rapid oscillations from side to side and up and down simultaneously. You will have seen similar devices in mental hospitals. Only with our Bed all movements are precisely calibrated, for they must be meticulously coordinated with the movements of the Harrow. But it’s the Harrow which has the job of actually carrying out the sentence.”

“What is the sentence?” the Student asked. “You don’t even know that?” asked Spain in astonishment and bit his lip. “Forgive me if my explanations are perhaps confused. I really do beg your pardon. Previously it was the Dean’s habit to provide such explanations. But the New Dean has excused himself from this honorable duty. However, the fact that with such an eminent visitor”—the Student tried to deflect the honor with both hands, but Spain insisted on the expression—“that with such an eminent visitor he didn’t even once make him aware of the form of our sentencing is yet again something new, which . . .” He had a curse on his lips, but controlled himself and said merely: “I was not informed about it. It’s not my fault. In any case, I am certainly the person best able to explain our style of sentencing, for here I am carrying”—he patted his breast pocket—“the relevant diagrams drawn by the previous Dean.”

“Diagrams made by the Dean himself?” asked the Student. “Then was he in his own person a combination of everything? Was he academic, teacher, critic, judge, engineer, and draftsman?”
“He was indeed,” said Spain, nodding his head with a fixed and thoughtful expression. Then he looked at his hands, examining them. They didn’t seem to him clean enough to handle the diagrams. So he went to the bucket and washed them again. Then he pulled out a small leather folder and said, “Our sentence does not sound severe. The law which a Condemned Writer has violated is inscribed on his body with the Harrow. This Condemned Writer, for example,” and Spain pointed to the Condemned Writer, “will have inscribed on the body, ‘Plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, is not allowed at Gallatin!’”

9/4 GROUND RULES, HOW not WHAT, CRITICS, STORY POTENTIAL, READING LIKE WRITERS
READING: In the Penal Colony, Lawns, The Dead, For Esme--with love and squalor, A Good Man is Hard to Find

9/11 WHERE A FICTION HAPPENS, THEATRE OF THE READER’S MIND, A CURTAIN GOES UP, SENSE OF THE SENSES
Reading: Sea Oak

9/18 NEXUS OF WANTS, THINGNESS, CHOREOGRAPHY
Reading: The Short and Happy Life

9/25 ON THE ORIGIN OF WRITERS, SIG DETAIL, INSIG DETAIL, SUPERABUNDANCE
Reading: The Lady and the Dog

10/2 STORY TIME CLOCK, SPENDING YOUR WORDS WISELY, CONSISTENCY
Reading: Harrison Bergeron

10/9 SLOPT = SATISFACTION LOVINGLY PROMISED, ONLY TURN, MANAGING THE GAPS
Reading: Flowering Judas

10/16 STORY CHARACTER, FRANK DANIEL’S GIFT of EDWARD MABLEY’S GIFT, WANT
Reading: Nightfall

10/23 OBSTACLES TO WANT
Reading: A Temporary Matter

10/30 HEART OF THE MATTER, CHOICE FACTORIES (Mckee’s Gift)
Reading: Flowering Judas

11/6 POINTING OUT THE VIEW, INFINITE VARIABILITY, PERMANENT ISOLATION
WORKSHOP SOPs

For Writer:
--First off, don’t turn in anything that you think someone might find offensive or threatening. If you are wondering, clear with Spain first. That said, we should acknowledge that interesting work often makes us uncomfortable.
--Writer says everything writer has to say on the page. This means that while your draft is discussed/dissected you squirm/die a thousand deaths SILENTLY. At end of discussion Writer has a minute to ask any questions he/she felt were not already answered. This is not a time for writer to explain what they meant to say.
--Try to hear everything you can.

For Reader/Critic:
--Assume it is a DRAFT, not a completed fiction, somewhere on the arc of becoming what it will become. We WASTE TREMENDOUS ENERGY if we critique these DRAFTS as if they were published fictions.
--Remember it is fiction. Try not to to address the writer as if they are a character in the story.
--Be decent.
--Focus, as best you can, on THE HOW of the story, the WHY of effect, not the WHAT of what it is “saying”.
--Be prepared to concisely make a Single-most-important Comment about each story. You can choose to highlight something you thought worked particularly well, or to focus on something you felt was particularly problematic.

BRIEF NOTE ON METHOD
We use The Scientific Method as our model. The idea is to help you begin to acquire the craft of fiction through systematic observation, measurement, experiment, modification of hypotheses.

The notes (including these) handed out this semester are a set of theories that we believe are validated by experimental evidence, however we suggest you not blindly accept these theories, but first treat them as hypotheses, until you confirm their validity with experiments of your own.

What do we have for tools to aide in our investigations? At first glance it might seem our resources are limited: eyes, brains, pencils, blank paper. But this would be to overlook our greatest resource--shelves of narratives that have been (naturally?) selected by readers who refuse to stop reading them, despite an ever-evolving world. These narratives are readily available for field observation, vivisection, analysis.

BRIEF NOTE ON WHAT AND HOW

In this class we attempt, as best we can, to focus on THE HOW of story, not THE WHAT of what the draft is attempting to “say”. Many of you will have to make an effort to shift your focus from WHAT TO HOW as it is likely the majority of your literature classes focused exclusively on THE WHAT.

This doesn’t mean THE WHAT of what a writer writes is not important. For the completed piece there is nothing more important. The WHAT of what you write is what you are saying, is the search you are on, is WHAT matters to you, is WHAT makes you you.

But it’s not teachable, by teacher or peer.

CRITICS

Nobody ever raised a statue to a critic. --said somebody, may they pardon us for mangling the quote.

Vladimir--No no, after you.
Estragon--No no, you first.
v--I interrupted you.
e--On the contrary.
They glare at each other angrily.
v--Ceremonious ape!
e--Punctilious pig!
v--Finish your phrase, I tell you!
e--Finish your own!
Silence. They draw closer, halt.
v--Moron!
e--That's the idea, let's abuse each other.
They turn, move apart, turn again and face each other.
v--Moron!
e--Vermin!
v--Abortion!
e--Morpion.
v--Sewer-Rat!
e--Curate!
v--Cretin!
e--(with finality) Critic!
v--Oh!
He wilts, vanquished, and turns away.

This to emphasize that in this class, even though most of what we do is critiquing, are intent is to celebrate the writer, the creator.

We devalue the critic, if not mock them.
Yes, when we weigh the worth of artists we think SUN-GODS, creators of rosy fingered dawns of life-giving light, or creators of high-noon scorching illuminations (of the human heart).

And when we weigh the worth of the critic we think pale reflection, auxiliary, dim moon.

CRITIQUING

When we are pale-reflecting, dim-mooning, workshopping, we are not critiquing WHAT the piece is saying unless we can’t help ourselves.

Certainly we are not trying to teach THE WHAT. How could we?

Of course we must acknowledge that in some fundamental way THE HOW and THE WHAT are inextricably bound, but it’s a question of shading our attention.

We are critiquing the WRITER’S CRAFT CHOICES.

What we are trying to understand is HOW, word by word, scene by scene, summary by summary a writer vaults a fiction off the page and onto that stage in every reader’s mind.

We are trying to understand how writers we admire seduce readers with sentences. Trying to learn how to accomplish the first and last task of every narrative, the waking of want in the reader to reach for the next page, and the next, and the next.
You hope to teach the writer something, you think you have something to teach them, and if they are lucky they might learn something, but mainly you teach yourself.

Like watching the first flight of a new flying something it is easy enough to know if a draft stays aloft or not. But fathoming WHY a narrative flies or stalls calls for another level attention (and skill).

STUDENT CRITICS vs. CRITIC CRITICS

The difference? Something about stance. The Critic Critic guards a gate, and knows they know. Their most important job is to say, No, you can't come in.

The Student Critic is like Keats, living like a poet, living in uncertainty, learning, searching for whys.

..several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... Keats

In this class we ask that you try and develop your Student Critic Self.

When we critique a draft, each of us (and the rest of the class) will most likely learn more about us (the critic) than we will learn about the draft.

It should be obvious (but so often we forget) that there can only be so much strength/finish to an early draft that perhaps only vaguely resembles the distant iteration that will become the completed piece.

It is folly (and would be overwhelming to any writer/new narrative) to lean on all of it-sense detail, specific detail, significant detail, character, character want, obstacles to character want, point of view, choice, managing the gap, et cetera, et cetera--all at once.

We try to find that balance, lean on it just right.

Different drafts call for different levels of attention.

Some submissions are only ready to bear up to inquiries of the broadest nature, to questions of character, want, and profluence.

Sometimes, by happy miracle, an early draft is delivered to the workshop as if by the gods, and it is ready to have its structure leaned on, its scenes and summaries leaned on, perhaps even its sentences and metaphors leaned on.
Sometimes the piece is perfect. Not often, but it happened once. And we were looking so hard for what was wrong that we didn’t see what was right.

When we examine workshop drafts (turned in under deadline and duress) we should focus on potential as opposed to measuring workshop drafts against the completed best.

ON BEING CRITIQUED

As novice writers of newly minted drafts we can only hear what we are ready to hear.

But hear everything you can.

Listen for the gifts your critics gift you, but don’t listen too hard, don’t lose your balance.

Hear what you can hear, what speaks to you, and let the rest dissipate, disassociate, disappear. Somehow, you have to try to hear it all, but also begin to discriminate between what sounds “right” to you, and what sounds off—a key talent to acquire because so often the critical assessments of your peers will be diametrically opposed.

We must waltz our narratives—naked hearts—out in front of that gatling gun of subjective opinion, get bloodied and shredded, and be bulletproof as well.

You will be lucky to find one or two writer/teacher/critics who speak to your heart, and who can hit .300 when they approach your work. That's if you are lucky. They are worth their weight in gold. Don't let them get away.

FIRST DRAFTS/EARLY WORKSHOP DRAFTS

The idea is to bring in something that can be leaned on. If you are sure it is finished, and the cement has set, it is a waste of everyone's time.

That said a true first draft is probably not what you want to drop on a workshop. With a day or two of distance you would most likely see for yourself much of what the workshop will have to tell you.

You don’t want to burn valuable minutes having your spelling and syntax corrected—and you don’t want READERS tossed violently from your read.

Don’t forget it is a lucky day if an early draft even approximates a story. Generally early drafts are not about writing stories but about searching for story possibility.
Perhaps the most one ought to hope for is something to save, something we can't let go of, something that won't let go of us.

Great fictions are miracles.

Good fictions are miracles.

A draft that takes wing (in a reader’s mind) ought to impress us as much as the gravity defying stunt of flight itself. To assume a first draft will soar is as naive as stepping off a cliff with feathers glued to your fists.

Yes, try and build your first and second and third drafts in sand, not concrete. You want to be able to kick it over; it will get kicked over; kicking it over is a good thing.

We hope to eventually learn to revise words that aren't stories into words that are.

Writers are high wire walkers, engineers of thin cables of language across a (sometimes terrifying) yawning whiteness, catching their balance word by word, knowing wire walkers

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We will do it fifty times before we get it right. If our gods favor us.

Writing great fictions calls for skills equal in complexity to those skills needed to orchestrate great music, to direct great films. A range of knowledge calling for (for most of us) years of study and practice.

FAILURE, FAIL-YOU-ARE

Wonderstand failure it no enemy.

Most any artistic triumph is an eyelash away from disaster.

We must give ourselves permission to fail, and to fail spectacularly.
The greatest hindrance to creativity is fear of failure. Whenever the punishment is too severe, creativity dies. Look at the unholywoods; if they fail out there somebody loses 100 million dollars.

Writers are trapeze artists (didn’t we just say they were high-wire walkers? We did. Well, that too.)

We fling ourselves, spinning and dancing on air with our language, and the reader has to make the catch.

Sometimes they don’t. And someone


But when we compose workshop drafts, bring them in, we are not working in front of a hostile crowd, we are working over a net of peers. If the catch is missed, our fault or the reader's, we fall into friendly arms.

The hope is that if we work long enough with a net under us, finally, we don't need it.

Like those Olympic ski aerialists who practice their flips and twists over pools of warm welcoming water. It is easy to imagine they would never perfect those moves over stone hard snow.

Yes, we must forgive each other for failing (falling), and falling short (of course we must fall short), and, most importantly, we must forgive ourselves.

For the novice writer there is probably no more important quality to cultivate than forgiveness. Maybe for any writer. If we can’t forgive ourselves of our early efforts, for not measuring up to what we admire as great, we are doomed to half empty notebooks of paralyzed poetry and stunted stories.

...J.S. is perfectly right in regard to the slipshod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine.—No!—though it may sound a little paradoxical. It is as good as I had the power to make it—by myself—Had I been nervous about its being
a perfect piece, and with that view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble—I will write independently.—I have written independently without Judgement—I may write independently and with judgment hereafter.—The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself—That which is creative must create itself.—In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.—I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest.—But I am nigh getting into a rant…Keats.

We pass on the Keats’ letter because it is instructive, because he articulated so well what is to be lost. If Keats had allowed himself to focus on what Endymion was not, if he had not given himself permission to write without Judgement, to flex and strengthen, to stretch his capacities, to fail, writing the 4000 lines in eight months, then the extraordinary reach of 1819 would not have happened, and the miracles of Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode on Melancholy, To Autumn, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, Bright Star—would have been lost to all of us.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

1
Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities of mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2
Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal-yet, do not grieve:
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3
Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new:
More happy love! More happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young:
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4
Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e’er return.

5
O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”-that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
--Keats

READING LIKE APPRENTICE WRITERS (hungry to learn) vs. READING LIKE READERS (or book reviewers or critics)
Why does the reading of much good writing (as a reader) seem to have no connection with developing the ability to write good writing? This is true, isn’t it? Our proof? Some of the best-read people we know couldn’t write themselves a parking ticket (fictional, or otherwise).

It seems that reading good writing (as a reader) gets you ready to write good writing about as well as taking a 767 first class from here to LA gets you ready to pilot the thing yourself.

Why might this be?

Might a measure of HOW skillfully a Writer is saying WHAT they are saying be the amount of attention (or lack of attention) the Reader pays to the HOW of how they are saying it? So the more skillful the writing the less likely the reader is to notice the craft?

It does seem the work of great anybodies--think Jordan, think Callas, think Hendrix, think Flannery--appears effortless, seamless, beyond decipherment. The viewer/listener/reader so captured by end effect that they (we) come away ignorant of any craft.

It is a litmus test, isn’t it? That illusion of effortlessness? With a great story we are lost in the “fictional dream,” paying no attention to HOW the dream was generated. Yes? Maybe? And so the easiest choice (the only choice) is to give into the seduction, save learning for another day.

The typical reader doesn’t give a damn about how a piece of writing works. They only want to be lost in the fictional dream--transported to a whaling ship sailing a Quito spring, to a civil war field-hospital that Inman walks out of, to a hotel room in Dublin where Gretta remembers her one true love, Michael Furey, and with such a fewness of words irrevocably alters Gabriel’s life--a dream that, with any luck (if only for a moment), will mask the tick-tock of THE GREAT THUDDING CLOCK that chisels away our lives.

True? For you? Maybeperhaps?

(Exceptions, of course, are metafiction lovers.)

If we don’t learn THE HOW of a narrative by reading it, can we learn anything about THE HOW from book reviewers? What is it book reviewers are up to anyway? Probably each up to something slightly different. Some trying to help those of us who haven’t read the book decide if we should read it. Some just hoping to make a couple ducats--because if you have anything to do with the book business you mostly likely don’t have enough coin for a single Starbucks giga-mocha-choke-a-bambino. Some might be settling old scores, real or imagined. And, of course, sometimes you realize reviewers are just about showcasing their big brains, hoping to dazzle the reader with their interpretations, language, The-Me Show; although generally this (immaturity? lack of self esteem?) is subordinated in the reviewing world, considered bad form. Usually
what we get is some sort of synopsis of events, and an overview of THE WHAT. It is a rare book reviewer that offers a nuts-and-bolts analysis of HOW a book’s words and sentences and scenes and summaries work. That said, we can be sure that a good part of the visceral response by the reviewer, the thumbs-up thumbs-down part, is a reaction to THE HOW, even if THE HOW remains unexplored.

Can we learn THE HOW from book critics? What is it book critics are doing when they critique a fiction or a writer? Probably some (most?) are publishing so they don’t perish; publishing so they can get or keep one of those increasingly elusive tenure track teaching jobs--publishing for resume, for food in mouth, roof over head. Hard to argue with that. Others, we can imagine, like some reviewers, just love language and narrative and have engineered careers that allow them steep themselves in what they love. It does seem book critics are less likely than book reviewers to subordinate The-Me, are more about championing THE ME, about singing out, Watch this, come see my show, let me tell you how clever I am, how much I know. Again, probably because of audience--students of literature? academics?-- it is the rare critic who engages THE HOW of narrative.

Whom does that leave to illuminate the HOW?

There are literary theorists illuminating HOW word by word--Gerard Genette and the like. That’s one place to go, but it can be heavy going.

There are teachers of creative writing, some good, some great, some bad, some useless. Plenty of downsides there.

There are you peers, ditto all the above about teachers.

There are a couple good books on the craft of narrative. No downsides it seems.

And, FORTUNATELY, there are the fictions themselves, available to be read not as a READER, but as an APPRENTICE WRITER.

HOW MIGHT AN APPRENTICE WRITER READ?

For the first read you probably ought to give yourself permission to read with those same sympathies/tendencies/wants that the READER reads with, not asking for anything more than fictional dream, mystery, profluence, take me away, mask the tick-tock-- this to inoculate yourself against the tricks/talents all great WRITERS seduce READERS with.

The questionnaires you are going to fill out for each fiction we read are an attempt, no doubt painful, at getting you started reading the way apprentice writers might want to read. Templates for teasing out THE HOW of an effective piece of fiction.

So we ask you to ask yourself: Which of the five senses does the author favor? Do they use two senses, three? How is time handled? Is it in scene, is it in summary? Are the scenes choreographed? Is there enough information to direct the scenes as stage plays.
Does anyone want anything? Are there obstacles to that want?

This concern: Is it possible that understanding THE HOW of a performance--moment by moment--actually hinders the experience of it?

Certainly this is the case with magic.

Or even a worse worry: Is it possible that knowing HOW something works (at least the early stages of apprehension of the HOW) actually hinders the creating of it?

Probably something to this worry.

It seems likely there is a stage we (must?) pass through when learning THE HOW of writing that unsettles us--a dawning apprehension of the vast complexities of the craft--and perhaps this awareness might leave one feeling, at least temporarily, inadequate, self-conscious, not up to the task, silent, blocked.

But it all seems logical that a firm understanding of THE HOW of narrative is the only way to give yourself a chance at repeatable success.