FICTION WRITING (UN-ADVANCED*)--UG 1550-001, Spring 2017

Thursdays 6:20-9:00, 1 Washington Place, #527

Office hours: Thursdays 4-6 by appointment, 1 Washington Place, #608

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Needed:

Opn mind, obsession to learn, humbleness mixed with arrogance (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.

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, across genres, repeatedly (and verifiably) wake a WANT in the READER to reach for the next page and next page and next.

Mustards:

Submit 3 drafts (one a GSE constraint draft) double-spaced and numbered, up to 12 pages long, with a mistspelling in first sentence of each. If part of a larger work the submission needs to be accompanied with a synopsis.

Be sure enough of your copies arrive in class one week before your work is up for discussion. Extra stories are to be left in my Gallatin 6th floor mailbox where they can be picked up, with much shame, by anyone who missed class.

Fill out questionnaires (Qs) for published work, hand in on time.

Fill out Qs for peer drafts. These are to be brought to class in duplicate--one handed to author, one to me.

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

Participate in in-class exercises.

Fill out GSE for your third story, meet with the Story Editor, write your GSE story.

*Only differences (we can fathom) between Fiction Writing and Advanced Fiction Writing are the increasing critical abilities of workshop members.

**Subject to confusion, reassessment, redaction, outright disavowal.
Imagine this workshop as a journey in a prairie schooner that departs from a jumping-off place called Some Of Us Don’t Know Squat About How Fiction Works, crosses parched prairies, high mountains, to arrive fourteen weeks later at 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. Picture 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 choosing to be above it all, sitting on the feed box, saying, I don’t want to get dirty, This is impossible, There’s no chance of ever getting out of here, blah, blah, blah. Not the behavior you want to model.

SO GRADING

Turn in three drafts, numbered and double-spaced, on time: \( 3.14159265/3.14159265 \)

Complete Published Story Questionnaires in duplicate, turn in day of discussion: 10/10

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 ..... 88.1415926510 maybe

Worst you can possibly get is -60

One excused absence won’t effect your grade. Excused means you email Spain by noon on the day you miss class to let him know you accidentally chopped off your arm, foot, nose, et cetera. Two excused absences and Spain has 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. We won’t have enough time to cover all we need to cover even if we start at the stroke of 6:20. If you have a job or any other regular commitment that you know will make you regularly late, bail now.

Anyone coming in after 6:25 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 (excerpted from Frank Coughed-Up’s (long) short story: In the Gallatin Colony.

“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 who 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 he 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 herself 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 she didn’t even once make you 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 herself?” asked the Student. “Then was she in her own person a combination of everything? Was she academic, teacher, critic, judge, engineer, and draftsman?”

“She 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 in the Gallatin Colony!’”
CALENDER

1/26 Hello

2/02 What is Story?/Why Story?

2/09 Theatre of the Mind

2/16 Sense of the Senses

2/23 Ink Time

3/2 Want

3/09 Obstacle/Choice

3/16 Spring Break

3/23 Character

3/30 Puzzle, Pattern, Prediction

4/06 Theme or The-me? Which Story to Write?

4/13 Pointing out the View

4/20 Dialogue

4/27 Revision, Plasticity

5/04 Metaphorically Speaking
WORKSHOP SOPs

For Writer:
--Don’t turn in anything you think someone might find offensive or threatening. If you are wondering if it might be offensive, clear with The Navigator 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 (and make fools of ourselves) if we critique these DRAFTS as if they were published fictions.
--Remember it is fiction. Try not 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 draft, the WHY of effect, not the WHAT of what the draft is “saying”. For many of you this may be difficult because you have been trained otherwise.
--Be prepared to concisely make a single-most-important comment about each draft. 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, experimentation, modification of hypotheses.

The notes (including these) handed out this semester are a set of theories that we believe are validated by experimental evidence (library books on library shelves that get checked out), 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, and 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 a story 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 (more commonly referred to as theme).

This doesn’t mean THE WHAT of what a writer writes is not important. For the completed piece (perhaps) there might be nothing more important. The WHAT of what you write is what you are attempting to communicate, is the whole point of the effort, 

*but it’s not teachable, by teacher or peer.*

IN SUPPORT OF THE WORKSHOP PROCESS

Easily enough we can imagine the first storytellers, on the savanna, on the veldt, their audiences circled around the fire pit, the warm flickering light reflecting off the attentive faces of the listeners, the listeners holding rudimentary spears, sharpened rocks, listening to these first stories, but also listening for (the ever present) threat, for death approaching from the dark.

We can imagine the quick adaptations/edits the first storytellers made when they sensed they were losing the attention of their listeners. Better leave out the walk, but keep the stop at the baobab trees, they liked that the first time, the funny part when Broken-Ass fell out of the tree, but then get right to the antelope, and then to the best part, the fight to defend the meat from the lions.

Easily we can imagine how, before the written word, storytellers must have learned their craft faster than we do because their apprenticeships didn’t happen in isolation but in front of restless audiences that delivered immediate signals of both pleasure and disinterest.

The writing workshop is about as close as most of us can get to the telling of those first tales around a fire.

(Remind me to tell you my Gordon Lish story of extreme selection.)

We hope you allow the workshop to gift you the narrative tools informed by selection (selections made by human nature, selections made by librarians), so as to narrow the infinite universe of choice for how to KEEP A READER READING.

Because, perhaps not so obvious, but nonetheless apparent, with an infinite universe of choice, and our subsets of finite days, it is less likely we will arrive at a working model of narrative (in time) unless we take advantage of a short cut or two.
It’s not difficult to starve yourself as an entertainer, it’s the easiest of accomplishments.

We look to the work of those that have come before to see what works.

Books on a shelf are not dead.

Libraries are more like zoos than museums, with living collections that hibernate until a book is checked out all that dormant potential comes alive in a READER’S MIND once again.

It is important to discover what an audience is incapable of refusing.

Don’t worry, even if you are to accept WANT, OBSTACLES, and CHOICE as *sine qua non* of the writer-character-reader equation, you will still have plenty of choices to keep your big brain busy.

Pinker writes that if you interrupt a speaker mid-sentence, there are on average ten different words that could be inserted to still end up with a meaningful statement—sometimes you only have 1 or 2 choices, sometimes thousands. And as a thought experiment he assumes that the average human can muster up a 20 word sentence.

Therefore the number of sentences that a speaker can deal with in principle is at least 10 to the 20th (a one with 20 zeros after it, or a hundred million trillion). At a rate of five seconds a sentence, a person would need a childhood of about a hundred trillion years (with no time for eating or sleeping) to memorize all of them.

--Pinker

As you begin to learn more about story design, your early drafts (expeditions) continue to be searches for specific words, for something to save, but also become searches for tools that (with any luck) resemble the tools that have reliably served fiction writers--Homer, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Austen, Joyce, Woolf-- for thousands of years.

CRITICS

Then his voice changed in tone as he told me that he wanted to give me some good advice. ‘Never pay any attention to what critics say,’ he proceeded, and expatiated on this theme. When I ventured to put in the remark that their articles might sometimes be of great importance, he cut me short. ‘Remember,’ he said, ‘a statue has never been set up in honour of a critic!’ “Sibelius: A Close-Up”, Bengt de Törne.

Vladamir--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, our intent is to celebrate the writer, the creator.

We devalue the critic, if not mock them.
Yes, when we weigh the relative worth of artists we think SUN-GODS, creators of rosy fingered dawns of life-giving light, 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 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 (in the way of double-helical dna) 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 (or doesn’t vault) 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. We are 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 accumulated story wisdom).

CURIOUS CRITICS vs. I. NOAH EVERYTHING CRITICS

The difference? It is something about stance. The I. Noah Everything Critic guards a gate, and knows they know. Their most important job is to say, Noah, you can't come in.

The Curious Critic is like Keats, living like a poet, living in uncertainty, always leaning to learn, 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 Curious 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/structure/finish/polish to an early draft that perhaps only vaguely resembles the distant iteration of the completed piece.

It is folly (and would be overwhelming to any writer/new narrative) to lean on all of its--sense detail, specific detail, significant detail, character, character want, obstacles to character want, point of view, choice, pattern, prediction, 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 exactly right. 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 them against the completed best.

ON BEING CRITIQUED

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

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—an important talent to acquire because so often the critical assessments of your peers will be diametrically opposed.

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 profitably engaged. 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 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 by these easily corrected mistakes.
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, engineering thin cables of language across (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, direct great films. This 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.
One of the greatest hindrances 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

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Writer? Reader? Character?

Something to think about.

There is this to comfort us: When we bring in our workshop drafts 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, the idea is that we fall to friendly arms.

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

Like those Olympic ski aerialists who practice 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 and falling short (of course we must fail and 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,
Sylan 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

ON ILLUSORY SUPERIORITY OR “THE LAKE WOE Begone EFFECT”
People, on average, tend to believe themselves to be above average—a view that violates the simple tenets of mathematics. In a survey of nearly one million high school seniors, 70% stated that they had “above average” leadership skills, but only 2% felt their leadership skills were “below average.” On their ability to get along with others, almost all respondents rated themselves as at least average—with 60% rating themselves in the top 10% of this ability and 25% rating themselves in the top 1% (College Board, 1976–1977). College students think they are more likely than their peers to live past 80 and have a good job; they think they are less likely to acquire a drinking problem or suffer a heart attack (Weinstein, 1980). Such above-average effects, as they are called, are not constrained to college students. Motorcyclists believe they are less likely to cause an accident than is the typical biker (Rutter, Quine, & Albery, 1998). Business leaders believe their company is more likely to succeed than is the average firm in their industry (Cooper, Woo, & Dunkelberg, 1988; Larwood & Whittaker, 1977). People think they are less susceptible to the flu than their contemporaries, and as a result avoid getting flu shots (Larwood, 1978). Of college professors, 94% say they do above-average work (Cross, 1977). People signing up to bungee jump believe they are more likely to avoid injury than the average bungee jumper, although their friends and family do not share this impression (Middleton, Harris, & Surman1996). Ironically, people even state that they are more likely than their peers to provide accurate self-assessments that are uncontaminated by bias (Friedrich, 1996; Pronin, Lin, Ross, 2002).

Indeed, even when people are the most confident, that certainty is no guarantee of accuracy. In studies in which college students expressed absolute (100%) certainty in their answers, they still were wrong roughly one time out of every five (Fischhoff et al., 1977). In another study, when doctors diagnosed their patients as having pneumonia, predictions made with 88% confidence turned out to be right only 20% of the time (Christensen- Szalanski & Bushyhead, 1981).

--Flawed Self-Assessment: Implications for Health, Education, and the Workplace, Dunning, Heath, Suls, 2004

That 94% of college professors assess they do above-average work suggests a possible correlation between (over) education and Illusory Superiority. But we suspect our inferences, as, no doubt, we overvalue them. The more we (the ones “in the know”) know our knows, are certain of them, the faster you should run from us, to second opinion, third, fourth, until you can began to shape your own (with any luck malleable) dangerous and overvalued opinions.

How did Keats (so young!), great and glorious Keats, embrace his negative capability? Did he know he would die so young, and somehow, still young, had to (with so few days) become unknowing and wise?

How to no our knows?

Run!
Fast as you can.

But first we hand you this syllabus. And next we will hand you some notes.

Read them, burn them.

Warm your hands with what little heat the fire speaks with, but stomp out the embers to be sure they don’t smolder, lurk, to flare and burn down your house.