
Aesthetic Law and Artistic Mystery

What the beginning writer ordinarily wants is a set of rules on what to do and what not to do in writing fiction. As we'll see, some general principles can be set down (Things to Think About When Writing Fiction) and some very general warnings can be offered (Things to Watch Out For); but on the whole the search for aesthetic absolutes is a misapplication of the writer's energy. When one begins to be persuaded that certain things must never be done in fiction and certain other things must always be done, one has entered the first stage of aesthetic arthritis, the disease that ends up in pedantic rigidity and the atrophy of intuition. Every true work of art—and thus every attempt at art (since things meant to be similar must submit to one standard)—must be judged primarily, though not exclusively, by its own laws. If it has no laws, or if its laws are incoherent, it fails—usually—on that basis.

Trustworthy aesthetic universals do exist, but they exist at such a high level of abstraction as to offer almost no guidance to the writer. Most supposed aesthetic absolutes prove relative under pressure. They're laws, but they slip. Think, for instance, of the well-known dictum that all expectations raised by the work of fiction must be satisfied, explicitly or implicitly, within

the fiction—the idea, to put it another way, that all legitimate questions raised in the reader's mind must be answered, however subtly, inside the work. Thus, for example, if we are told that a sheriff in a given story has a Ph.D. in philosophy, an expectation is raised that philosophy will somehow help him do his job. If philosophy is never again mentioned in the story, and if the most careful scrutiny of the story reveals no important way in which philosophy has bearing, we feel dissatisfied, annoyed. The story has, we say, loose ends. The writer has done his work carelessly, cynically. We may suspect the worst of him, that he's in it for the money, that he scorns his reader's intelligence, that his shoddy craftsmanship is intentional and malicious—in fact that he ought to be deported. If he pretends to high seriousness—if he writes not a mystery story but something evidently meant to pass as art—we denounce him as a fake, a pretentious, self-deluded donzel. We're not talking here about superficial slips like—in *Absalom, Absalom!*—Faulkner's description of a house as built of, in one passage, wood and, in another place, stone. For mistakes of this kind, as for slips of the tongue, the sympathetic reader makes silent correction. The mistakes that offend in a would-be work of art are serious slips in reasoning, as when some idea or event is introduced that ought to change the outcome but then is forgotten, or never recognized for what it is, by the writer. And so it has come to be axiomatic that a work should answer every question it raises, that all of a work's elements should fulfill themselves. But is it true?

mark
No one will deny that the principle is useful, especially when applied in obvious ways, as in the examples above or when Chekhov shows us the gun ostentatiously loaded in Act One of *The Seagull*. No one will deny that each time a writer believes he's completed a new work, he ought to look it over in the light of this general principle. But the fact remains that the supposed aesthetic law is far from absolute, since from the beginning of time great writers have shown impatience with it.

*Notice by the
we have to believe both*
Aesthetic Law and Artistic Mystery

Every reader of Homer's *Iliad* is stirred to ask whether Achilles really loves Briseus or simply thinks of her—as Agamemnon does—as a war prize. The point is important because it profoundly affects our judgment of Achilles' character. If he both loves Briseus and considers her his rightful prize (as of course she is), we have adequate motivation for his withdrawal from the war, a withdrawal that must result in the death of friends. If he does not love her, he is likely to seem to us petty and vindictive, a sulky child too sensitive, even for a Greek, about his honor. Critical good will and Homer's high valuation of his hero lead us to assume that Achilles does love Briseus—though also, as the twenty-fourth book makes clear, he exaggerates the value of honor of the sort bestowed by others. But except once, briefly, through the mouth and point of view of a secondary character (Achilles' friend Patroklos), Homer refuses any answer to our question. It's as if the whole matter seemed to him beneath epic dignity, mere tea-table gossip. Perhaps, as some scholars have argued, Greek heroes thought it unmanly to care very much about women. Or, on the other hand, perhaps with his deep sense of what is right and his Greek certainty of love's place in the all-embracing order of Zeus (a subject treated in the *Odyssey*), Homer would be shocked by our doubt of his hero's great-heartedness; that is, perhaps he thought Achilles' love went without saying. But whatever his reason, Homer gives us only what Patroklos thinks—or claims he thinks, in a situation that might incline him to lie—and offers, in his own voice, no clue.

Take another, more modern example. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* we naturally ask how it is that, when shipped off to what is meant to be his death, the usually indecisive prince manages to hoist his enemies with their own petard—an event that takes place off stage and, at least in the surviving text, gets no real explanation. If pressed, Shakespeare might say that he expects us to recognize that the fox out-foxed is an old motif in literature—he could make up the tiresome details if he had

to—and that the point throughout is not Hamlet's indecisiveness in general (any prince worth his salt can knock off a pair of his enemy's fawning underlings) but his self-destructive anxiety as he faces a specific metaphysical dilemma, that of violating law for a higher law in an uncertain universe; that is, murdering a step-father and king on the say-so of a ghost. (I simplify, of course. The proofs are clear enough for the rationalist Horatio; but Horatio is not Hamlet. The center of every Shakespearean play, as of all great literature, is character; and it is Hamlet's panic, rage, and indecisiveness that raise the question of what made him act so decisively this once—the question Shakespeare does not answer.) But the explanation I've put in Shakespeare's mouth is probably not the true one. The truth is very likely that almost without bothering to think it out, Shakespeare saw by a flash of intuition that the whole question was unimportant, off the point; and so like Mozart, the white shark of music, he snapped straight to the heart of the matter, refusing to let himself be slowed for an instant by trivial questions of plot logic or psychological consistency—questions unlikely to come up in the rush of drama, though they do occur to us as we pore over the book. Shakespeare's instinct told him, "Get back to the business between Hamlet and Claudius," and, sudden as lightning, he was back.

This refusal to be led off to the trivial is common in great literature, as is its comic opposite, the endlessly elaborated explanation of the obvious we find in, for instance, the opening chapter of *Tristram Shandy*. This is no proof that the general principle with which we began—the principle that a work should in some way give answers to the questions it raises—is valueless. But the example of Homer, Shakespeare, and others does suggest that aesthetic laws can sometimes be suspended. Suspending recognizable aesthetic laws of course means taking risks, and the teacher who wishes to play it safe may say to his students, "That's all right for Shakespeare, but not for a beginner." The trouble with this solution is that it tries to teach

There are not notable features in
"bedroom"

the art of fiction by shrinking the art, making it something more manageable but no longer art.

Art depends heavily on feeling, intuition, taste. It is feeling, not some rule, that tells the abstract painter to put his yellow here and there, not there, and may later tell him that it should have been brown or purple or pea-green. It's feeling that makes the composer break surprisingly from his key, feeling that gives the writer the rhythms of his sentences, the pattern of rise and fall in his episodes, the proportions of alternating elements, so that dialogue goes on only so long before a shift to description or narrative summary or some physical action. The great writer has an instinct for these things. He has, like a great comedian, an infallible sense of timing. And his instinct touches every thread of his fabric, even the murkiest fringes of symbolic structure. He knows when and where to think up and spring surprises, those startling leaps of the imagination that characterize all of the very greatest writing.

Obviously this is not to imply that cool intellect is useless to the writer. What Fancy sends, the writer must order by Judgment. He must think out completely, as coolly as any critic, what his fiction means, or is trying to mean. He must complete his equations, think out the subtlest implications of what he's said, get at the truth not just of his characters and action but also of his fiction's form, remembering that neatness can be carried too far, so that the work begins to seem fussy and overwrought, anal compulsive, unspontaneous, and remembering that, on the other hand, mess is no adequate alternative. He must think as cleanly as a mathematician, but he must also know by intuition when to sacrifice precision for some higher good, how to simplify, take short cuts, keep the foreground up there in front and the background back.

The first and last important rule for the creative writer, then, is that though there may be rules (formulas) for ordinary, easily publishable fiction—imitation fiction—there are no rules for real fiction, any more than there are rules for serious

the ART of fiction

2
 visual art or musical composition. There are techniques—
 hundreds of them—that, like carpenter's tricks, can be studied
 and taught; there are moral and aesthetic considerations every
 serious writer must sooner or later brood on a little, whether or
 not he broods in a highly systematic way; there are common
 mistakes—infelicities, clodpole ways of doing things—that
 show up repeatedly in unsuccessful fiction and can be shown
 for what they are by analysis of how they undermine the fic-
 tion's intended effects; there are, in short, a great many things
 every serious writer needs to think about; but there are no
rules. Name one, and instantly some literary artist will offer us
 some new work that breaks the rule yet persuades us. Inven-
tion, after all, is art's main business, and one of the great joys of
 every artist comes with making the outrageous acceptable, as
 when the painter makes sharply clashing colors harmonious or
 a writer in the super-realistic tradition introduces—convinc-
 ingly—a ghost.

This is not to say that no one really knows what fiction is or
 what its limits are; it is simply to recognize that the value or
 "staying power" of any piece of literature has to do, finally,
 with the character and personality of the artist who created
 it—his instincts, his knowledge of art and the world, his mas-
 tery. Mastery holds fast. What the beginning writer needs,
 discouraging as it may be to hear, is not a set of rules but
 mastery—among other things, mastery of the art of breaking so-
 called rules. When an artist of true authority speaks—someone
 like Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Racine, Dostoevsky, or Mel-
 ville—we listen, all attention, even if what he says seems at
 first a little queer. (At any rate we listen if we're old enough,
 experienced enough, so that we know what kinds of things are
 boring, juvenile, simple-minded, and what things are not. To
 read well, one also needs a certain kind of mastery.)

On reflection we see that the great writer's authority consists
 of two elements. The first we may call, loosely, his sane human-
 ness; that is, his trustworthiness as a judge of things, a stability

rooted in the sum of those complex qualities of his character
and personality (wisdom, generosity, compassion, strength of
 will) to which we respond, as we respond to what is best in our
 friends, with instant recognition and admiration, saying, "Yes,
 you're right, that's how it is!" The second element, or perhaps I
 should say *force*, is the writer's absolute trust (not blind faith)
 in his own aesthetic judgments and instincts, a trust grounded
 partly in his intelligence and sensitivity—his ability to perceive
 and understand the world around him—and partly in his ex-
 perience as a craftsman; that is (by his own harsh standards),
 his knowledge, drawn from long practice, of what will work
 and what will not.

What this means, in practical terms for the student writer,
 is that in order to achieve mastery he must read widely and
 deeply and must write not just carefully but continually,
 thoughtfully assessing and reassessing what he writes, because
 practice, for the writer as for the concert pianist, is the heart of
 the matter. Though the literary dabbler may write a fine story
 now and then, the true writer is one for whom technique has
 become, as it is for the pianist, second nature. Ordinarily this
 means university education, with courses in the writing of fic-
 tion, and poetry as well. Some important writers have said the
 opposite—for instance, Ernest Hemingway, who is quoted as
 having said that the way for a writer to learn his craft is to go
 away and write. Hemingway, it may help to remember, went
 away for free "tutorials" to two of the finest teachers then liv-
 ing, Sherwood Anderson and Gertrude Stein.

It is true that some writers have kept themselves more or
 less innocent of education, that some, like Jack London, were
 more or less self-made men; that is, people who scratched out
 an education by reading books between work-shifts on boats, in
 logging camps or gold camps, on farms or in factories. It is true
 that university education is in many ways inimical to the work
 of the artist: Rarely do painters have much good to say of
 aestheticians or history-of-art professors, and it's equally un-

common for even the most serious, "academic" writers to look with fond admiration at "the profession of English." And it's true, moreover, that life in the university has almost never produced subject matter for really good fiction. The life has too much trivia, too much mediocrity, too much soap opera, but consider:

No ignoramus—no writer who has kept himself innocent of education—has ever produced great art. One trouble with having read nothing worth reading is that one never fully understands the other side of one's argument, never understands that the argument is an old one (all great arguments are), never understands the dignity and worth of the people one has cast as enemies. Witness John Steinbeck's failure in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It should have been one of America's great books. But while Steinbeck knew all there was to know about Okies and the countless sorrows of their move to California to find work, he knew nothing about the California ranchers who employed and exploited them; he had no clue to, or interest in, their reasons for behaving as they did; and the result is that Steinbeck wrote not a great and firm novel but a disappointing melodrama in which complex good is pitted against unmitigated, unbelievable evil. Objectivity, fair-mindedness, the systematic pursuit of legitimate evaluation, these are some of the most highly touted values of university life, and even if—as is no doubt true—some professors are as guilty of simplification as John Steinbeck was, the very fact that these values are mouthed must have some effect on the alert student. Moreover, no student can get far in any university without encountering the discussion method; and what this means, at least in any good university, is that the student must learn to listen carefully and fair-mindedly to opinions different from his own. In my experience, this is not common elsewhere. In most assemblies, people all argue on the same side. Look at small-town papers. Truth is not much valued where everyone agrees on what the truth is and no one is handy to speak up for the side

that's been dismissed. However bad university professors may be in general, every great professor is a man or woman devoted to truth, and every university has at least one or two of them around.

But what makes ignoramuses bad writers is not just their inexperience in fair argument. All great writing is in a sense imitation of great writing. Writing a novel, however innovative that novel may be, the writer struggles to achieve one specific large effect, what can only be called the effect we are used to getting from good novels. However weird the technique, whatever the novel's mode, we say when we have finished it, "Now that is a novel!" We say it of *Anna Karenina* and of *Under the Volcano*, also of the mysteriously constructed *Moby-Dick*. If we say it of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* or *Malone Dies*, of Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*, or Kobo Abe's *The Ruined Map*, we say it because, for all their surface oddity, those novels produce the familiar effect. It rarely happens, if it happens at all, that a writer can achieve effects much larger than the effects achieved in books he has read and admired. Human beings, like chimpanzees, can do very little without models. One may learn to love Shakespeare by reading him on one's own—the ignoramus is unlikely to have done even this—but there is no substitute for being taken by the hand and guided line by line through *Othello*, *Hamlet*, or *King Lear*. This is the work of the university Shakespeare course, and even if the teacher is a person of limited intelligence and sensitivity, one can find in universities the critical books and articles most likely to be helpful, the books that have held up, and the best of the new books. Outside the university's selective process, one hardly knows which way to turn. One ends up with some crank book on how Shakespeare was really an atheist, or a Communist, or a pen-name used by Francis Bacon. Outside the university it seems practically impossible to come to an understanding of Homer or Vergil, Chaucer or Dante, any of the great masters who, properly understood, provide the highest

models yet achieved by our civilization. Whatever his genius, the writer unfamiliar with the highest effects possible is virtually doomed to search out lesser effects.

Admittedly the man who has educated himself is in a better position than the man not educated at all. But his work is sure to bear the mark of his limitation. If one studies the work of the self-educated—and we do not mean here the man who starts out with limited but rigorous and classical education, like Herman Melville—what one notices at once is the spottiness and therefore awkwardness of their knowledge. One forgives the fault, but the fact remains that it distracts and makes the work less than it might have been. One finds, for instance, naively excited and lengthy discussions of ideas that are commonplace or have long been discredited, or one finds curious, quirky interpretations of old myths—interpretations that, though interesting in themselves, suffer by comparison with what the myths really say and mean. We read, let us say, a story about Penelope as a grudging, recalcitrant wife. The writing may be superb, but when we think of Homer's portrait of the true, perfect wife, as courageous, cunning, and devoted as her husband, Homer's version so outshines the new one that we turn almost in disgust from the new writer's work. True, one can as easily get spotty knowledge from university graduates, and one can as easily get crackpot opinions from university professors as from independent study. The success of fools in the university world is one of God's great mysteries. But it's beside the point that the man who's been through university study can have knowledge as spotty as the self-made man's. The university can do no more than offer opportunities—opportunities made available nowhere else: a wealth of books, at least a few first-rate courses, professors, and fellow students, also lectures, debates, readings, and gatherings where anyone at all, if he's not too shy, can talk with some of the best novelists, poets, musicians, painters, politicians, and scientists of the age. If foolishness abounds in universities, it is only within that

same university world that the honest understanding of literature is a conscious discipline. No one can hope to write really well if he has not learned how to analyze fiction—how to recognize a symbol when it jumps at him, how to make out theme in a literary work, how to account for a writer's selection and organization of fictional details.

We need not be much distressed by the fact that as a rule painters have very little good to say of art historians and aestheticians, or that writers, even our best-educated writers, often express impatience with English professors. The critic's work—that is, the English professor's—is the analysis of what has already been written. It is his business to systematize what he reads and to present his discoveries in the way most likely to be beneficial to his students. If he's good at his job, he does this more or less dispassionately, objectively. He may be moved by a particular work, and may let his students know it, but though tears run down his cheeks, his purpose is to make structure and meaning crystal clear. This can lead—from the artist's point of view—to two evils. First, the professor, and indeed his whole profession, may tend to choose not the best works of literature but those about which it is most possible to make subtle observations. Since the novels of Anthony Trollope contain almost no obscure allusions and no difficult symbolism, they are hard to teach. One stands in front of class mouthing platitudes, snatching about for something interesting to say. On the other hand, one can dazzle one's students almost endlessly, or encourage one's students to dazzle one another, with talk about allusion and symbol in the work of ingenious but minor writers. Subtly and insidiously, standards become perverted. "Good" as an aesthetic judgment comes to mean "tricky," "academic," "obscure."

This perversion of standards leads to the second evil: The literature program wastes the young writer's time. Instead of allowing him to concentrate on important books, from Homer's *Iliad* to John Fowles' *Daniel Martin*, it clutters his reading

hours with trivia, old and new. To the extent that a given program feels obliged to treat English and American literature in their historical development, the offense is likely to be compounded. Though no one will deny that writers like Thomas Otway or, say, George Crabbe have both their innate and their historical interest, they have no more relevance for the serious young writer than has, for instance, James D. Watson's little book on the discovery of DNA. Probably less.

But the student is no helpless robot in the program. Strange to say—since writers so often speak harshly of English professors—young writers are almost always the darlings of the department, especially if they're good and serious young writers; so that it's almost always possible for the writer to work out some special arrangement, getting the courses he needs and avoiding those likely to be useless to him. (Who can hate a student who wants Dante instead of Dryden, Joyce instead of Jonathan Edwards?) And in any event, no law requires that the student leave college with a degree—discounting practical considerations. All that's required is that the student get, somehow, the literary background he needs.

One last remark and we can end this digression on the importance, for the serious young writer, of formal education.

The argument that what the writer really needs is experience in the world, not training in literature—both reading and writing—has been so endlessly repeated that for many it has come to sound like gospel. We cannot take time for a full answer here—how wide experience, from Zanzibar to the Yukon, is more likely to lead to cluttered texture than to deep and moving fiction, how the first-hand knowledge of a dozen trades is likely to be of less value to the writer than twenty good informants, the kind one gets talking to in bars, on Greyhound buses, at parties, or on sagging park benches. The primary subject of fiction is and has always been human emotion, values, and beliefs. The novelist Nicholas Delbanco has remarked that by the age of four one has experienced nearly everything

one needs as a writer of fiction: love, pain, loss, boredom, rage, guilt, fear of death. The writer's business is to make up convincing human beings and create for them basic situations and actions by means of which they come to know themselves and reveal themselves to the reader. For that one needs no schooling. But it's by training—by studying great books and by writing—that one learns to *present* one's fictions, giving them their due. Through the study of technique—not canoeing or logging or slinging hash—one learns the best, most efficient ways of making characters come alive, learns to know the difference between emotion and sentimentality, learns to discern, in the planning stages, the difference between the better dramatic action and the worse. It is this kind of knowledge—to return to our earlier subject—that leads to mastery.

However he may get it, mastery—not a full mental catalogue of the rules—must be the writer's goal. He must get the art of fiction, in all its complexity—the whole tradition and all its technical options—down through the wrinkles and tricky wiring of his brain into his blood. Not that he needs to learn literature first and writing later: The two processes are inseparable. Every real writer has had Melville's experience. He works at the problem of Ahab and the whale (the idea of an indifferent or malevolent universe), he happens to read Shakespeare and some philosophy books at the same time, and because of his reading he hits on heretofore unheard-of solutions to problems of novelistic exploration. Mastery is not something that strikes in an instant, like a thunderbolt, but a gathering power that moves steadily through time, like weather.

In other words, art has no universal rules because each true artist melts down and reforges all past aesthetic law. To learn to write well, one must begin with a clear understanding that for the artist, if not for the critic, aesthetic law is the enemy. To the great artist, anything whatever is possible. Invention, the spontaneous generation of new rules, is central to art. And since one does not learn to be a literary artist by studying first

*
Read aloud

how to be something different from a literary artist, it follows that for the young writer, as for the great writer he hopes to become, there can be no firm rules, no limits, no restrictions. Whatever works is good. He must develop an eye for what—by his own carefully informed standards—works.

Basic Skills, Genre, and Fiction as Dream

If there are no rules, or none worth his attention, where is the beginning writer to begin?

Often one glance at the writer's work tells the teacher that what this student writer needs first, before stirring an inch in the direction of fiction, is a review of fundamentals. No one can hope to write well if he has not mastered—absolutely mastered—the rudiments: grammar and syntax, punctuation, diction, sentence variety, paragraph structure, and so forth. It is true that punctuation (for instance) is a subtle art; but its subtlety lies in suspending the rules, as in "You, don't, know, a god, damned, thing," or "He'd seen her before, he was sure of it." No writer should ever have to hesitate for an instant over what the rule to be kept or suspended is. If he wishes, the teacher may deal with the student's problems as the course goes along (as one deals with spelling), but this is not at all the best way. Learning to write fiction is too serious a business to be mixed in with leftovers from freshman composition. The teacher, if he knows what he's doing, is too valuable to be wasted in this way; and the student, once he learns that he can get rid of most problems quickly and easily, is certain to want to do so. With the proper help and the proper book, any good student can