The ART of FICTION

Notes on Craft for Young Writers

John Gardner
The most important single notion in the theory of fiction I have outlined—essentially the traditional theory of our civilization's literature—is that of the vivid and continuous fictional dream. According to this notion, the writer sets up a dramatized action in which we are given the signals that make us "see" the setting, characters, and events; that is, he does not tell us about them in abstract terms, like an essayist, but gives us images that appeal to our senses—preferably all of them, not just the visual sense—so that we seem to move among the characters, lean with them against the fictional walls, taste the fictional gazpacho, smell the fictional hyacinths. In bad or unsatisfying fiction, this fictional dream is interrupted from time to time by some mistake or conscious ploy on the part of the artist. We are abruptly snapped out of the dream, forced to think of the writer or the writing. It is as if a playwright were to run out on stage, interrupting his characters, to remind us that he has written all this. I am not saying that a novelist cannot noticeably treat his characters as puppets in a stage-set world, since puppets and a stage set are also things we can see and to some extent empathize with. Even the most "objective" fiction, as Robert Louis Stevenson called it, is still fiction, still dramatization.
If the principle of vividness and continuity is clear, we can turn to some technical implications.

A scene will not be vivid if the writer gives too few details to stir and guide the reader’s imagination; neither will it be vivid if the language the writer uses is abstract instead of concrete. If the writer says “creatures” instead of “snakes,” or in an attempt to impress us with fancy talk he uses Latinate terms like “hostile maneuvers” instead of sharp Anglo-Saxon words like “thrash,” “coil,” “spit,” “hiss,” and “write,” if instead of the desert’s sand and rocks he speaks of the snakes’ “inhospitable abode,” the reader will hardly know what picture to conjure up on his mental screen. These two faults, insufficient detail and abstraction where what is needed is concrete detail, are common—in fact all but universal—in amateur writing. Another is the failure to run straight at the image; that is, the needless filtering of the image through some observing consciousness. The amateur writes: “Turning, she noticed two snakes fighting in among the rocks.” Compare: “She turned. In among the rocks, two snakes were fighting.” (The improvement can of course be further improved. The phrase “two snakes were fighting” is more abstract than, say, “two snakes whipped and lashed, striking at each other”; and verbs with auxiliaries (“were fighting”) are never as sharp in focus as verbs without auxiliaries, since the former indicate indefinite time, whereas the latter [e.g., “fought”] suggest a given instant.) Generally speaking—though no laws are absolute in fiction—vividness urges that almost every occurrence of such phrases as “she noticed” and “she saw” be suppressed in favor of direct presentation of the thing seen.

The technical implications of the continuity principle—the idea that the reader should never be distracted from the image or scene—cannot be treated so briefly. In the work of beginning writers, especially those weak in the basic skills of English composition, the usual mistake is that the writer distracts the reader by clumsy or incorrect writing. Characters, of course, can speak as clumsily as they like; the writer’s job is simply to imitate them accurately. But the standard third-person narrator can never miss. If the narrator slips into faulty syntax, the reader’s mind tacks away from the fighting snakes to the problem of figuring out what the sentence means. The distraction is almost certain to be emotional as well as intellectual, since the reader has every right to feel that the writer’s business is to say what he means clearly. In good fiction, the reader never has to go back over a sentence just to find out what it says. He may read a sentence twice because he likes it, or because, through no fault of the author, his mind briefly wandered, musing, perhaps, on the larger implications of the scene; but if it’s the author’s carelessness that makes him read twice, he has a right to feel that the author has violated the fundamental contract in all fiction: that the writer will deal honestly and responsibly with the reader. (This, it should be mentioned, does not rule out use of the so-called unreliable narrator, since the unreliable narrator is a character inside the fiction.)

Clumsy writing is an even more common mistake in the work of amateurs, though it shows up even in the work of very good writers. Some of the more frequent forms of clumsy writing should perhaps be mentioned here, since faults of this kind are a good deal more serious than the amateur may imagine. They alienate the experienced reader, or at very least make it hard for him to concentrate on the fictional dream, and they undercut the writer’s authority. Where lumps and infelicities occur in fiction, the sensitive reader shrinks away a little, as we do when an interesting conversationalist picks his nose.

The most obvious forms of clumsiness, really failures in the basic skills, include such mistakes as inappropriate or excessive use of the passive voice, inappropriate use of introductory phrases containing infinite verbs, shifts in diction level or the regular use of distracting diction, lack of sentence variety, lack of sentence focus, faulty rhythm, accidental rhyme, needless explanation, and careless shifts in psychic distance. Let us run through these one by one.
Except in stock locutions, such as "You were paid yesterday," "The Germans were defeated," or "The project was abandoned," the passive voice is virtually useless in fiction except when used for comic effect, as when the writer mimics some fool's slightly pompous way of speaking or quotes some institutional directive. The active voice is almost invariably more direct and vivid: "Your parrot bit me" as opposed to (passive) "I was bitten by your parrot." (The choice in this case may depend on characterization. A timid soul fearful of giving offense might well choose the passive construction.) In a story presented by the conventional omniscient narrator—an objective and largely impersonal formal narrative voice like, say, Tolstoy's—the passive voice is almost certain to offend and distract. Needless to say, the writer must judge every case individually, and the really good writer may get away with just about anything. But it must be clear that when the writer makes use of the passive he knows he's doing it and has good reason for what he does.

Sentences beginning with infinite-verb phrases are so common in bad writing that one is wise to treat them as guilty until proven innocent—sentences, that is, that begin with such phrases as "Looking up slowly from her sewing, Martha said..." or "Carrying the duck in his left hand, Henry..." In really bad writing, such introductory phrases regularly lead to shifts in temporal focus or to plain illogic. The bad writer tells us, for instance: "Firing the hired man and burning down his shack, Eloise drove into town." (The sentence implies that the action of firing the hired man and burning down his shack and the action of driving into town are simultaneous.) Or the bad writer tells us, "Quickly turning from the bulkhead, Captain Figg spoke slowly and carefully." (Illogical; that is, impossible.) But even if no illogic or confusion of temporal focus is involved, the too frequent or inappropriate use of infinite-verb phrases makes bad writing. Generally it comes about because the writer cannot think of a way to vary the length of his sentences. The writer looks at the terrible thing he's written: "She slipped off the garter. She turned to John. She smiled at his embarrassment," and in a desperate attempt to get rid of the dully thudding subjects and verbs he revises to "She slipped off the garter. Turning to John, she smiled at his embarrassment." The goal, sentence variety, may be admirable, but there are better ways. One can get rid of the thudding subjects and verbs by using compound predicates: "She slipped off the garter and turned to John," by introducing qualifiers and appositional phrases: "She slipped—or, rather, yanked—off the garter, a frayed, mournful pink one long past its prime, gray elastic peeking out past the ruffles, indifferentyly obscene" (etc.); or by finding some appropriate subordinate clause, perhaps: "When she had slipped off the garter, she turned to John"—a solution that gets rid of the thudding by lowering (fastening) the stress of the first "she." (Compare the two rhythms: "She slipped off the garter. She turned to John" and "When she had slipped off the garter, she turned to John." All this is not to deny, of course, that the introductory infinite-verb phrase can be an excellent thing in its place. Properly used, it momentarily slows down the action, gives it a considered, weighted quality that can heighten the tension of an important scene. It works well, for instance, in situations like these: "Slowly raising the rifle barrel..." or "Gazing off at the woods, giving her no answer..." Used indiscriminately, the introductory infinite-verb phrase chops the action into fits and starts and loses what effectiveness it might have had, properly set.

Diction problems are usually symptomatic of defects in the character or education of the writer. Both diction shifts and the steady use of inappropriate diction suggest either deep-down bad taste or the awkwardness that comes of inexperience and timidity. There seems little or no hope for the adult writer who produces sentences like these: "Her cheeks were thick and smooth and held a healthy natural red color. The heavy lines under them, her jowls, extended to the intersection of her lips and gave her a thick-lipped frown most of the time." The phrase
"Her cheeks were thick and smooth" is normal English, but "[Her cheeks] held a healthy natural red color" is elevated, pseudo-poetic. The word "held" faintly hints at personification of "cheeks," and "healthy natural red color" is clunky, stilted, slightly bookish. The second sentence contains similar mistakes. The diction level of "extended to the intersection of her lips" is high and formal, in ferocious conflict with the end of the sentence, which plunges to the colloquial "most of the time." There may be slightly more hope for the writer who uses steadily elevated diction—sentences that pomp along like these: "The unique smell of urine and saltwater greeted him as he stepped through the hatchway. He surveyed the area for an open sink or shower stall but, finding none, had to wait in line." ("Had to wait in line" is of course a sudden diction drop.) The writing here has most of the usual qualities of falsely elevated diction: abstract language ("unique smell"), cliché personification ("[the smell] greeted him"), Latinate language where simple Anglo-Saxon would be preferable ("surveyed the area" for "looked around"), and so forth. If a writer with difficulties like these ever writes the relatively easy kinds of fiction—the realistic story and the yarn as opposed to the tale—he can get rid of his problems simply. He can learn by diligence to eradicate all traces of fancy talk from his vocabulary, using direct, colloquial speech in realistic stories and in yarns imitating the conventional backwater narrative voice (the rural Southerner, the crafty old farmer of New England, or whatever). Serious tales, which by convention require elevated, almost stately tone, are likely to prove forever beyond this writer’s means, since no one can write in the high style if he cannot tell real high style from fake. It’s a limitation no writer should happily accept, as a few phrases from Melville should remind us:

The morning was one peculiar to that coast. Everything was mute and calm, everything grey. The sea, though undulated into long roods of swells, seemed fixed,

and was sleeked at the surface like waved lead that has cooled and set in the smelter’s mould. The sky seemed a grey mantle. Flights of troubled grey fowl, kith and kin with flights of troubled grey vapours among which they were mixed, skinned low and pitifully over the waters, as swallows over meadows before storms. Shadows present, foreshadowing deeper shadows to come.

Or look at an example of Isak Dinesen’s use of the tale's traditional high style:

The big house stood as firmly rooted in the soil of Denmark as the peasants’ huts, and was as faithfully allied to her four winds and her changing seasons, to her animal life, trees and flowers. Only its interests lay in a higher plane. Within the domain of the lime trees it was no longer cows, goats, and pigs on which the minds and the talk ran, but horses and dogs. The wild fauna, the game of the land, that the peasant shook his fist at when he saw it on his young green rye or in his ripening wheat field, to the residents of the country houses were the main pursuit and the joy of existence.

The writing in the sky solemnly proclaimed continuance, a worldly immortality. The great country houses had held their ground through many generations. The families who lived in them revered the past as they honoured themselves, for the history of Denmark was their own history.

The high style, like Bach, is not for everyone; but the fact that amateurs so regularly fall into grotesque imitation of it suggests that it strikes some responsive chord in us. By reading carefully and extensively, by writing constantly and getting the best criticism available to him, the writer who begins with no feeling for diction can eventually overcome his problems.

Sentence variety is discussed in most freshman composition
books and need not be treated at length here; it will be enough to mention one or two of the problems that most frequently plague creative writers. What the young writer needs to do, of course, is study sentences, consciously experiment with them, since he can see for himself what the difficulty is, and can see for himself when he has beaten it: Where variety is lacking, sentences all run to the same length, carry over and over the same old rhythms, and have the same boring structure. Subject-verb, subject-verb, subject-verb-object, subject-verb. What the alert writer learns as he begins to experiment is that the cure can be worse than the disease. I’ve mentioned already the usually ill-fated introduction of an opening infinite-verb phrase. Another bad cure is the sentence awkwardly stretched out by a “that” or “which” clause. For example, “Leaping from the couch, he seized the revolver from the bookshelf that stood behind the armchair,” or, “She turned, shrieking, throwing up her arms in terror at the sight of the gorilla that had arrived that morning from Africa, which had formerly been its home.” What happens in such sentences, obviously, is that they tend to trail off, lose energy. It may help to look at the matter this way: Sentences in English tend to fall into meaning units or syntactic slots—for instance, such patterns as

1 2 3
subject, verb, object
or
1 2
subject, verb-modifier.

In the so-called periodic sentence, highly recommended by high-school English teachers, the most interesting or important thing in the sentence is pushed into the final slot, as in “Down the river, rolling and bellowing, came Mabel’s cow.” The natural superiority of the periodic sentence can be exaggerated, but it is a fact that an anticlimactic ending can ruin an otherwise perfectly good sentence, and almost invariably—except in comic writing—the “that” or “which” clause leads to anticlimax. (In New Yorker “super-realist” fiction, this stylistic flatness may be a virtue.)

Often the search for variety leads to another problem, the overloading of sentences and the loss of focus. Look at these sentences: “The dark waters of the Persian Gulf were very peaceful as the pinkish glow of pre-dawn light turned the horizon’s gray clouds to shades of orchid and lavender. The clear, cool air breezed across the decks of the mammoth white ship as it moved almost silently through the water.” In a somewhat frantic attempt to get gusto, the writer packs his sentence like a Japanese commuter train. Perhaps a great writer might get away with this (in prose fiction Dylan Thomas and Lawrence Durrell have tried it), but it seems not too likely. As a rule, if a sentence has three syntactic slots, as in

1 2 3
The man walked down the road

—a writer may load one or two of the slots with modifiers, but if the sentence is to have focus—that is, if the reader is to be able to make out some clear image, not just a jumble—the writer cannot cram all three syntactic slots with details. So, for instance, the writer may load down slot 1 and leave the others more or less alone, thus:

1
The old man, stooped, bent almost double under his load of tin pans, yet smiling with a sort of maniacal good cheer and chattering to himself in what seemed to be Slavonian,
2 3
walked slowly down the road.

Or he may load up slot 2:

1 2
The old man walked slowly, lifting his feet carefully, sometimes kicking one shoe forward in what looked like
a dance, then slamming down the foot before the sole could flop loose again, grinning when it worked, muttering to himself, making no real progress down the road.

Or the writer may risk piling high precarious loads on both slots 1 and 2; for instance:

1

The old man, stooped, bent almost double under his load of tin pans, yet smiling with a sort of maniacal good cheer and chattering to himself in what seemed to be Slavonian,

2

walked slowly, lifting his feet carefully, sometimes kicking one shoe forward in what looked like a dance, then slamming down the foot before the sole could flop loose again, grinning when it worked, pleased with himself, but

3

making no real progress down the road.

If what chiefly interests him is literary stunts (and such things are not all bad, though they can detract from fiction's seriousness), the writer can ooch slot 3 just a little, changing it in the sentence above to something like "the bumpy, crooked road." This sort of playing around with sentences is one of the chief things that make writing a pleasure; nevertheless, no writer can help but recognize that eventually enough is enough.

Readers sensitive to the virtues of good fiction can be distracted from the fictional dream by subtler kinds of mistakes. One of these is faulty rhythm. Many writers, including some famous ones, write with no consciousness of the poetic effects available through prose rhythm. They put the wine on the table, put the cigarette in the ashtray, paint in the lovers, start the clock ticking, all with no thought of whether the sentences should be fast or slow, light-hearted or solemn with wedged-in juxtaposed stresses. I am not speaking now of the intentionally arhythmic writer, the kind who never allows himself a passage that stands out as rhythmically beautiful but on the other hand never makes us stumble or dance for our footing like a calf on ice. In realistic fiction, such writers argue, an important part of the writer's business is to imitate the way real people speak; and since in life people do not generally speak in fine poetic rhythms, the controlling narrator, who must thread the rhythms of his speech in with the rhythms of the characters, is wise to keep his rhythms unnoticeable; wise, that is, to steer as far as possible from the rhythms of bardic or incantatory writers like James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, or William Faulkner. To choose the bardic voice is automatically to take a slight step back from realism, to move from the casually spoken to the intoned, from the realistic story toward the tale. Both the intentionally arrhythmic writer—John Updike is an example—and the writer, like myself, who would sacrifice a character's ears for melodic effect, can be counted on not to distract the reader from his dream by clunky rhythms. The writer who simply never thinks about rhythm is almost certain to do so. The reader may suddenly be stopped cold by a line in accidental doggerel:

No one was looking when Tarkington's gun went off, killing James Harris and maiming his wife.*

The writer thus unintentionally produces a form of sprung verse—that is, jammed stresses one after another—when what he needs, to reflect the moment's rush, is lighter rhythms, anapests or dactyls. For example, he may write:

"Stop, thief!" Bones Danks cried. "Stop! Can't some good soul stop that man, please?"

Needless to say, the writer who does pay attention to rhythm can also find ways of distracting the reader from the fictional

* For explanation of the metrical markings, see pp. 150-53.
dream, mainly by overdoing things—that is, by letting his ego
catch in the way of his materials—but this we need not speak of
now, since we will need to look later at Longinus' principle of
frigidity.

Another irritant is accidental rhyme, as in the sentence
"When the rig blew, everything went flying sky-high—me too."
Notice here that the rhyme is offensive because both rhyme-
words, "blew" and "too," are stressed positions; that is, the voice
comes down hard on them. The rhyme is not offensive, to most
ears, if the writer can get one of the rhymes out of stressed
position: "The rig blew sky-high, and everything went flying—
me too." In this version the word "blew" gives away stress to
"sky-high," and the "blew-too" rhyme drops toward background
effect. Now, however, we have a new stressed rhyme—"sky-
high" and "flying" (well, close enough for rhyme in prose)—and
we notice an odd thing: It sounds OK. If we analyze the sounds,
trying to understand the reason, we perhaps come up with this:
First, the two-element rhyme "sky-high," with a hovering stress
(see analysis below), is resolved by a feminine rhyme (a word
ending with an unstressed syllable) followed by a phrase, "me
too," that functions as a pull-away; the result is that the rhyme-
word "flying" hits lightly in comparison with the rhyme base
"sky-high," the voice hurrying on to the pull-away.

"The rig blew sky-high, and everything went flying—me
too." Second, the phrase "me too" faintly recalls the unstressed
base "blew" and at the same time rhythmically recalls "sky-
high," with the result that the "sky-high—flying" rhyme is
slightly muted. Let us turn the sentence around one last time,
this time suppressing "blew":

"The rig went flying, and everything shot sky-high—me
too." If we mentally substitute "blew" for "shot," we see—or,
rather, hear—at once that it won't do—an extremely heavy,
awkward rhyme of the kind certain to distract the reader; that is,
make him stop thinking of the images for a moment to wonder
what's gone wrong with the writer's brain. On the other hand,
with "shot," the "flying—sky-high" rhyme seems acceptable.
The sentence's andante opening (loosely iambic) accelerates to
its allegro mid-section ("flying, and everything"), and then sud-
ddenly the sentence opens out like a huge, slow firework, with
repeated jammed stresses to balance the quickness earlier and
the "sky-high" rhyme rising like a crown. This kind of poetic
effect in fiction distracts only in an acceptable way. The reader
may pause and read the sentence twice, savoring the way sound
echoes sense, but if he has turned for a moment from the fic-
tional dream it is only in the way we pause sometimes to admire
the technique of an animal trainer—the flourish with which he
lowers his head into the jaws of the crocodile—after which we
throw ourselves back into watching the act. Writers very sure of
their technical mastery—tour-de-force writers—may make a
kind of game of seeing how far they can go, winking and leering
at the reader, before breaking the fictional illusion. On that,
mere later.

 Needless explanation and explanation where drama alone
would be sufficient are other irritants. In amateur fiction these
problems may show up in crude forms, but experienced writers
can make mistakes of the same basic kinds. The amateur writer
tells us, for instance, that Mrs. Wu is a crabby old woman and
explains that one reason is Mrs. Wu's trouble with sciatica. All
of this information could and should have been conveyed
through dialogue and action. We should have seen her kicking
the cat out of the way, rubbing her hip, yelling out the window
at Mr. Chang, who's parked his truck on her curb. We should
hear her on the telephone, complaining to her son in San Diego.
Experienced writers can make the same mistake—usually, if not
invariably, out of a too great fondness on the writer's part for
the mellifluous tones of his own voice. He may write:

Detective Gerald B. Craine was very drunk. Sitting
that morning in the parked truck, he couldn't tell reality
—or, at any rate, what you and I call reality—from the
shadows and phantoms produced by his delirium tremens. His sense of responsibility, his courage, his nobility of heart, his native chivalry, all these were as keen as ever; but his eye for mundane truth was not what it might have been. And so, believing he saw something, and thinking himself called upon for heroic action, he threw down the bottle, snatched out his revolver, ran into the house where the girl had just gone, and once again proved himself a fool.

Voice, once a writer masters it, can be a delightful thing, but no smart writer depends on voice alone to sail him past all evils. Compare another version of the scene with the drunken detective, this time dramatized, not explained:

Where the snake came from he did not see. A roar filled his mind, the sky flashed white, and as if the doorway to the underworld had opened, there lay the snake, a foot across, maybe thirty feet long, greenish-golden. It moved quickly, gracefully across the street in front of him and over the curb toward the porch where a moment ago Elaine Glass had stood. It had large black eyes; in its scales, glints of violet and vermillion. Hatchet-head raised, tongue flicking, it moved with the assurance of a familiar visitor up the sidewalk toward the steps.

With a yelp, without thinking, Craine threw down the bottle, pushed open the door of his side, half-jumped, half-fell from the truck, and ran around the front. He drew his pistol as he ran. The students on the porch snatched their things from the steps and porch-floor and jumped back. The tail of the enormous snake was disappearing through the door. Now it was gone. He ran after it, waving the pistol, running so fast he could hardly keep from falling.

Though we run across exceptions, philosophical novels where explanation holds interest, the temptation to explain is one that should almost always be resisted. A good writer can get anything at all across through action and dialogue, and if he can think of no powerful reason to do otherwise, he should probably leave explanation to his reviewers and critics. The writer should especially avoid comment on what his characters are feeling, or at very least should be sure he understands the common objection summed up in the old saw “Show, don’t tell.” The reason, of course, is that set beside the complex thought achieved by drama, explanation is thin g scrape, hence boring. A woman, say, decides to leave home. As readers, we watch her all morning, study and think about her gestures, her mutterings, her feelings about the neighbors and the weather. After our experience, which can be intense if the writer is a good one, we know why the character leaves when finally she walks out the door. We know in a way almost too subtle for words, which is the reason that the writer’s attempt to explain, if he’s so foolish as to make the attempt, makes us yawn and set the book down.

Careless shifts in psychic distance can also be distracting. By psychic distance we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story. Compare the following examples, the first meant to establish great psychic distance, the next meant to establish slightly less, and so on until in the last example, psychic distance, theoretically at least, is nil.

1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul . . .

When psychic distance is great, we look at the scene as if from far away—our usual position in the traditional tale, remote in time and space, formal in presentation (example 1 above would
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Careless shifts in psychic distance can also be distracting. By psychic distance we mean the distance the reader feels between himself and the events in the story. Compare the following examples, the first meant to establish great psychic distance, the next meant to establish slightly less, and so on until in the last example, psychic distance, theoretically at least, is nil.

1. It was winter of the year 1833. A large man stepped out of a doorway.
2. Henry J. Warburton had never much cared for snowstorms.
3. Henry hated snowstorms.
4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.
5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul . . .

When psychic distance is great, we look at the scene as if from far away—our usual position in the traditional tale, remote in time and space, formal in presentation (example 1 above would
appear only in a tale); as distance grows shorter—as the camera dollied in, if you will—we approach the normal ground of the yarn (2 and 3) and short story or realistic novel (1 through 5). In good fiction, shifts in psychic distance are carefully controlled. At the beginning of the story, in the usual case, we find the writer using either long or medium shots. He moves in a little for scenes of high intensity, draws back for transitions, moves in still closer for the story’s climax. (Variations of all kinds are possible, of course, and the subtle writer is likely to use psychic distance, as he might any other fictional device, to get odd new effects. He may, for instance, keep a whole story at one psychic-distance setting, giving an eerie, rather icy effect if the setting is like that in example 2, an overheated effect that only great skill can keep from mush or sentimentality if the setting is like that in example 5. The point is that psychic distance, whether or not it is used conventionally, must be controlled.) A piece of fiction containing sudden and inexplicable shifts in psychic distance looks amateur and tends to drive the reader away. For instance: “Mary Borden hated woodpeckers. Lord, she thought, they’ll drive me crazy! The young woman had never known any personally, but Mary knew what she liked.”

Clumsy writing of the kinds I’ve been discussing cannot help distracting the reader from the dream and thus ruining or seriously impairing the fiction. I’ve limited myself to the most common kinds, or those that have proved most common in my experience as a writing teacher and sometime editor of books and literary magazines. Among very bad writers even worse faults appear—two or three spring immediately to mind and may as well be mentioned: getting the events in an action out of order, cloddishly awkward insertion of details, and certain persistent oddities of imitation or spelling difficult to account for except by a theory of activity by the Devil. The first of these should need no explanation. I refer simply to the presentation of a series of actions where by some means the writer—perhaps because his mind is focused on something else—gets events out of sequence, forcing the reader to go back and straighten them out; or, to put it another way, where the writer momentarily suspends meaning in his sentence (almost always a bad idea), forcing the reader to run on faith for several words, hoping that out of seeming chaos some sense will emerge. Two examples. First: “Turning, dribbling low as he went in for his shot, he was suddenly knocked flat by one of the cheerleaders, who had rushed onto the court in her excitement and so had gotten in his way.” A sentence like this one can be foibility off on the reader occasionally—though the sharp reader will notice and object—but if such things happen often the authority of the writer is seriously undermined and, more to the point, the dream loses power and coherence. If we are to see a perfectly focused dream image, we must be given the signals one by one, in order, so that everything happens with smooth logicality, perfect inevitability. The only exception (and even here the writer should be sure his exception is justified) is the scene in which the character’s disorientation—and the reader’s—is meant to be an important part of the effect. Bad writers use this exception as an excuse to introduce voices out of nowhere, as when we have a young man walking down the road, whistling happily, no one in sight, and then we encounter the words (new paragraph): “Watch yourself, Boon!” Followed by (new paragraph): “Boon turned in alarm, looking all around in panic.” This kind of thing is common in fiction, of course, and my disapproval will not do much to discourage writers from continuing to use it. Nevertheless, if the theory of fiction as a dream in the reader’s mind is correct, the surprise break into the calm of things (“Watch yourself”) is a mistake, or anyway a lapse from absolute, perfectly focused clarity. Compare: “Suddenly, from somewhere, a voice shouted, ‘Watch yourself, Boon!’” But these are delicate matters, and every writer will have his own opinion on just how far he ought to go in pursuit of the ideal of clarity. As far as I’m concerned, if the writer has at least seriously thought about the problem and
fully understands the advantages of keeping event \( a \) in front of event \( b \) and all the event chains as sensible and clear as falling dominoes, he can—and should—do whatever feels best to him. Who knows what’s going on in the early novels of John Hawkes? And yet few writers have ever created more powerful and coherent dreams.

Practically nothing need be said, either, about the cloddishly awkward insertion of details. One thinks of those moments, so common in even professional fiction, when the writer finds himself struggling (as if for the first time) with the age-old problem of smoothly introducing the looks of his central character. (She happens past a mirror, sees her face in a clockface, happens on a friend who gushes about how she used to look as opposed to how she looks now; or the writer, throwing in the towel, just tells us, and the hell with it.) Any experienced writing teacher can give tips on how to slip things in with the dexterity of a magician forcing cards into the hand of his assistant from the audience, but really all that needs to be said—or ought to be said—is this: What the honest writer does, when he’s finished a rough draft, is go over it and over it, time after time, refusing to let anything stay if it looks awkward, phony, or forced. Clumsily inserted details must either be revised into neatly inserted details or they must be revised out of the fiction.

As for the third of the amateur sins I mentioned, oddities of imitation or spelling, the less said the better. I mean things like, in dialogue, “um, uh . . .”—sometimes used by good writers in ways that don’t stand out and distract from the fictional dream, but usually used by amateurs in ways that make the reader tear his hair. As long as one has a narrator available, one can avoid funny-looking dialogue by simply saying, for example, “Carlos said, stammering slightly, ‘I don’t know.’” (No need then for an “um” or a “d-d-don’t.”) And then there are odd spellings like “Yea” for “Yeah” or “Yeh,” spellings whereby football players or drug pushers start sounding like Jesus (“Yea verily”).

All of these clumsy kinds of writing belong under the heading “Learning the Basic Skills” and are matters so obvious to the experienced reader or writer that they seem at first glance to have no place in a book for serious writers. The reasons they do belong are, first, that the best writers do not always (or even often) come from the well-educated upper middle class—art’s cauldron is only on rare occasions gold or silver—and, second, that clumsy errors of the kind I’ve been treating help show clearly what we mean when we speak of “things that distract the reader’s mind from the fictional dream,” and nothing in what I’m saying is more fundamental than the concept of the uninterrupted fictional dream.

Let us turn now to three faults far graver than mere clumsiness—not faults of technique but faults of soul: sentimentality, frigidity, and mannerism. Faults of soul, I’ve said; but I don’t mean those words as a Calvinist would. Faults of soul, like faults of technique, can be corrected. In fact the main work a writing teacher does, and the main work the writer must do for himself, is bring about change in the writer’s basic character, helping to make him that “true Poet,” as Milton said, without whom there can be no true Poem.

Sentimentality, in all its forms, is the attempt to get some effect without providing due cause. (I take it for granted that the reader understands the difference between sentiment in fiction, that is, emotion or feeling, and sentimentality, emotion or feeling that rings false, usually because achieved by some form of cheating or exaggeration. Without sentiment, fiction is worthless. Sentimentality, on the other hand, can make mush of the finest characters, actions, and ideas.) The theory of fiction as a vivid, uninterrupted dream in the reader’s mind logically requires an assertion that legitimate cause in fiction can be of only one kind: drama; that is, character in action. Once it is dramatically established that a character is worthy of our sympathy and love, the story-teller has every right (even the obligation, some would say) to give sharp focus to our grief at the misfortunes of that character by means of powerful, appropriate rhetoric. (If
the emotional moment has been well established, plain statements may be just as effective. Think of Chekhov.) The result is strong sentiment, not sentimentality. But if the story-teller tries to make us burst into tears at the misfortunes of some character we hardly know; if the story-teller appeals to stock response (our love of God or country, our pity for the downtrodden, the presumed warm feelings all decent people have for children and small animals); if he tries to make us cry by cheap melodrama, telling us the victim that we hardly know is all innocence and goodness and the oppressor all vile black-heartedness; or if he tries to win us over by the detailed and authentically virtues of the unfortunate but by rhetorical clichés, by breathless sentences, or by superdramatic one-sentence paragraphs (“Then she saw the gun”)—sentences of the kind favored by porn and thriller writers, and increasingly of late by supposedly serious writers—then the effect is sentimentality, and no reader who's experienced the power of real fiction will be pleased by it.

In great fiction we are moved by what happens, not by the whimpering or bawling of the writer's presentation of what happens. That is, in great fiction, we are moved by characters and events, not by the emotion of the person who happens to be telling the story. Sometimes, as in the fiction of Tolstoy or Chekhov—and one might mention many others—the narrative voice is deliberately kept calm and dispassionate, so that the emotion arising from the fictional events comes through almost wholly untinged by presentation; but restraint of that kind is not an aesthetic necessity. A flamboyant style like that of Faulkner at his best can be equally successful. The trick is simply that the style must work in the service of the material, not in advertisement of the writer. When the ideas, characters, and actions are firmly grounded, Thomas Wolfe's or William Faulkner's style can give fitting expression to a story's emotional content. Like the formal laments of a Greek chorus, great rolling waves of rhetoric can raise our joy or grief to a keen intensity that transcends the mundane and takes on the richness and universality of ritual. What begins in the real, in other words, can be uplifted by style to something we recognize, even as we read, as at once the real and the real transmuted. So the passage on the death of Joe Christmas, in *Light in August*, strikes the reader as at once reality and artifice, fact and hymn. The prose poetry, in all its majestic self-consciousness, its unabashed leap above the language ordinary people really speak, causes us to feel the resonance of the death and all it means. But it's because the necessary drama has been presented—the lifelike causes laid out in the story—that the rhetoric works. When Wolfe or Faulkner works less carefully, as both sometimes do, trying to make incantation substitute for character-in-action, the reader squirms. We may squirm in the same way, it has often been remarked, when we encounter the other extreme of manneristic sentimentality, the whine we sometimes catch in Hemingway, wherein understatement becomes a kind of self-pity.

The fault Longinus identified as "frigidity" occurs in fiction whenever the author reveals by some slip or self-regarding intrusion that he is less concerned about his characters than he ought to be—less concerned, that is, than any decent human being observing the situation would naturally be. Suppose the writer is telling of a bloody fistfight between an old man and his son, and suppose that earlier in the story he has shown that the old man dearly loves his son, though he can never find an adequate way to show it, so that the son, now middle-aged, still suffers from his belief that his father dislikes him, and wishes he could somehow turn the old man's dislike to love. Suppose, further, that the writer has established this story of misunderstandings with sufficient power that when the fistfight begins—the old man's blow to the side of his son's head, the son's astonished raising of his arms for protection, the old man's second blow, this time to the nose, so that the son in pain and fury hits the old man on the ear—our reaction as we read is horror and grief. We bend toward the book in fascination and alarm, and the
writer continues: "The old man was crying like a baby now and swinging wildly—harmlessly, now that he’d been hurt—swinging and crying, red-faced, like a baby with his diapers full." "Yuk!" we say, and throw the book into the fire. What has happened, of course, is that the writer has forgotten that his characters’ situation is serious; he’s responded to his own imagined scene with insufficient warmth, has allowed himself to get carried away by the baby image, and, momentarily forgetting or failing to notice the scene's real interest—the fact that a pathetic misunderstanding can have led to this—the writer snatches at (or settles for) a detail of, at best, trivial interest, dirty diapers. The writer lacks the kind of passion all true artists possess. He lacks the nobility of spirit that enables a real writer to enter deeply into the feelings of imaginary characters (as he enters deeply into the feelings of real people). In a word, the writer is frigid.

Strictly speaking, frigidity characterizes the writer who presents serious material, then fails to carry through—fails to treat it with the attention and seriousness it deserves. I would extend the term to mean a further cold-heartedness as well, the given writer’s inability to recognize the seriousness of things in the first place, the writer who turns away from real feeling, or sees only the superficialities of a conflict of wills, or knows no more about love, beauty, or sorrow than one might learn from a Hallmark card. With the meaning thus extended, frigidity seems one of the salient faults in contemporary literature and art. It is sometimes frigidity that leads writers to tinker, more and more obsessively, with form; frigidity that leads critics to schools of criticism that take less and less interest in character, action, and the explicit ideas of the story. It may even be frigidity that steers the writer toward sentimentality, the faking of emotions the writer does not honestly feel. Frigidity is, in short, one of the worst faults possible in literature, and often the basis of other faults. When the amateur writer lets a bad sentence stand in his final draft, though he knows it’s bad, the sin is frigidity:

He has not yet learned the importance of his art, the only art or science in the world that deals in precise detail with the causes, nature, and effects of ordinary and extraordinary human feeling. When a skillful writer writes a shallow, cynical, merely amusing book about extramarital affairs, he has wandered—with far more harmful effect—into the same unsavory bog.

Mannered writing seems at times a species of frigidity (Hemingway at his worst), at other times a species of sentimentality (Faulkner at his worst), but is best treated as a separate fault, since the mannered writer may be neither frigid nor sentimental but simply mannered. Mannered writing is writing that continually distracts us from the fictional dream by stylistic tics that we cannot help associating, as we read, with the author’s wish to intrude himself, prove himself different from all other authors. The tics of mannered writing are not to be confused with stylistic devices that can be explained as clearly in the service of subject matter (character and action) or designed to express some new way of seeing (the special effects of some difficult but clearly justifiable style we must learn to tune in on, as we do to the styles of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, or, more recently, Peter Matthiessen in *Far Tortuga*). Neither should the tics of mannered writing be confused with those oddities we associate with inherent stiffness or nervousness, comparable to that of an amateur speaker who forms his sentences carefully and somewhat clumsily, as in the painstaking, sometimes clunky style of Sherwood Anderson. Look, for example, at the first two paragraphs of his "Death in the Woods."

She was an old woman and lived on a farm near the town in which I lived. All country and small-town people have seen such old women, but no one knows much about them. Such an old woman comes into town driving an old worn-out horse or she comes afoot carrying a basket. She may own a few hens and have eggs to sell. She brings them in a basket and takes them to a grocer. There she trades
them in. She gets some salt pork and some beans. Then she gets a pound or two of sugar and some flour.

Afterward she goes to the butcher's and asks for some dog meat. She may spend ten or fifteen cents, but when she does she asks for something. In my day the butchers gave liver to anyone who wanted to carry it away. In our family we were always having it. Once one of my brothers got a whole cow's liver at the slaughter-house near the fairgrounds. We had it until we were sick of it. It never cost a cent. I have hated the thought of it ever since.

It's hard to believe that Anderson thinks country people talk this way, and the idea that he is imitating an illiterate man's way of writing is too discouraging to pursue. Yet, reading Anderson's carefully stiff work, we never get the sense that he writes as he does to call attention to himself. Either he cannot write more smoothly (but some of his fiction belies this) or else he writes in this farmerish way because the style expresses his fiction's purpose: It discourages us from looking for superficial beauty, the polish of entertainment, and encourages us to read him sober-mindedly, with the sort of country earnestness that suits the plain, thoughtful narrator and his story. The style shows us not the writer's cleverness, much less his ego, but the tone and intention of his writing.

The tics of mannered writing, on the other hand, are those from which we gather, by the pricking of our thumbs, some ulterior purpose on the writer's part, a purpose perhaps not fully conscious but nevertheless suspect, putting us on our guard. Think of John Dos Passos at his most self-important, or George Bernard Shaw when he pontificates. Whereas the frigid writer lacks strong feeling, and the sentimental writer applies feeling indiscriminately, the mannered writer feels more strongly about his own personality and ideas—his ego, which he therefore keeps before us by means of style—than he feels about any of his characters—in effect, all the rest of humanity.

Mannered writing, then—like sentimentality and frigidity—arises out of flawed character. In critical circles it is considered bad form to make connections between literary faults and bad character, but for the writing teacher such connections are impossible to miss, hence impossible to ignore. If a male student writer attacks all womanhood, producing a piece of fiction that embarrasses the class, the teacher does less than his job requires if he limits his criticism to comments on the writer's excessive use of "gothic detail," the sentimentalizing tendency of his sentence rhythms, or the distracting effect of his heavily scatological diction. The best such timorous criticism can achieve is a revised piece of fiction that is free of all technical faults but no less embarrassing. To help the writer, since that is his job, the teacher must enable the writer to see—partly by showing him how the fiction betrays his distorted vision (as fiction, closely scrutinized, always will)—that his personal character is wanting.

Some writing teachers feel reluctant to do this kind of thing, and people who are not artists—people with no burning convictions about writing or the value of getting down to bedrock truth—are inclined to be sympathetic. Nobody's perfect, they generously observe. But the true artist is impatient with such talk. Circus knife-throwers know that it is indeed possible to be perfect, and one had better be. Perfection means hitting exactly what you are aiming at and not touching by a hair what you are not. It serves no useful purpose for the writer to remind himself that "even Homer sometimes nods." Homer doesn't, except in the most trivial ways; for instance, in his many long battle scenes, carelessly killing off the same soldier twice. Chaucer, in all his finest poems, achieves something very near perfection. Racine in Phaedra. Shakespeare in Macbeth. Serious critics sometimes argue that the standards in art are always relative, but all artistic masterpieces give them the lie. In the greatest
works of art—think of the last works of Cézanne or Beethoven—there are no real mistakes. For this very reason (not snobbery or malice) it is important to keep track of the faults of writers not quite of the first rank, especially those writers close to our own time, whose genius half-persuades us that their faults must somehow be virtues.

When we look at writers of the last generation—to say nothing of the best-known writers now among us—no fault stands out more visibly than mannered style. William Faulkner, though one of the best of men and often a brilliant writer, was highly mannered. One more “apotheosis,” the reader feels, and he'll be driven to blow up some church. In the late works, the reader feels again and again that Faulkner is trying to recapture lost successes by cranking up the rhetoric, originally invented to convey ideas and emotions already present, but now mere steam and roar and rattle, a freight train empty of its freight. Hemingway was as bad, though his mannered prose is antithetical to Faulkner's. (Should anyone doubt that the Hemingway style is excessively mannered, not just beautifully chiseled, as it is in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” and all his best short stories, let him try reading through ten, fifteen stories in a row.) James Joyce was another outrageous offender, as he knew himself. His lyrical repetitions of key symbolic phrases, especially in Ulysses, can never be explained fully by aesthetic function; they always carry with them a hint of Joyce's dandyism, his middle-period unwillingness to stand back from the work of art—as he himself told the world it should do—his unwillingness as an artist to imitate God, sitting “outside, indifferent, paring his nails.” Late in life, Joyce was enormously pained and frustrated by the wrong turn he believed his career had taken after Dubliners and Portrait. The finest short story ever written, he claimed, was Tolstoy's late, simple little fable, “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” That opinion, like other of Joyce's last opinions, is generally taken not too seriously. Joyce was ill, alcoholic, full of self-hatred; he had recently created—and was still working over—

one of the towering works of the human mind and spirit, Finnegans Wake.

But while we're obviously right to keep Joyce's dissatisfaction with Finnegans Wake in perspective, we need to notice that in fact he said what he meant. He was pointing out, quite seriously, something that he'd discovered to be going wrong with the age—not only in his own work but in everybody's work. Turning back, with praise, to his early, most unmannered writings, and raising for inspection as a literary touchstone an unmannered, simple fable, Joyce was reiterating principles he had recognized from the beginning, though he'd slipped from them sometimes in practice. He'd said long ago that all fiction should begin "Once upon a time . . ." and by an ingenious trick had begun his Portrait of the Artist on that formula. He'd long since offered his memorable metaphor on the unobtrusive artist imitating God. He was pointing out, in short, an important truth, a truth his disciples both early and late, from Faulkner and Dos Passos forward, have too often refused to hear.

Not all original or strikingly individual writing is mannered. No style is easier to recognize than Chekhov's, but it's difficult to think of a writer less mannered. It should be clear, too, that though a writer may be painfully mannered in one place, he may not be in others. Nowhere in Joyce's finest work—"The Dead," for instance—do we find the artist's personality illegitimately intruding on the story. Nowhere in Melville's greatest passages, certainly not in "Benito Cereno" or "Bartleby the Scrivener," does Melville's voice rise to (as Lawrence said) a "bray." In these works, and others like them, poetic effects are kept subtle and unobtrusive. No one can fail to notice the poetic beauty of Joyce's closing lines in "The Dead," but the poetry comes from the rhythm of the sentences (rhythm so subtle only prose can achieve it), from the precisely focused imagery (the image of falling snow, which circles outward till it fills all the universe), and the last lines' echoes—merest whispers—of passages encountered earlier. Yet it need not be obvious poetic effect
that makes a story seem mannered. As William Gass shows in his best fiction—"In the Heart of the Heart of the Country," for instance—even quite spectacular artifice can sit firmly inside the fiction, not suggesting intrusion by the writer.

What does the beginning writer look for, then, as signs that his writing is slipping toward the mannered? He should think hard about any innovation he's introduced into his work, making sure that the work would not be, for all practical purposes, the same if he had done what he's done in more conventional ways. So, for instance, if he has substituted commas for periods in much of the story, trying for some subtle new rhythmical effect that seems to him appropriate to this particular narrative, he might try retyping key passages in conventional punctuation, then reading both versions over and over, making sure that the new way really does add more than it detracts. (Detracts in the sense that it detracts the reader's mind until he adjusts to it—adjusts as we do to the best innovative writings.)

If the writer has introduced flamboyant poetic effects—noticeable rhyme, for example—the writer might read and reread what he's written, then put it away awhile, allowing it to cool, then again read and reread, carefully analyzing his emotion as he reads, trying to make out whether the new device works because it gives new interest and life to the material or whether, on the other hand, it begins to wear thin, feel slightly creepy. Needless to say, no final decision, in a matter like this, should be based on cowardice. Any fool can revise until nothing stands out as risky, everything feels safe—and dead. One way or another, all great writing achieves some kind of gusto. The trick lies in writing so that the gusto is in the work itself, and whatever fire the presentation may have comes from the harmony or indivisibility of presentation and the thing presented.