

ON LITERARY CULTURE AND
CIVILIZATION: AUTOPSY FOR A
CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

I believe it would be a tremendous mistake for me to come to the University of Michigan and deliver one of the Hopwood Lectures in the distinguished presence of writer Nicholas Delbanco and not speak about the late novelist John Gardner, whom we shared as a mentor more than thirty years ago. I intend to say a few things about John Gardner, one of the most remarkable writing teachers in our time, but before I do that, I'd like to talk about what happened—or didn't happen—in my own advanced fiction-writing workshop this past winter at the University of Washington.

This is my thirty-second year of teaching the craft of the short story and the novel. I sometimes call my classes, for both graduates and undergraduates, a boot camp for creative writing. I refer to what we do each ten-week academic quarter as being applied aesthetics. And I consider myself fortunate that over the last three decades, my former students have spread out all over the world. They are editors now and tenured professors, literary critics, best-selling, award-winning novelists, poets, and screenwriters. And, of course, some of my students became bankers and partners in mid-sized law firms, but they are bankers and lawyers who still write fiction and have an insatiable love for literature and the arts.

In one of my typical classes, students are called upon to write three stories in ten weeks and revise two of them. They must turn in each week a fully developed plot outline for a

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new story and a weekly exercise in craft from John Gardner's wonderful book *The Art of Fiction*, and twice during the term each student must lead the critical discussion of the work of one of his or her peers. Last winter I had eighteen students, they produced fifty-four stories and 252 exercises and story outlines, all of which I dutifully read and redacted. The requirements I just described have served students year after year, because this is a labor-intensive skill acquisition course, one that emphasizes the sequential acquisition of fiction techniques and provides the opportunity to practice them. But my hope has always been to transmit in my teaching *more* than just a vocational skill because techniques are far from being neutral tools devoid of cultural values. On the contrary, *techne*, which the ancient Greeks understood as being skillful at doing something, always involves vision. All my life I've always believed that apprentices learn best (as in music or the martial arts) through oldfangled imitation of master craftsmen, through assignments aimed at learning a repertoire of literary strategies, and by writing and revising prodigiously. For that reason, I've assigned Professor Delbanco's book *The Sincerest Form* from the time it was published. I see the goal of a (literary) art class as being the creation of artists who are technicians of form and language; it is the preparation of prolific journeymen, not one-trick ponies, who one day will be able to take on any narrative assignment—fiction or nonfiction, screenplay or radio drama, novel or literary journalism—that comes up in their careers, if only for the sake of their financial survival. I want them to become men and women of letters on whom nothing of significance in our social and cultural world is lost, to be able to empathize with and write about lives other than their own, to produce works with the potential to become cultural artifacts, gifts of goodness, truth and beauty that will entertain and enlighten generations of readers. Obviously, such a class has to make clear that writing well is the same thing as thinking well.

So why, then, did my winter class a few weeks ago turn out to be so disappointing and at times even depressing?

One reason might be that for this class I tried something new for their first short stories. I've always let my students write about any subject they wanted, my argument being that I didn't want to curtail their creative freedom. But last fall, I

asked my twelve graduate students in our MFA program how they might respond to an assignment where the teacher gave them a specific story idea to write about. They all told me they would love such a challenge. And that made me happy, because I love artistic challenges. In Seattle, I serve as a trustee for the Washington Commission for the Humanities (now Humanities Washington), and each year for the past decade we've had a fundraiser called *Bed-Time Stories*, an event where the board comes up with a phrase related to bedtime, and local writers as well as those out of state compose a new fiction (about two thousand words) based on that phrase. The thirty-two writers who have participated include the late playwright August Wilson, David Shields, Tom Robbins, Candace Robb, and Ron Carlson. I will write my tenth bedtime story this summer, and the first five stories I wrote for this event appear in my third story collection, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*. We've responded to themes that range from insomnia to a goodnight kiss, from night hawks to night light. And, like jazz musicians (or medieval troubadours), the old pros have always relished the chance to test anew their storytelling prowess and hear what their peers have produced. It's the sort of challenge that all professional writers, regardless of the medium they work in—television, radio, the motion-picture industry, or any place where stories are told and prose is published—pride themselves on being able to do as a journeyman. One of my friends, Michael Anderson, a writer and critic who was my editor at the *New York Times Book Review* in the 1990s and who teaches at Yale, thought this would be a terrific assignment.

So with great anticipation, I gave my advanced undergraduate students last winter this assignment. On the first day of class, I described for them a fiction once referred to as the shortest short story ever told. It's by Thomas Bailey Aldrich, is only three sentences long, and was published in 1870. The story goes like this: "A woman is sitting alone in a house. She knows she is alone in the whole world; every other living thing is dead. The doorbell rings." To my way of thinking, these three sentences are not really a story, but instead a story idea, what John Barth once called the "ground situation" for a fiction. I asked my students to flesh out the idea,

developing the character, and creating a story with traditional "rising conflict to resolution."

When they turned this story in, I discovered that only three of my eighteen students were able to stay on point with the three sentences I gave them. In story after story, I saw the failure of the imagination and invention. It was then I realized I would have to ratchet down my expectations for the term. Technically, some of their stories were fine, but fifteen of these students—most of them seniors—were unable to take up the challenge, and so they usually presented the woman living alone as deranged, only thinking she was alone, and in some stories she had killed off every one around her.

After listening to their stories, I realized I should not have been surprised by the failure of this experiment. John Gardner once observed that, "Plot is the writer's equivalent to the philosopher's argument." What he meant—or what I believe he meant—was that there is a logic to the causal sequence of events in every story, and that this compelling and inexorable sequence of events is an interpretation that shows us something important and plausible about our world. But on our first day of class, not a single one of my students was able to tell me the difference between plot and story. None had read E. M. Forster's classic definition of those two things in *Aspects of the Novel*, though they all seemed to have seen and remembered every movie anyone mentioned in class. One charming young lady even said that day that in her previous classes she was allowed to write stories that had no plot.

Because my experiment had failed, I allowed my students to write whatever content they wished for their second stories due five weeks later. We workshopped these fictions for another five weeks. Free to write anything they pleased, one of my students turned in a story about a young drug dealer who on the last two pages kills a man trying to steal his drugs. Another spent twenty pages taking us through what happens to her twenty-something protagonist after she tries to end her life with an overdose of painkillers, walking the reader through every tedious detail at the psychiatric unit in a Seattle hospital. Another story, by an older woman in class, portrayed the physical and psychological abuse a woman on an Indian reservation suffered from her very one-dimensional husband, whom she beats to a pulp by the end of the story.

And then there was the story about a young writer who visits an Asian restaurant when his bloodstream is surging with every kind of drug imaginable, distorting his perception so badly the other customers appear to him to be like disgusting reptiles and prehistoric animals. The story of course brought to mind Hunter Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Both the author of that story and the student who critiqued it with great praise said they loved *Fear and Loathing*, but they had not read the book, only seen the movie version starring Johnny Depp, and the student providing commentary that day prefaced his remarks by stating he was a misanthrope who believed things always turned out for the worse. Yet another student wrote about a young man who is given an eastern European pastry by an old woman who lives in his apartment building. Tasting it, he remembers a trip he took across Europe and the love affair he almost had there. I asked this young writer if he had read Proust's *Swann's Way* where Marcel's memory is triggered by a madeleine. No, he said, he'd picked up this strategy by reading a Stuart Dybek story.

Thus things went for five weeks, story after story steeped in violence, drugs, cynicism, and, I noticed, a profound dislike for other human beings. As I read these stories, I felt troubled. I couldn't help but think of the advice the late Alex Haley gave to young writers: "Find the good and praise it." I also remembered a remark made by one of my better students in the 1980s, someone who discussed with me John Gardner's controversial literary manifesto *On Moral Fiction*, and he said, "It is *easy* to be despairingly effective and hard to write affirmations of life." And, finally, I found myself thinking of something Martin Luther King, Jr., said in his 1964 Nobel Prize acceptance speech: "Civilization and violence," he asserted, "are antithetical concepts." What, I wondered, did these student fictions say about our culture and civilization at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

However, there was one story in that second round of fictions that stood out from the others, a draft that had the potential to speak powerfully to our moment in cultural history, but I'm not ready quite yet to talk about this one.

As this academic quarter came to an end, I decided to do something I haven't done in years, and usually only for beginning and intermediate fiction writers during our first week of

class. For the last day of my winter class, I asked those students in my supposedly advanced creative writing workshop to give me an example (one page) of the finest prose (fiction) they'd ever read, and to write a paragraph explaining why they felt that page or those paragraphs had great literary virtue. I asked them to do this nearly impossible task so that I could take the temperature of their cultural literacy. They were free to choose any title from the last two thousand years of Western literature, or fiction from the Far East or Middle East, Africa or South America. I told them specifically not to choose what they felt I might approve of, only writing in which they saw the greatest artistic excellence—instances of literary skill they admired and wished to emulate. Here is what they came up with. (Four people didn't do the assignment.)

Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illuminated*

David Sedaris, "The Change in Me"

Don DeLillo, *Underworld*

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

Ken Kesey, *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*

Louise Erdrich, *The Painted Drum*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Two students chose
McCarthy)

Stephen King, *The Gunslinger* (The Dark Tower Series)

J. D. Salinger, *Seymour: An Introduction*

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*

Amy Hempel, "In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried"

Marianne Wiggins, *Herself in Love*

To my surprise, the list was not as bad as I'd expected. A couple of writers I respect highly or long ago reviewed with praise, Calvino and McCarthy, were represented. But rather than pass judgment on the list, I decided instead to send it to a few professional writers, teachers, and critics whose opinions I trust. I asked them: What do you think of their reading habits, literary taste, and preparation for becoming writers?

The first response I got back was from my friend and former student David Guterson, author of the best-seller *Snow Falling on Cedars*, whose new, fourth novel, *The Other*, will appear this season. He said:

What do I think? Reading habits—If this list is any clue, depth and breadth is clearly missing. With the exception of Calvino, all Americans essentially contemporary. Literary taste—It's not like one likes chocolate and the other likes strawberry. It's more like their sensibilities are just not highly developed enough yet for them to have discernment. Preparation for becoming writers—They ought to go to the world-wide well like monks on 7 year retreats.

Another writer-friend, Sharyn Skeeter, who was an editor at *Black Essence* and *Mademoiselle* magazines in the 70s and now teaches in Connecticut, said,

I don't really know what to make of it, especially if you asked for "finest prose . . ." Did they understand your assignment? Do they read anything earlier than mid/late-20th century? I don't know all of these but except for Erdrich, I don't see any other minority writers. Stephen King? Finest prose?

Dr. Jim McWilliams, a professor who edited *Passing the Three Gates: Interviews with Charles Johnson*, replied that,

Actually, your students' choices aren't that bad. When I read your instructions, I thought the selections would be all Stephen King, Harry Potter, Anne Rice. When I asked my students in contemporary American lit the same question last year, a fantasy writer I've never heard of garnered the most votes. I personally find most of your students' selections to be a bore (I've tried reading *The Corrections* three times and *Everything Is Illuminated* twice), but at least they did choose some moderately interesting and intellectually challenging selections. I do think it's odd that nothing pre-1960 was selected. What would you have selected? I think I'd have to choose *Moby-Dick*.

Another of my former students, scholar Marc Conner, who teaches at Washington and Lee University responded by saying,

The favorite books of your students was an interesting list, to say the least. Though I like some of the authors on there—Calvino, McCarthy—still I'd like to see some writers of greater substance. Whither Joyce? Dickens? Dostoevsky? I'm reminded of the afternoon back in 1987 in your fiction

writing class, when I finally asked you WHO young writers should read if they want to become great writers. Finally you near-shouted, "Melville! Homer! Virgil!" The greats, in short, of thought and literature. Good answer.

And, lastly, critic Michael Anderson said,

As is sadly the case with young people, they had not read enough. Where to begin? What have I been saying would be the soundest way to teach creative writing? By assigning a reading list and discussing why the works should be esteemed. What has been shown to be the worst way? Allowing students to turn in their drivel.

In general, my friends noticed the same things I did: namely, that my students were mainly reading recent and highly promoted authors published after 1960, and, in this case, no nonwhite writers except Erdrich. There were a couple of prose stylists, authors who show us anew the expressive possibilities of the English tongue, as Professor Delbanco does, but few works from the Western canon, and nothing whatsoever from non-Western cultures. Apparently, my culturally provincial students had *not* read a lovely little book called *The Educated Imagination*, by critic Northrop Frye, which I assigned at the beginning of the term. In that work, originally presented in the 1960s as six half-hour radio talks on the value and use of literature, Frye tells us that, "A writer's desire to write can only have come from previous experience of literature, and he'll start by imitating whatever he's read, which usually means what the people around him are writing. This provides him with what is called a convention, a certain typical and socially accepted way of writing."

In other words, despite the fact that one of the most sacred of sacred cows in creative writing classes is that "writers should write about what they know," the truth is that the richness or poverty of a writer's vision of literary possibilities can be directly correlated with what the writer has—or has not—read in literature, history, philosophy, the sciences, and cultures other than the one he or she was born into and conditioned by. I was asking them to write years before they had anything interesting or original to say. But was it simply their *age* that was the problem? I don't think so. At least not their biological age; the problem is most likely the enveloping age

in which we live. Let me share with you what the great American writer Ralph Ellison, who my students had *not* read, was doing to prepare himself when he was a sophomore or junior at Tuskegee Institute.

In *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, literary critic Lawrence Jackson relates an incident at Tuskegee Institute, which proved to be crucial for Ellison's development and is useful for our purposes here. "The most significant discovery of 1935 for Ellison," says Jackson,

was T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" . . . with a prodigious expenditure of energy, Ellison stepped-up his reading in order to nail down the poem's meaning. He looked up Eliot's seven pages of references, with Professor Sprague's collegial advice informing his search, and began to unpack the layers of the poem. . . . The library explorations took him into new territories of geography and anthropology. Ellison began with Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, nearly a guidebook to "elucidate the difficulties of the poem." Weston revealed the Arthurian legend and fisher-king myths directly behind Eliot's poem. George Frazier's multi-volumed *The Golden Bough* provided him with an overview of human ritual and culture. Ellison revived his dusty Latin skills, drilled into him at Douglass High School in Oklahoma, in order to understand a generous Ovid quote, which Eliot found indispensable, as well as the smattering of French he'd obtained in the fall. The exhausting research netted him intimacy with many of the major canonical Western texts not staples in the Tuskegee curriculum, such as *The Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, *The Inferno*, Spenser's *Prothalamion*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Tempest* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In the weeks following the historical education in literature and anthropology, he came to the work of Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein and more Hemingway . . .

In other words, Ellison's education demanded of him that he intimately know jazz *and* the sources for all the references in Eliot's poem; black history *and* St. Augustine's *Confessions*; the works of the Harlem Renaissance *and* Sherwood Anderson—what a Eurocentric curriculum provided *and* what it deliberately censored at the time. It required a certain generosity of spirit, because this approach to learning is conjunctive,

not disjunctive; not “either/or” but rather “this-and-this-and this-and, of course, *that* too.” For Ellison understood, like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that everything in life and culture is interrelated and interconnected—the black, the white, the Western, the Eastern, *connected*, as King said, “in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” This idea of creolization is also central to Buddhist thought and is expressed by the truth of dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*), which says that nothing comes into existence independently, and that all things in this universe depend on all other things for their being.

I believe Professor Delbanco will agree with me that our mentor John Gardner was a writer who embraced the Ellisonian spirit that embodies Frye’s belief in a learned, “educated imagination.” Because of the example he provided when I was twenty-four years old and two years away from publishing my first novel in 1974, it was never necessary for me to take a creative writing class in college. He taught thousands of students, among them Raymond Carver, and he provided us all with a rare example of what an artist and scholar could be. He said, perhaps in exaggeration, that he knew twelve languages, ancient and modern. But he clearly was a Chaucer scholar, and so loved the poet Homer that at age forty-five he taught himself Greek in order to do his own translations for his students at SUNY–Binghamton, whose work, by the way, Gardner published at his own expense in a literary journal he started in the 1950s, writers such as Joyce Carol Oates and William H. Gass. He wrote librettos, screenplays, plays for the stage, book reviews that were like position papers on aesthetic issues, poetry, short stories, op-ed pieces for newspapers, criticism, every form of prose possible in the English language, and somehow he also found the time to play the French horn. In short, he was a man of letters, a writer in the fullest meaning of that word, one who would stop at nothing in order to improve. I remember commenting to Gardner’s first wife, Joan, about how impressed I was by the poetic vocabulary Gardner exhibited in his *Jason and Medea*, a retelling of the Greek myth. She smiled and told me that after reading one of her husband’s books, she complained that he never used any big words in his stories. Determined to fix that, Gardner—she said—took out his magnifying glass and

read every word from A to Z in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, realizing as he did so, I'm sure, that each word is like an old coin handled by millions: each, with its various meanings, is a tissue of experiences and interpretations of our predecessors crystallized into word.

Gardner was just as passionately committed to teaching as he was to writing, not as a profession, or a hobby, but as a way of life. I learned so much (good and bad) from just watching how this dedicated artist conducted himself for ten years. I wish I could say the time I spent working with Gardner was always smooth, but even the best of literary apprenticeships, those based on love and mutual respect, may have problems when the apprentice strikes out in new directions. Gardner believed, as an artist and scholar, in absorbing what Matthew Arnold called "the best that has been known and said." While he was deeply Western and Protestant in his learning, I began with my second novel, *Oxherding Tale*, to move closer to the Eastern philosophies that had sustained and nourished me from the time I was a teenager. There was no falling out between us, but he hotly argued with me about Buddhism, saying in one letter, "If Buddhism is right, then I've lived my life wrong, and I can't accept that." I must confess that I was disappointed by his reaction at the time, because it was Gardner who inspired me—a philosophy person—to study *Le Morte d' Arthur* and Middle English poetry, and to revisit writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson who in one of his letters in 1840 wrote, "Every history in the world is my history. I can as readily find myself in . . . the Vedas as in the New Testament, in Aesop as in the Cambridge Platform or the Declaration of Independence."

But to his credit, and despite our disagreements, Gardner wrote to my publisher before the book came out in 1982 and asked if he could endorse the novel.

Furthermore, he also translated with Nobuko Tsukui the Zenlike stories of Kikuo Itaya for a volume entitled *Tengu Child*. This work was published posthumously in 1983, just a year after his fatal motorcycle accident. In his lengthy and thoughtful introduction to this book, called "Meditational Fiction," Gardner says,

Since we are not Buddhists, one might ask, why should we read the stories of Itaya, a writer not widely read even in his native Japan. The easy and immediate answer is that they're beautiful. . . . Whatever subtle irony there may be in Keats's claim that beauty is truth and truth beauty, it may well be that beauty is indeed a door to enlightenment, or wholeness. One may or may not wish to accept the Eastern idea that all is one, but surely it is true, or at least worth considering as possibly true, that the individual's search for harmony with the universe (including the universe as represented by one's choleric neighbor or that neighbor's vicious dog) is a program at least as likely to prosper as is the egoistic struggle for dominance. . . . Whether or not we feel an affinity for the religious and ontological assumptions behind these stories, we cannot help but be moved by their temperance, justice, delicacy and humor. The lyrical simplicity is like the purest well-water, and the pervasive humor is so elegant, so subtle, and so entirely good-hearted that one wonders, at least while one is reading the stories, why anyone should choose to be comic in any other way.

As someone who has practiced meditation for twenty-eight years and taken formal Buddhist vows in the Soto Zen tradition, I was delighted to see Gardner's spirit toward the end of his life opening to the East. Naturally, it was the experience of being seduced by *beauty* that moved his heart and engaged his mind. Ambushed by beauty, we feel humility and thanksgiving. We realize that our cultural inheritance of artifacts that are Good, True, and Beautiful is global, available equally in Celtic art, in *Beowulf*, in a *sloka* (verse) of four lines, eight syllables in the *Bhagavad Gita*, or in the sutras of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. We recognize how the art of the world, these gifts from our ancestors and predecessors from all four corners of the earth, is the basis for our own creations. And, lastly, we see how fragile and precious this inheritance is, how civilization always hangs on a gossamer-thin thread, and that culture and civilization *can* be lost in a single generation, not by outright destruction, but rather by our indifference or never knowing that such hard-won achievements even exist.

Earlier in this talk, I said that one of my students did produce a story that was promising. It failed in its first-draft exe-

cution, but the potential of her story was so great—and of such importance—that if she keeps working on it, her final draft should prove to be memorable. She lifted her story from real life. Last December, in Vermont, about fifty people—teenagers and young adults—broke into the former summer home of poet Robert Frost. They partied for hours. They played drinking games. In this place with an Athenian spirit, the young Visigoths broke windows, screens, dishes, and antiques. They destroyed tables and chairs, pictures, and light fixtures. They smashed wicker furniture and dressers, and then threw the pieces into the fireplace to warm the unheated building. They spat phlegm on artwork hanging on the walls. They left vomit, urine, and beer cans everywhere, and coated the place with yellow, pollenlike dust discharged from fire extinguishers. I remember reading this news story during the Christmas holidays, and thinking they must have been Eloi from the 1960 movie version of *The Time Machine*. (Yes, as a screenwriter, I watch movies, too.) This real-life story ended with the vandals being identified, and one indifferent young person asking if he could use his mug shot for his page on Facebook.

My student imagined her protagonist to be a studious, twenty-something college student among the fifty people who desecrated Frost's home, a shy girl who is pulled along by social pressure, and in the midst of this destruction awakens to where she is, whose home this is (in a deeply spiritual way, it is *her* home as much as it is that of Robert Frost), and she is overwhelmed by the feeling that somehow she must stop the others.

I told my student I was dying to see the next draft.