

FURTHER QUESTIONS?

Henry David Thoreau began one of his wonderful lectures by saying, "You have invited me; you have engaged to pay me; and I am determined that you shall *have* me, though I bore you beyond all precedent."

My resolve on this occasion is the same as Thoreau's. The better to implement it, I'm going to serve me up to you by asking myself and replying seriously to a number of altogether *unexciting* questions—the first of which, reasonably enough, is "Why bother to do that?"

Well: The fact is that like many another American writer in the second half of the twentieth century, I served my literary apprenticeship not in expatriate cafés or Depression-era boxcars or on the assorted killing fields of any of our several wars, but for better or worse in undergraduate college and then in graduate school—majoring in, of all things, *writing*. Ernest Hemingway would disapprove; likewise, no doubt, Charles Dickens, Honoré de Balzac, Mark Twain, and many another alumnus of the School of Hard Knocks. So did I, for that matter, now and then, for it was on such writers that I was raised. But except for a sculpting uncle of mine who attended the Maryland Institute's College of Art shortly before dying in the First World War, I was the first of my immediate family ever to "go past high school," as people where I come from used to say (my older brother's educational trajectory was detoured by the *Second World War*), and on the whole I regard my apprenticeship in academe as both benevolent and beneficial indeed, although even at the time I half-appreciated that literature had managed nicely for several millennia without the benefit of creative-writing programs and

would doubtless continue to struggle along somehow if they should all disappear tomorrow. ("At the time" here means the late 1940s, when the then-new program at Johns Hopkins, which recently turned 50, was only the second degree-granting writing program in our republic—second after Iowa's. At last count the number exceeded 400, I believe, but I stand by my proposition.) I shall circle back, perhaps, to a hedged defense of this almost uniquely American, post-World War II phenomenon, the college creative-writing program, and of the concomitant phenomenon of poets and fictionists as professors. I bring the matter up now in order to launch the following reminiscence by way of reply to Question #1: "Why bother, etc.?" It is an anecdote that I've told elsewhere; kindly indulge its twice-telling.

My then-closest graduate-school-fellow-apprentice-writer-friend and I, as we were about to be duly certified by our university as Masters of Arts despite our still-considerable distance from anything resembling mastery, considered together what we might do to pay the rent until the golden shower of literary fame and fortune descended upon us. Having had some school-vacation experience of such alternatives as factory-, sales-, and clerical work as well as manual labor, we agreed by passionate default that *college teaching* looked to be the least abusive of our available options and potentially the richest in free time for writing. It had not escaped our notice that doctors, lawyers, administrators, and businessfolk, for example, tend to get busier as their careers advance, whereas the work-loads of university professors in the humanities appeared to us to get progressively lighter and more flexible as they ascend the academic ranks. Never mind whether this perception was correct; my buddy and I were persuaded enough thereby to decide to become writer/teachers: Writers in the University. Inasmuch as we ourselves had been blessed with splendid professors of a great many disciplines and were the opposite of cynical about the teaching half of our prospective double careers, our next consideration was how we might spend our classroom time most fruitfully for our students-to-be and ourselves. My friend—who had a stronger intellectual string to his bow than I and a more solid background in literature, history, and philosophy—decided that he would devote *his* academic life to the answering of rhetorical questions. Should one of his future students happen to ask blithely, for example, "Who's to say, finally, what's real and what isn't?" Ben vowed that he would tap

himself on the chest and lead that student rigorously through the history of metaphysics, from the pre-Socratics up to the current semester.

And I? Well, the Answering of All Rhetorical Questions is no easy act to follow—Wouldn't you agree?—but it occurred to me to vow in my turn that I would spend *my* academic life saying over and over again All the Things That Go Without Saying; that (if I may paraphrase myself) I would stare first principles and basic distinctions out of countenance; face them down, for my students' benefit and my own, until they blink and confess new information. What is literature? What is fiction? What is a *story*?

And so for the next many years I did, and indeed continue still to do, although the dialogue is more often with myself these emeritus days than with students. And I hope to return to at least the last of those examples (What is a story?) later in this talk. So that's two things now to be perhaps returned to, the first being . . . I forget what, but trust that *it* will return to *me*. Meanwhile, having answered or at least responded to my opening question—"Why bother to attempt serious replies to banal questions?"—I now proceed to a few of those questions themselves.

That gifted graduate-school pal, alas, died young leaving many rhetorical questions still unanswered. In faithful pursuit of our jointly-declared program, however, I've been writing more fiction as well as professing it ever since, and publishing it for 40-plus years or 5000-plus pages, whichever is longer, and giving public readings from it (most often on college campuses) for at least 35 of those 40 years at the rate of about one reading per month in the academic season, for the pleasure of trying out my sentences on a live audience instead of a merely living one (I should perhaps confess that it was as a more or less failed jazz musician that I came to fiction-writing). More often than not, these monthly gigs include responding to questions from the audience afterward—something that for better or worse a writer doesn't normally get to do with his or her readers.

As you might imagine, over the semesters at least a few of those questions come to be fairly expectable and not inherently exciting—*Do you write your books with a pen or a pencil or what? Have any of your novels been made into movies? What effect, if any, has your university teaching had on your writing?* Whether or not such routine questions—and my earnest responses themto—are inter-

esting, it *has* interested me to see both the questions and the replies evolve somewhat over the decades. Taking them in order (I mean in order to get them out of our way):

1. The old question *Do you write with a pen or a pencil or a typewriter or what?* changed about a dozen years ago to *typewriter or word processor?* and nowadays it seems to have become *desktop or laptop?*—as if that exhausts the imaginable options any more than does the classic “Your place or mine?” I have never understood the great pen-or-pencil question’s point, so to speak, in either its low-tech or its higher-tech versions, but I’m impressed by its frequency. Is the asker an aspiring writer, I wonder, who imagines that a change of instruments might induce the muse to sing? Can she or he be thinking, “Since that guy uses Microsoft Word 5.0 on an old Macintosh LCIII and his stuff gets published and even remains by and large in print, perhaps if [etc.] . . .” It’s a magic syllogism. Even if the question’s motive is less complimentary, its logic is no less fallacious: “Ah, so: He writes with a Mont Blanc Meisterstück fountain pen. That explains the Germanic interminability of certain of his novels,” etc.

No, no, no, dear interrogator: You must seek elsewhere the explanation of their Germanic *und so weiter*. What earthly difference can it make to the muses whether one composes one’s sentences with a Cray mainframe supercomputer or with the big toe of one’s left foot (like the cerebrally palsied Irish writer Shane Connaught) or with one’s nose or with some other appendage of one’s anatomy or for that matter of someone else’s anatomy? It goes without saying—Does it not?—that those sentences are what they are, for better or worse, whatever the instrument of their setting down.

I do remember, however, once hearing the critic Hugh Kenner speak in an interesting way of how literature changed after the nineteenth century when it came to be composed on typewriters instead of penned, its alphabetical atoms no longer cursively linked within their verbal molecules (these metaphors are mine, not Professor Kenner’s) but ineluctably and forever side-by-side like wary subway passengers, and leached of individual calligraphy as well. When I objected that a few antediluvians, such as my erstwhile Baltimore neighbor Anne Tyler and myself, still prefer the muscular cursive of longhand penmanship for first-drafting our prose, Kenner replied, “All the same, you grew up breathing the air of literature composed on the typewriter.” Well,

he had me there, sort of—except that the air that most oxygenated my particular apprenticeship was a fairly equal mix of high Modernism (presumably typewritten) and of quill-scrawled antiquity, with a healthy component of the oral tale-telling tradition as well. It is a mixture that I heartily recommend to apprentice writers: one foot in the high-tech topical here and now, one foot in narrative antiquity, and a third foot, if you can spare it, in the heroic middle distance.

My favorite response to the classic pen/pencil/Powerbook question, you'll be excited to hear, comes in fact from those older storytelling traditions. The enormous Sanskrit tale-cycle *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, or Ocean of Streams of Story, was set down in the tenth or eleventh century—with a quill pen, presumably—by the Kashmirian court poet Somadeva. Its ten large folio volumes pretend to be a radical *abridgment* of the surviving *one-seventh* of what has to have been in its original version the longest story ever told or written: the *Bṛihat Kathā*, or Great Tale, first told by the god Shiva to his consort Parvati as a thank-you gift for a particularly divine session of lovemaking. By my calculations (based on what's conjectured about the Homeric oral tradition), it must have taken Shiva two and a half years to spin the thing out, while Parvati sat listening patiently on his lap—the primordial laptop, I suppose. No problem in their case, since the tale, the teller, and the told were all immortal. But when Shiva's Great Tale was first written down by the scribe Gunadhya (so our later writer Somadeva declares), its passage from the oral to the written medium required seven full years—which is just as well, inasmuch as the medium of transcription was the scribe's own blood.

So it is, more or less, my friends, with all of us: a good case for writing short stories and lyric poems, perhaps, unless your blood-replacement capacity is that of an Anne Rice male lead. Just as Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan suggested a few years ago that the efficient cause of American violence isn't guns but ammunition, so maybe the pen/pencil/Powerbook question ought to be *Skrip, Quink, ribbon, bubble-jet, or laser? Blood-group O, A, or B?* There is much more, by the way, to that exemplary *Kathāpitha*, or Story of the Story, as Volume One of Somadeva's ten-volume abridgment of the surviving one-seventh of The Ocean of Story is called. But I don't want to spoil the pleasure of your reading the whole thing for yourself.

Once upon a time a quarter-century ago, as I was driving the

poet John Ashbery to his scheduled reading-plus-Q & A at Johns Hopkins, he wondered aloud to me what sort of questions he was likely to be asked. "The usual, no doubt," I assured him: "*Do you write with a pen or a pencil?*, stuff like that." "Oh, I hope they ask that one," Ashbery said; "*I like that one!*"

Truth to tell, so do I. To get right down to it, breath-bated auditors, I write my fiction with an immortal British Parker 51 fountain pen bought three dozen years ago in honor of the great Charles Dickens in what is alleged to be Mister Pumblechook's premises in Rochester, England; that instrument is charged with Scheaffer's Skrip and deployed in the looseleaf binder—battered but still-functioning, like its owner—that I bought during freshman orientation week at Johns Hopkins in September 1947. From there, at morning's end, the day's "muscular cursive" is Macintoshed for extensive editing and revision. And I compose my nonfiction, this lecture included, mainly on Fridays, with a MontBlanc Meisterstück 146 fountain pen bequeathed me by a beloved Spanish friend and critic upon his untimely death from stomach cancer, he having chosen for his epitaph this line from a story of mine about a skeptical spermatozoon: "It is we spent old swimmers, disabused of every illusion, who are most vulnerable to dreams." And I deploy that Meisterstück in an altogether different, history-free looseleaf binder before Macintoshing et cetera. Lately, however, I seem to've taken to nonficting directly on the word-processor, without that muscular-cursive foreplay. Make of that datum what you will.

2. Q: *Have any of your novels been made into movies?*

A: I always used to answer *No* to that question, even when some film buff claimed to have seen *The End of the Road* back in the early 1970s with Stacey Keach playing Jacob Horner, Harris Yulin as Joe Morgan, Dorothy Tristan as Rennie Morgan, and James Earl Jones as the capital-D Doctor. Despite my name in the credits and my modest payment for the film rights, I deny that that wretched flick has anything to do with my rigorous little novel of the same title and dramatis personae. (The movie critic John Simon declared at the time, correctly, that the principal difference between the novel and film versions of the story is that whereas my novel concludes with a harrowing abortion, the film is a harrowing abortion from start to finish.) But what was the question *for?*, I used to wonder, as I did with the pen-or-pencil

one. I couldn't help translating it to mean, "Reading's a drag, man, but I dig movies, so I'll maybe catch you out at the nabes and see if you're on my wavelength."

As you can tell from that vintage slang, the question as given is dated. Its current version would be, "Are any of your novels available as videos?" The answer is still No, and I can't recommend the audiocassette versions, either. The updated question, I fear, has to be translated, "Hauling out to the Cineplex has gotten to be almost as much of a bummer as reading books, but I do like to slug the old VCR if there's nothing on Cable."

What can a mere novelist say? Echoing Robert Frost's famous definition of poetry as "that which gets lost in translation," my comrade-in-arms William Gass defines *story* as "that which is extracted from a novel to make a movie." I agree, I guess, although for me the element of story remains first among equals in the ingredients of fiction. But in a good novel (it goes without saying) the story is truly inseparable from the language it's told in and the voice that tells it. Movies are, literally, another story altogether, and videocassettes another story yet. As it happens, the best I can say even for a good movie-adaptation of a good novel—such as Anthony Minghella's film of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*—is what Thomas Mann said about reading Shakespeare in German translation: "It's like taking a hundred thousand dollars from a millionaire," Mann declared: "He remains a very rich man."

It now appears evident that what movies and network television did to live theater earlier in this century (not to mention what they did to the audience for printed fiction), the VCR and cable TV are doing to the movie houses and to some extent to the film industry. That's just a fact of technological life. Of more interest to me is a different analogy: If movies and television have affected the art of prose fiction in the twentieth century in something like the way that still photography affected the art of painting in the latter nineteenth, then we can reasonably expect that the development of interactive television and high-tech "virtualism" in the century to come will have a comparable effect on movies and videos as we know them today. We are told by another of my American comrades-in-arms, Robert Coover, that electronic fiction and computer hypertext generally will have a comparable revolutionary impact on what remains of printed-book culture, with its obsolescent notions of author, reader, text,

publisher, copyright, and the like. I confess that I won't at all regret missing that particular technological revolution, which along with electronic virtuality offers to do to the audience for "p-fiction" what the rise of the novel since the seventeenth century did to the audience for poetry. It gives me some comfort to note, however, that while in my lifetime I've had to replace my 78 rpm records with 45s and then with 33.3 LPs, and then those with audiocassettes and then those with compact disks, each time discarding and expensively rebuilding my recorded-music library, the oldest volumes in my *book* library remain by and large as conveniently accessible as they were on their publication-day, perhaps centuries ago. If fewer and fewer people read printed fiction in the century to come, that won't be because the marvelously low-tech, high-protein medium of the book is outmoded, but because the pleasures of reading will have been displaced by glitzy and evanescent high-tech distractions for which civilization will be on balance the poorer. If thus it must go, then I shall with some small relief go first.

That curmudgeonly sentiment brings me to the last of these evolving but nevertheless routine questions, after which we'll move on to a couple of less routine ones and then have done.

3. Q: *What effect does your university teaching have on your novels?*

A: My reply to this gee-whizzer used to be, "it delays their completion." In this case, however, although the question remains the same, the respondent's altered circumstances require a different answer. As afore-established, I was indeed for four decades a full-time teacher as well as a full-time writer, and for the first two of those four decades I was a full-time parent as well—when you're young, you can full-time it on several fronts at once. Then my children grew up and (just as my late friend and I had foretold) my academic workload eased off, so that for several years I taught only one semester out of two, and for a few years after that only one graduate-level seminar every second semester. More lately, for the first time since kindergarten I've been out of the classroom altogether. To my total unsurprise, in these progressively time-richer circumstances my literary output has remained almost exactly what it was forty years ago, when I was teaching four sections of freshman composition, six days a week, and helping to raise three small children, and moonlighting in a dance band on weekends for extra cash. Back then I stole time

to write, and my larceny was sufficiently grand that I was able to go straight later on. Now that I have all the writing-time I want—in a day, in a week, in a year, if never in a lifetime—I find that although I enjoy generating sentences and stories as much as ever, I don't spend any more time at it than I did when I wished that I had a lot more time to spend. One's musely metabolism, evidently, is what it is almost regardless of circumstances, and so I infer that what used to delay the completion of my novels was not university teaching after all; it was (and it remains) living that part of life that doesn't consist of writing fiction—the part of life without which, in my case anyhow, there wouldn't be any fiction to write, even though that fiction seldom has to do directly with its author's biographical experience.

Does that, too, go without saying, I wonder? In any case, there it is: said.

So much for those profoundly routine questions, which I seem to find routinely profound. Of the non-routine sort I shall instance just one, and then ask myself one myself, and then we're done. Now and then, in the post-reading or post-lectorial Q & A, someone will come up with something at least as perceptive, and on occasion as unsettling, as anything that my most learned and attentive critics have laid on me. It was an anonymous member of some audience a quarter-century ago who in the Q & A observed that my books thus far (of which there were back then only six) tended to come in *pairs*, the second member of each pair a sort of complement or corrective to the first; inasmuch as the questioner understood me to be one half of a pair of opposite-sex twins, she wondered how programmatic on my part might be this metaphor of more-or-less-paired books, and what I took to be its significance.

Well, I was floored; had never until that moment noticed what now seemed evident, even conspicuous—the more so since the theme of twinship itself comes up in a couple of those books. Moreover, although I've never regarded my twin sister and me as complements other than anatomically, and certainly not as reciprocal correctives, I was so intrigued, even charmed by the unintended metaphor that I resolved perversely to defy it. And so I did in Book #7 (a monster novel called *LETTERS*), to which the slender novel that followed it had only the most tenuous connection; and Book #9, a collection of essays, was surely no twin to ei-

ther of those—so there. But then Book #10, I noticed after writing it, can fairly be regarded as dizygotic not to Book #9 but to Book #8, and Books 11 and 12 to each other, and Book 13 (a second essay-collection) to the aforementioned Book 9, and Book 14 (a story-series) as trizygotic to Book 5 on the one hand and to Book 15 (another story-series, currently in progress) on the other, and so it would appear that only that gargantuan *Mittelpunkt*, Book #7, remains (so far) untwinned—although, come to think of it, it contains within its intrications sequels to all six of its predecessors. . . . Make of all this, too, what you will; I myself have come to shrug my shoulders—first the left, and then, complementarily, the right. . . .

Let us return to the country of Things That Go Without Saying. One Q that I've never had a chance to A in these public circumstances is the perhaps most basic and apparently elementary of all—which is why I used frequently to put it to my coachees (especially the most advanced apprentice writers among them), and why I put it still to myself, most often in the well-filling interval between books: What is fiction? What's a *story*?

Okay, so that's two questions, really, and for the *long* replies thereto I refer anyone who's interested to an essay of mine called "It Goes Without Saying," in the collection *Further Fridays*—one of those dizygotic twin volumes afore-referred-to. The *short* answer to the question "What's a story?" was provided me by some member of yet another audience past, who after the show pressed upon me a treatise on something called Systems Philosophy and urged me to read it on the flight home. As I had no idea what Systems Philosophy might be, I did indeed leaf through that gift-book up there in the stratosphere, and although I landed not much wiser as to its subject, it did provide me with some wonderful jargon, out of which I constructed the following rigorous definition of the term *story*: A story (it goes without saying) consists of *the incremental perturbation of an unstable homeostatic system and its catastrophic restoration to a complexified equilibrium*.

I confess to being in love with that definition—which in fact quite accurately describes classic Aristotelian dramaturgy. The "unstable homeostatic system" is what I've called elsewhere the Ground Situation of any story: a dramaturgically voltaged state of affairs pre-existing the story's present action, like the ongoing feud between the Capulets and the Montagues. Its "incremental

perturbation" is the "rising action" or complications of the conflict following upon the introduction of a Dramatic Vehicle into the Ground Situation (Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet fall into star-crossed love, a turn of events that precipitates Bando's tale and Shakespeare's play out of the Ground Situation; the couple's incrementally more desperate attempts to consummate that love comprise the story's action). The "catastrophic restoration" is the climax or Aristotelian peripeteia, catastrophic in its relative swiftness and magnitude even in the quietest of stories. And the "complexified equilibrium" thereby restored is the classic denouement, dramaturgically consequential vis-à-vis the original Ground Situation or else no story has been told or sung or written down or played out (the lovers' death, e.g., puts the interfamily squabble at least temporarily on Hold).

All that sort of thing really does go without saying for most storytellers, who work at least as much by the hunch and feel of experienced talent as by articulated theory, and who are likely to find it easier to make up a story than to explain the difference between stories and non-stories or not-quite stories. If such high-tech theorizing makes no more sense to you than, say, much of life does, then I offer you another pet maxim from my inventory, to wit: *Of of what one can't make sense, one may make art.* May I repeat those eleven quasi stammering monosyllables? *Of of what one can't make sense, one may make art.*

O self-demonstrating bliss.

But why *does* one make art? Specifically, what accounts for the odd circumstance that people in every time and place appear to enjoy, whether as individuals or as cultures, making up nonfactual yarns, for example, and telling or writing or acting them out and hearing or reading or spectating them? Why is it that we Homo sapienses pleasure in the incremental perturbation of imaginary unstable homeostatic systems and their catastrophic restoration to complexified equilibria? In the vicarious turning of screws on cooked-up predicaments until those quantitative increments effect a comparatively sudden and significant qualitative change?

Damned if I know. In the Friday-piece mentioned above ("It Goes Without Saying") I itemized some two dozen of fiction's feasible functions, from reality-testing and -mapping to reality-avoidance, from aphrodisia through anaphrodisia to mere lin-

guistical futzing around. Behind all of those catalogued functions, I believe (as well as any of the many that I no doubt missed), lies a neuroscientific argument that strikes me as both plausible and pleasing, and with which I'll close my spiel. The self-styled "neurophilosopher" Daniel C. Dennett, of Tufts University, maintains that human consciousness itself has an essentially narrative aspect, grounded in the biological evolution of the brain. I won't attempt here to summarize Dennett's thesis, but I am immediately persuaded of its validity—at least as an explanatory fiction. To me it seems a short and plausible step, though a consequential and doubtless an intricate one, from the "if" propositions characteristic of computer and neural programming—*If x, then y*, etc., which in animal behavior might be called the Four F-propositions: whether Stimulus or Situation X prompts us to Flee, Fight, Feed, or, you know, Mate—it's a short and plausible step, I was saying, from these to the *what ifs* and *as ifs* of fictional narrative. I second the motion that the "neural Darwinism" by which consciousness may evolve—evolve not only to recognize and act upon stimuli but to reflect upon, disport with, and be moved to aesthetic pleasure by certain of them—has an inherently narrative aspect. Professor Dennett goes even farther, conceiving of consciousness as essentially a "multi-draft scenario spinner," or "Joycean machine"; of the self itself as an *as if*, a "posited Center of Narrative Gravity"—in short, as an intricate onspinning fiction. "We *are* the stories we tell ourselves and others about who we are," he concludes (in his treatise *Consciousness Explained*): stories that we edit continually, and that continually edit us.

Amen to that, say I. Whether or not one goes the whole way with Dennett's neurophilosophy (and some very prominent neuroscientists do not), he has I think established at very least that when we make up stories or take pleasure in made-up stories, we are literally doing what comes naturally.

Now, then, I ask you: Did the pondering of questions like these ever make anybody a better writer? Wouldn't any fictionist be just as well off following the example of Norman Mailer, say, who in his 1984 Hopwood Lecture declared his tendency "to mumble about technical matters like an old mechanic"? "Let's put the thingamajig before the whoosits here'," said Mailer, "is how I usually state the deepest literary problems to myself." Same here, more often than not, when I am in actual intimate

congress with the muse. It's in the recovery-time between such sessions that I incline to put such questions more formally to myself and to entertain them from others. And I happen to believe that when we do *that*, too, we're doing what comes naturally—perhaps more naturally to some people than to others.

But I suppose that that goes without saying.

Any further questions?