

Theory of These Exercises: Practice.

I write this not so much as a rejoinder or even supplement to John's essay as because it occasioned some thoughts that might prove a variation on the theme. The theme is surely "practice"; some variations follow. Much of this may seem disjunct---but necessarily so, I hope, since it conjoins with what precedes. I'd like to think of this as written conversation, a dialogue between two inveterate monologists. Here, then, are some not-quite-random thoughts on the problems of substance and style.

First, there's a governing ambiguity in the "Theory of These Exercises." The tone is unashamedly moral and avowedly polemic, but the topic is technique. On the face of it, at least, there's a contradiction between substance and style---and one we'd better not blur. None but a fool would deny linkage, or that vowels and consonants, meaningfully altered, will alter meaning to boot. That a change of style invokes a change of substance, and vice-versa, is no news since Stevens, and wasn't news to him; we have a mode for needs.

For the sake of argument, though, let's argue this single example. One might write of the death of a grandmother or a Detroit assembly line or supermarket burning up or Hiroshima burning down in precisely the same rhetorical terms. Then the effect will be at best paratactic, at worst worse.. Syntax is, I think, the art of subjugation---whereas parataxis is the arrangement of epic and posits an equivalence. The Detroit assembly line is therefore no more or less important than Hiroshima or what our hero had for breakfast; it's a linked system, somehow.

If this be successful and not bathetic there must be belief; it's the difference, in a way, between the resonance of Roland's horn and the empty honking of the later Hemingway. So that the consciously displaced stylistic effect is almost always, in these latter times, self-consciously ironic---the stuff of satire or second-rate talent. We need not inquire into the nature of Homer's governing system, or that of Dante or the Beowulf poet to recognize that in some way, there, things fit; they made sense. Suffice it to say that without such a governing system, a change of substance had best invoke a change of style---and that high seriousness and low comedy should deploy their variant dictions. "Modernism," of course, has pretty much successfully eradicated such variance and distinction---has razed if not erased the notion of hierarchy (syntax). But, and here I trust I buttress John's point, we are left with a levelled Babel and not the gift of tongues.

(It's fun, of course, such babble; we ought admit to that. If there weren't pure pleasure in the way that words edge up against each other, in the way that paragraphs fit, in learning how katechresis can be serviceable---then we'd all of us have to be a higher and bloodier-minded bunch. Because the average wage is maybe a penny a page, or dime each twenty hours; the average reward is anonymity. If your name be well enough known to be taken, then it's likely to be so in vain, or misspelled; vanity and sottishness and the deep paralysis of repetition await those who truly succeed. It's easy to inveigh against the writer's rotten lot, to say we're blessed or cursed or necessary, prophets without honor and too few who're honorably with....But there are other professions, and most "glory-hunters" could parlay their professional wordsmithing into some other job. We don't; we won't; why not? One answer is it's fun.)

Allright. That means the "governing ambiguity" instanced above is instinct in the problem posed: how learn to lie to tell the truth? Fiction is a series of strategies tricked out to hedge in truth as the tale-teller sees it, and he wants to make us the

audience see. In a way these early bards had it easier, had fewer doubts. They knew they had such and such a story to tell, a moral to point, a hero to praise, villain damn. Since the stuff of the epic was constant, the apprentice could focus consistently on the fashion of telling; with "matter" taken care of, one learned "manner" as if to it born. So were I to fashion exercises, they might be the reverse of the thirty already included---Dick meets Jane, Dick wins, loses Jane; Dick mourns Jane's death;

Dick meets Rick; they fight, they make alliance, they have children, the following adventures, and so forth. Tell the tale of a monkey copulating with banana peels upside down in a space capsule, since it's never been done before. Tell it from the capsule's point of view.

It's possible, in other words, that the problem remains one of "what to write," not "how to write it"---and that a great burden of proof would be lifted from the true apprentice writer if subject matter simply didn't enter in.

We all of us experience everything that Tolstoy and Shakespeare described by the time we're five if not before. We're familiar with gain, loss, love, hate, life, death, riches, poverty, laughter, sorrow, the very marrow of War and Peace or Hamlet. We grow by, among other things, growing in the gift of putting all this into words. There's nothing new under the sun. (Except, the echo answers, the computer, the Jiffy Fix-It Glu, the television series ABC premiered last week. And there's some truth in such objection; the problem for the writer, then, is to find some sufficiently available innovative context for the old old truths. And this takes time, takes a lot more than our first five years to learn---takes information in abundance, the relentless pack-rat accumulation of fact. All writers read all the time. They may not be well educated in the formal sense, nor have a comprehensive overview of the eighteenth century---but they carry books like talismans, know "singing school" is everything, hear Tolstoy, Shakespeare and the rest as sonorous still....)

Therefore the craftsman's paradox: the only way to learn one's art is through back-breaking labor which must not seem like work. Like the dubber in a foreign-language film who most succeeds when no one knows he's around...Or like those Zen masters of the martial arts. After the body has been trained to achievement, trained so that what earlier seemed impossible is difficult, difficult habitual, and the habitual easy; at the point where everything is instinct, true mastery begins. The highest dān can never be attained; the highest attainable dān is reached through meditation. So we have the spectacle of the ancient jiu-jitsu sensei, crumbled into the carapace of age, sitting on his tatami mat in the sun. And a disciple---full of health and radiant muscularity---comes up and assumes an attack-stance and says, "Master, I must kill you now," and raises the axe. But the sensei pulls the rug out from under his student's menacing feet.

So what I mean to urge is practice, trusting to the notion of perfection later on. Throw away a million words; read, write incessantly. We are all of us apprentices in a fast-vanishing guild; we need all the help we can get. There are some journeymen about, and a master-craftsman or six, but the species is endangered and much mastery is specious nowadays. Hunt that old codger in the sun, but don't swing your axe if you find him and keep at a respectful distance from his tatami mat. Look up his sleeves with reverence; acquire, if you can, some Latin and small Greek.

The real questions are, of course, what you write and to what purpose and for whom? Yet they are questions it's painful to ask, or fruitless to insist on answering, too soon. How uncover the secrets of growth or let those five years ramify in every text you take? These exercises are as good a place as any and far better than most to begin. But don't for an instant imagine that there aren't three hundred others, or that three

thousand would suffice to make an artist out of the glib artisan. That's once more what I meant by ambiguity; if art is a serious business, then it's also play; if it keep a man from suicide, then it might do so to propel him into war. Be careful, whichever way.

NFD