

## 7 *That Crafty Feeling*

*What follows is a version of a lecture given to the students of Columbia University's Writing Program in New York on Monday 24 March 2008. The brief: 'to speak about some aspect of your craft'.*

### *1. Macro Planners and Micro Managers*

First, a caveat: what I have to say about craft extends no further than my own experience, which is what it is – twelve years and three novels. Although this lecture will be divided into ten short sections meant to mark the various stages in the writing of a novel, what they most accurately describe, in truth, is the writing of *my* novels. That being said, I want to offer you a pair of ugly terms for two breeds of novelist: the *Macro Planner* and the *Micro Manager*.

You will recognize a Macro Planner from his Post-its, from those Moleskines he insists on buying. A Macro Planner makes notes, organizes material, configures a plot and creates a structure – all before he writes the title page. This structural security gives him a great deal of freedom of movement. It's not uncommon for Macro Planners to start writing their novels in the middle. As they progress, forwards or backwards, their difficulties multiply with their choices. I know Macro Planners who obsessively exchange possible endings for one another, who take characters out and put them back in, reverse the order of chapters and perform frequent – for me, unthinkable – radical surgery on their novels: moving the setting of a book from London to Berlin, for example, or changing the title. I can't stand to hear them speak about all this, not because I disapprove, but because other people's methods are always so incomprehensible and horrifying. I am a Micro Manager. I start at the first sentence of a



novel and I finish at the last. It would never occur to me to choose among three different endings because I haven't the slightest idea of the ending until I get to it, a fact that will surprise no one who has read my novels. Macro Planners have their houses largely built from day one, and so their obsession is internal – they're forever moving the furniture. They'll put a chair in the bedroom, the lounge, the kitchen and then back in the bedroom again. Micro Managers build a house floor by floor, discretely and in its entirety. Each floor needs to be sturdy and fully decorated with all the furniture in place before the next is built on top of it. There's wallpaper in the hall even if the stairs lead nowhere at all.

Because Micro Managers have no grand plan, their novels exist only in their present moment, in a sensibility, in the novel's tonal frequency line by line. When I begin a novel I feel there is nothing of that novel outside of the sentences I am setting down. I have to be very careful: the whole nature of the thing changes by the choice of a few words. This induces a special breed of pathology for which I have another ugly name: *OPD* or *obsessive perspective disorder*. It occurs mainly in the first twenty pages. It's a kind of existential drama, a long answer to the short question *What kind of a novel am I writing?* It manifests itself in a compulsive fixation on perspective and voice. In one day the first twenty pages can go from first-person present tense, to third-person past tense, to third-person present tense, to first-person past tense, and so on. Several times a day I change it. Because I am an English novelist enslaved to an ancient tradition, with each novel I have ended up exactly where I began: third person, past tense. But months are spent switching back and forth. Opening other people's novels, you recognize fellow Micro Managers: that opening pile-up of too-careful, obsessively worried-over sentences, a block of stilted verbiage that only loosens and relaxes after the twenty-page mark is passed. In the case of *On Beauty*, my *OPD* spun completely out of control: I reworked those first twenty pages for almost two years. To look back at all past work induces nausea, but the first twenty pages in particular bring on heart palpitations. It's like taking a tour of a cell in which you were once incarcerated.

Yet while *OPD* is happening, somehow the work of the rest of the novel gets done. That's the strange thing. It's as if you're winding the key of a toy car tighter and tighter . . . When you finally let it go, it travels at a crazy speed. When I finally settled on a tone, the rest of the book was finished in five months. Worrying over the first twenty pages is a way of working on the whole novel, a way of finding its structure, its plot, its characters – all of which, for a Micro Manager, are contained in the sensibility of a sentence. Once the tone is there, all else follows. You hear interior decorators say the same about a shade of paint.

## 2. Other People's Words, Part One

It's such a confidence trick, writing a novel. The main person you have to trick into confidence is yourself. This is hard to do alone. I gather sentences round me, quotations, the literary equivalent of a cheerleading squad. Except that analogy's screwy – cheerleaders *cheer*. I put up placards that make me feel bad. For five years I had a line from *Gravity's Rainbow* stuck to my door:

We have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function . . . zeroing in on what incalculable plot?

At that time, I guess I thought that it was the duty of the novel to rigorously pursue hidden information: personal, political, historical. I say *I guess* because I don't recognize that writer any more, and already find her idea of the novel oppressive, alien, useless. I don't think this feeling is unusual, especially when you start out. Not long ago I sat next to a young Portuguese novelist at dinner and told him I intended to read his first novel. He grabbed my wrist, genuinely distressed, and said: 'Oh, please don't! Back then, all I read was Faulkner. I had *no sense of humour*. My God, I was a different person!'

That's how it goes. Other people's words are so important. And



then without warning they stop being important, along with all those words of yours that *their* words prompted you to write. Much of the excitement of a new novel lies in the repudiation of the one written before. Other people's words are the bridge you use to cross from where you were to wherever you're going.

Recently I came across a new quote. It's my screen saver now, my little scrap of confidence as I try to write a novel. It is a thought of Derrida's and very simple:

If a right to a secret is not maintained then we are in a totalitarian space.

Which is to say: enough of human dissection, of entering the brains of characters, cracking them open, rooting every secret out! For now, this is the new attitude. Years from now, when this book is done and another begins, another change will come.

'My God, I was a different person!' – I think many writers think this, from book to book. A new novel, begun in hope and enthusiasm, grows shameful and strange to its author soon enough. After each book is done, you look forward to hating it (and you never have to wait long); there is a weird, inverse confidence to be had from feeling destroyed, because being destroyed, having to start again, means you have space in front of you, somewhere to go. Think of that revelation Shakespeare put in the mouth of King John: '*Now my soul has elbow room!*' Fictionally speaking, the nightmare is losing the desire to move.

### 3. Other People's Words, Part Two

Some writers won't read a word of any novel while they're writing their own. Not one word. They don't even want to see the cover of a novel. As they write, the world of fiction dies: no one has ever written, no one is writing, no one will ever write again. Try to recommend a good novel to a writer of this type while he's writing and he'll give you a look like you just stabbed him in the heart with a kitchen knife. It's a matter of temperament. Some writers are the kind of solo

violinists who need complete silence to tune their instruments. Others want to hear every member of the orchestra – they'll take a cue from a clarinet, from an oboe, even. I am one of those. My writing desk is covered in open novels. I read lines to swim in a certain sensibility, to strike a particular note, to encourage rigour when I'm too sentimental, to bring verbal ease when I'm syntactically uptight. I think of reading like a balanced diet; if your sentences are baggy, too baroque, cut back on fatty Foster Wallace, say, and pick up Kafka, as roughage. If your aesthetic has become so refined it is stopping you from placing a single black mark on white paper, stop worrying so much about what Nabokov would say; pick up Dostoyevsky, patron saint of substance over style.

Yet you meet students who feel that reading while you write is unhealthy. Their sense is that it corrupts voice by influence and, moreover, that reading great literature creates a sense of oppression. For how can you pipe out your little mouse song when Kafka's Josephine the Mouse Singer pipes so much more loudly and beautifully than you ever could? To this way of thinking, the sovereignty of one's individuality is the vital thing, and it must be protected at any price, even if it means cutting oneself off from that literary echo chamber E. M. Forster described, in which writers speak so helpfully to one another, across time and space. Well, each to their own, I suppose.

For me, that echo chamber was essential. I was fourteen when I heard John Keats in there and in my mind I formed a bond with him, a bond based on class – though how archaic that must sound, here in America. Keats was not working-class, exactly, nor black – but in rough outline his situation seemed closer to mine than the other writers I came across. He felt none of the entitlement of, say, Virginia Woolf, or Byron, or Pope, or Evelyn Waugh or even P. G. Wodehouse and Agatha Christie. Keats offers his readers the possibility of entering writing from a side door, the one marked 'Apprentices Welcome Here'. For Keats went about his work like an apprentice; he took a kind of MFA of the mind, albeit alone, and for free, in his little house in Hampstead. A suburban, lower- middle-class boy, a few steps removed from the literary scene, he made his own scene out of the books of his



library. He never feared influence – he devoured influences. He wanted to learn from them, even at the risk of their voices swamping his own. And the feeling of apprenticeship never left him: you see it in his early experiments in poetic form; in the letters he wrote to friends expressing his fledgling literary ideas; it's there, famously, in his reading of Chapman's Homer, and the fear that he might cease to be before his pen had gleaned his teeming brain. The term *role model* is so odious, but the truth is it's a very strong writer indeed who gets by without a model kept somewhere in mind. I think of Keats. Keats slogging away, devouring books, plagiarizing, impersonating, adapting, struggling, growing, writing many poems that made him blush and then a few that made him proud, learning everything he could from whomever he could find, dead or alive, who might have something useful to teach him.

#### 4. Middle-of-the-Novel Magical Thinking

In the middle of a novel, a kind of magical thinking takes over. To clarify, the middle of the novel may not happen in the actual geographical centre of the novel. By *middle of the novel* I mean whatever page you are on when you stop being part of your household and your family and your partner and children and food shopping and dog feeding and reading the post – I mean when there is nothing in the world except your book, and even as your wife tells you she's sleeping with your brother her face is a gigantic semi-colon, her arms are parentheses and you are wondering whether *rummage* is a better verb than *rifle*. The middle of a novel is a state of mind. Strange things happen in it. Time collapses. You sit down to write at 9 a.m., you blink, the evening news is on and four thousand words are written, more words than you wrote in three long months, a year ago. Something has changed. And it's not restricted to the house. If you go outside, everything – I mean, *everything* – flows freely into your novel. Someone on the bus says something – it's straight out of your novel. You open the paper – *every single story in the paper is directly relevant to your novel*. If you are fortunate enough to have someone waiting to publish your novel, this is the point

at which you phone them in a panic and try to get your publication date brought forward because you cannot believe *how in tune the world is with your unfinished novel right now*, and if it isn't published next Tuesday maybe the moment will pass and you will have to kill yourself.

Magical thinking makes you crazy – and renders everything possible. Incredibly knotty problems of structure now resolve themselves with inspired ease. See that one paragraph? It only needs to be moved, and the whole chapter falls into place! Why didn't you see that before? You randomly pick a poetry book off the shelf and the first line you read ends up being your epigraph – it seems to have been written for no other reason.

#### 5. Dismantling the Scaffolding

When building a novel you will use a lot of scaffolding. Some of this is necessary to hold the thing up, but most isn't. The majority of it is only there to make you feel secure, and in fact the building will stand without it. Each time I've written a long piece of fiction I've felt the need for an enormous amount of scaffolding. With me, scaffolding comes in many forms. The only way to write this novel is to divide it into three sections of ten chapters each. Or five sections of seven chapters. Or the answer is to read the Old Testament and model each chapter on the books of the prophets. Or the divisions of the Bhagavad Gita. Or the Psalms. Or *Ulysses*. Or the songs of Public Enemy. Or the films of Grace Kelly. Or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. Or the liner notes to *The White Album*. Or the twenty-seven speeches Donald Rumsfeld gave to the press corps during his tenure.

Scaffolding holds up confidence when you have none, reduces the despair, creates a goal – however artificial – an end point. Use it to divide what seems like an endless, unmarked journey, though by doing this, like Zeno, you infinitely extend the distance you need to go.

Later, when the book is printed and old and dog-eared, it occurs to me that I really didn't need any of that scaffolding. The book would



Changing My Mind

have been far better off without it. But when I was putting it up, it felt vital, and once it was there, I'd worked so hard to get it there I was loath to take it down. If you are writing a novel at the moment and putting up scaffolding, well, I hope it helps you, but don't forget to dismantle it later. Or if you're determined to leave it out there for all to see, at least hang a nice façade over it, as the Romans do when they fix up their palazzi.

## 6. First Twenty Pages, Redux

Late in the novel, in the last quarter, when I am rolling downhill, I turn back to read those first twenty pages. They are packed tighter than tuna in a can. Calmly, I take off the top, let a little air in. What's amusing about the first twenty pages – they are funny now, three years later, now I'm no longer locked up in them – is how little confidence you have in your readers when you begin. You spoon-feed them *everything*. You can't let a character walk across the room without giving her backstory as she goes. You don't trust the reader to have a little patience, a little intelligence. This reader, who, for all you know, has read Thomas Bernhard, *Finnegans Wake*, Gertrude Stein, Georges Perec – yet *you're* worried that if you don't mention in the first three pages that Sarah Malone is a social worker with a dead father, this talented reader might not be able to follow you exactly. It's awful, the swing of the literary fraudulence pendulum: from moment to moment you can't decide whether you're the fraudulent idiot or your reader is the fraudulent idiot. For writers who work with character a good deal, going back to the first twenty pages is also a lesson in how much more delicate a thing character is than you *think* it is when you're writing it. The idea of forming people out of grammatical clauses seems so fantastical at the start that you hide your terror in a smokescreen of elaborate sentence making, as if character can be drawn forcibly out of the curlicues of certain adjectives piled ruthlessly on top of one another. In fact, character occurs with the lightest of brushstrokes. Naturally, it can be destroyed

Being

lightly, too. I think of a creature called Odradek, who at first glance appears to be a 'flat star-shaped spool for thread' but who is not quite this, Odradek who won't stop rolling down the stairs, trailing string behind him, who has a laugh that sounds as if it has no lungs behind it, a laugh like rustling leaves. You can find the inimitable Odradek in a one-page story of Kafka's called 'The Cares of a Family Man'. Curious Odradek is more memorable to me than characters I spent three years on, and five hundred pages.

## 7. The Last Day

There is one great advantage to being a Micro Manager rather than a Macro Planner: the last day of your novel truly is the last day. If you edit as you go along, there are no first, second, third drafts. There is only one draft, and when it's done, it's done. Who can find anything bad to say about the last day of a novel? It's a feeling of happiness that knocks me clean out of adjectives. I think sometimes that the best reason for writing novels is to experience those four and a half hours after you write the final word. The last time it happened to me, I uncorked a good Sancerre I'd been keeping and drank it standing up with the bottle in my hand, and then I lay down in my backyard on the paving stones and stayed there for a long time, crying. It was sunny, late autumn, and there were apples everywhere, overripe and stinky.

## 8. Step Away from the Vehicle

You can ignore everything else in this lecture except number eight. It is the only absolutely twenty-four-carat-gold-plated piece of advice I have to give you. I've never taken it myself, though one day I hope to. The advice is as follows.

When you finish your novel, if money is not a desperate priority, if you do not need to sell it at once or be published that very second – *put it in a drawer*. For as long as you can manage. A year or more is



ideal – but even three months will do. *Step away from the vehicle.* The secret to editing your work is simple: you need to become its reader instead of its writer. I can't tell you how many times I've sat backstage with a line of novelists at some festival, all of us with red pens in hand, frantically editing our published novels into fit form so that we might go onstage and read from them. It's an unfortunate thing, but it turns out that the perfect state of mind to edit your own novel is two years after it's published, ten minutes before you go onstage at a literary festival. At that moment every redundant phrase, each show-off, pointless metaphor, all the pieces of deadwood, stupidity, vanity and tedium are distressingly obvious to you. Two years earlier, when the proofs came, you looked at the same page and couldn't see a comma out of place. And by the way, that's true of the professional editors, too; after they've read a manuscript multiple times, they stop being able to see it. You need a certain head on your shoulders to edit a novel, and it's not the head of a writer in the thick of it, nor the head of a professional editor who's read it in twelve different versions. It's the head of a smart stranger who picks it off a bookshelf and begins to read. You need to get the head of that smart stranger somehow. You need to forget you ever wrote that book.

### 9. *The Unbearable Cruelty of Proofs*

Proofs are so cruel! Breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain. Proofs are the wasteland where the dream of your novel dies and cold reality asserts itself. When I look at loose-leaf proofs, fresh out of the envelope, bound with a thick elastic band, marked up by a conscientious copy editor, I feel quite sure I would have to become a different person entirely to do the work that needs to be done here. To correct what needs correcting, fix what needs to be fixed. The only proper response to an envelope full of marked-up pages is '*Give it back to me! Let me start again!*' But no one says this because by this point exhaustion has set in. It's not the book you hoped for, maybe something might yet

be done – but the will is gone. There's simply no more will to be had. That's why proofs are so cruel, so sad: the existence of the proof itself is proof that it is already too late. I've only ever seen one happy proof, in Kings College Library: the manuscript of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot, upon reaching his own point of exhaustion, had the extreme good fortune to meet Ezra Pound, a very smart stranger, and with his red pen Ezra went to work. And what work! His pen goes everywhere, trimming, cutting, slicing, a frenzy of editing, the why and wherefore not especially obvious, at times, indeed, almost ridiculous; almost, at times, indiscriminate . . . Whole pages struck out with a single line.

Underneath Pound's markings, *The Waste Land* is a sad proof like any other – too long, full of lines not worth keeping, badly structured. Lucky Eliot, to have Ezra Pound. Lucky Fitzgerald, to have Maxwell Perkins. Lucky Carver, we now know, to have Gordon Lish. *Hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable – mon frère!* Where have all the smart strangers gone?

### 10. *Years Later: Nausea, Surprise and Feeling Okay*

I find it very hard to read my books after they're published. I've never read *White Teeth*. Five years ago I tried; I got about ten sentences in before I was overwhelmed with nausea. More recently, when people tell me they have just read that book, I do try to feel pleased, but it's a distant, disconnected sensation, like when someone tells you they met your second cousin in a bar in Goa. I suspect *White Teeth* and I may never be reconciled – I think that's simply what happens when you begin writing a book at the age of twenty-one. Then, a year ago, I was in an airport somewhere and I saw a copy of *The Autograph Man*, and on a whim, I bought it. On the plane I had to drink two of those mini bottles of wine before I had the stomach to begin. I didn't manage the whole thing, but I read about two-thirds, and at that incredible speed with which you can read a book if you happen to have written it. And it was actually not such a bad experience – I



laughed a few times, groaned more than I laughed and gave up when the wine wore off – but for the first time, I felt something other than nausea. I felt surprise. The book was genuinely strange to me; there were whole pages I didn't recognize, didn't remember writing. And because it was so strange I didn't feel any particular animosity towards it. So that was that: between that book and me there now exists a sort of blank truce, neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Finally, while writing this lecture, I picked up *On Beauty*. I read maybe a third of it, not consecutively, but chapters here and there. As usual, the nausea; as usual, the feeling of fraudulence and the too-late desire to wield the red pen all over the place – but something else, too, something new. Here and there – in very isolated pockets – I had the sense that this line, that paragraph, these were exactly what I meant to write, and the fact was, I'd written them, and I felt okay about it, felt good, even. It's a feeling I recommend to all of you. That feeling feels okay.

## 8 One Week in Liberia

### Monday

There are no direct flights from England to Liberia. Either you go to Brussels or you book with Astraeus, a specialist airline named after a Roman goddess of justice. It runs a service to Freetown, in neighbouring Sierra Leone. The clientele are mostly Africans dressed as if for church. Formal hats, zirconias and Louis Vuitton holdalls are popular. A toddler waddles down the aisle in a three-piece suit and bow tie. Only non-Africans are dressed for 'Africa', in khakis, sandals, wrinkled T-shirts. Their bags are ostentatiously simple: frayed rucksacks, battered cases. The luggage of a nomad people.

A cross-section of travellers sit in a row. A glamorous African girl in a silky blouse, an English nun, an American aid worker and a Lebanese man, who describes himself as a 'fixer': 'I fix things in Freetown – electrical systems, buildings.' He calls the well-dressed Africans 'soon-comes'. 'They come, they soon go. Their families assume they're rich – they try to live up to this idea.' The plane prepares to land. The fixer looks out the window and murmurs, 'White man's graveyard,' in the same spirit that people feel compelled to say 'the Big Apple' as their plane approaches JFK. This, like much else on the plane, accommodates the Africa of imagination.

In Sierra Leone everyone deplanes, taking the Africa of imagination with them, a story that has at least a familiar form. Who remains in the story of Liberia? Barely a dozen people, ushered to the front to stare at one another across the wide aisles of business class. The nun is travelling on: Sister Anne of the Corpus Christi Carmelites. Brown socks in brown sandals, brown wimple; a long, kindly face, mapped with wrinkles. She has worked in Liberia since the eighties, running a mission school in Greenville. 'We left when the war became