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A Guide to Revision

Revision is the most important part of what we do as writers. It's also the least studied stage in the process. There are style manuals in abundance, true. These style manuals often feature a wealth of practical recommendations for writers. But these recommendations are, in their silence on the specifics of revision, essentially aimed at the first draft. Less often do these style manuals apply themselves to the ongoing process of writing, the painstaking improvement that is revision. At the other extreme, writing workshops, which often *do* make suggestions for revision, have an easier time suggesting major surgery than they do suggesting the kinds of fine tuning that make the difference in the long, slow deliberation of completion.

As a way of rethinking the kind of instruction I have recently offered my own students, it has occurred to me that I might attempt to make scientific—however disagreeable that word might sound—the art of revision. In this way, I imagine that I help to make this essential part of composition less fearsome, less unknown. A number of specific suggestions occur below, therefore, with a rationale for each. The diagnosis I'm offering here is old-fashioned: that haste and a lack of interest in line-by-line work are the literary diseases of the age. What follows are some things you can do to avoid falling ill.

Of course, I am by no means perfect at these things myself. But over the years I have become more teachable. (I have even revised these lines according to the rules

contained in these pages and I am not sure the piece is done yet!) This, therefore, is advice I take myself, at least when I am working at my best. I offer it to all interested parties.

1. *Omit Needless Words*

This suggestion *is* from a style manual, one of the best, and it is therefore a good place to begin. The injunction comes from Strunk and White, of course, as readers of that primer will recall. E. B. White, an admirable stylist, has the line-by-line gracefulness of a great rewriter, and in this particular case the perfection is as much in the *form* of the recommendation as it is in the sense. Which is to say: it's obvious that all the needless words have been removed from the phrase "Omit needless words." (One cannot greet with like enthusiasm the authors' suggestion, elsewhere, to "Prefer the mainstream to the offbeat.") What could be more elegantly restrained than this nugget of wisdom? The command, as shown here, is such an adroit verb form, don't you think? Use commands often! And while I will recommend below that you rethink modifiers when you revise, the modifier here ("needless") is so muscular, especially before the noun "words," that it is hard to quarrel with it.

Why omit needless words? A parable, if I may. When I was first working in book publishing, in 1986, I worked for an editor who occasionally offered an exercise along the lines of the Strunk and White suggestion, in the course of training young editors. My boss's editorial exercise involved a deep inquiry into the phrase "Buy fresh fish here." This being a sign one might, for the sake of argument, see at a local fish market. About

this phrase, “Buy fresh fish here,” my boss observed that a) no fish market would advertise *old* or *unfresh* fish, making “fresh” redundant; and b) if you were standing at the fish market itself it was obvious that you were already “here,” making that word unnecessary; c) what else would you do at the market but “buy” the fish, eliminating the need for that portion of the sign; leaving d) just “Fish” in the sign, as far as truly essential words went. Jane, my boss, suggested that contemporary prose be edited along these lines. Ruthlessly.

While we are rehashing of Strunk and White, another very important bit of advice to be found in its pages is this one: “Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.” This is not simply to suggest relocating prepositions from the end—*up with this kind of rigidity we need not put*. This suggestion instead intends to note simply that there is a declarative grace in sentences that recognize the drama at, or just before, the dead stop.

2. *Sacrifice Your Modifiers*

At Farrar, Straus & Giroux, where I later worked, we issued a collection of stories by a young writer who boasted that not an adjective appeared in his volume. (He later had a nervous breakdown, and has published little since, but I am not sure his problems are related to his refusal to use adjectives.) This sort of grammatical boasting has a strange currency these days. It is not rare in writing circles to hear denigration of the adverb (see, for example, David Gates’s remarks on the subject). According to workshop commonplaces of the moment, you should *never* use an adverb. I am not willing to go quite this far, but I recognize that the assault on modifiers has a purpose. What is the

purpose? The purpose of sacrificing modifiers is to get you, the writer, to think more clearly about nouns and verbs. Nouns and verbs are the crucial building blocks of contemporary prose. A well-turned noun is a glorious thing to behold. (“For her part, she told me that as a schoolgirl she had been dismissed late one morning with sticklets of charcoal and clunches of unruled paper, and had been instructed not to come back until she had made rubbings of what it was like where she lived,” *Stories in the Worst Way*, by Gary Lutz). And a great verb is what makes possible all the movement in a sentence or a paragraph. What is literature, in the end, but a description of movement? Nouns and verbs are most often encumbered with modifiers when the writer is uncertain about their selection in the first place. Adjectives and adverbs, that is, are for the grammatically insecure, and when they are overused they begin to take on a purple hue. As an example of insecurity, think, for example, of the word “real” in the commonplace “the real thing,” or its relative, “the real deal.” “Real” is beloved of copy writers in modern advertising, since it affects to confer the genuine. Of course, if “thing” (or “deal”) were not itself so imprecise, “real” wouldn’t become necessary in the first place. If you gaze long enough at “the real thing,” you will see how opaque and inexplicable a phrase it really is, and yet it purports to tell the truth!

A further list of deracinated modifiers might also include such words as “incredible,” “unbelievable,” or, among adverbs, “thoughtfully,” “impossibly,” “meaningfully,” and so forth. A good exercise for those wishing to improve their lines would be to cut *all* the adjectives and adverbs, just for the sake of it, and then, in subsequent drafts, to allow back a smattering—the most excellent of adjectives—where absolutely necessary.

Having eliminated the bulk of the modifiers, you can go about the business of improving your nouns and verbs. Your prose will be better for it.

3. *Consider the Rhythm*

The exercise I give to improve rhythm involves the four types of sentences possible in English language prose, at least as we have come to understand them from middle and high school English classes. The four types of sentences are:

- 1) *The Simple Sentence*, consisting of a noun and a verb: “The heart leaps.”
- 2) *The Compound Sentence*, consisting of more than one main clause, these fused together with a conjunction: “The heart leaps, but the soul dies.”
- 3) *The Complex Sentence*, consisting of a main clause and one or more dependent clauses: “In the course of a every day’s labors, the heart leaps.”
- 4) *The Compound-Complex Sentence*, which consists of an amalgam of a compound and a compound-complex sentence: “In the course of every day’s labors, when faced with the brutality of modernity, the heart leaps, but the soul also dies.”

Additionally, there are two kinds of sentences generally considered out of bounds, at least according to your language arts instructors:

- 5) *The Sentence Fragment*, consisting of a noun or verb but otherwise incomplete: “Enough already. About the heart. And the soul. Leaping. Or whatever.”
- 6) *The Run-On Sentence*, which conjoins multiple main clauses (and, in many cases, their dependencies, as well) either without traditional conjunctions or at such a length as to seem, well, *de trop*: “Semicolons are one way of joining sentences to other

sentences just for the hell of it; semicolons are your friend when you want to feel free and easy as regards sentence length; semicolons are like a little wink at the reader that you are unafraid of scale and are willing to go down that road, grammarians be damned.”

My contention is that the perfect paragraph consists of a variation of these line lengths. The perfect paragraph may, in fact, use each of them. In chopping up 4/4 time in a musical composition, you occasionally find a measure that has four quarters notes, or a dotted quarter and five eighth notes, or four eighth notes and a half note, and so forth; similarly, your paragraph is going to *sound* better if you think more about varying the line lengths, if your paragraph, metaphorically speaking, is syncopated. A lot of lazy contemporary writing consists of simple sentences upon simple sentences (we have Hemingway to blame for this, probably, though he might in turn blame Gertrude Stein, and I’m not even going to get started on Raymond Carver), without the beauty of a long sentence to make the shorter lines sound more unusual and premeditated by juxtaposition.

The fragment and the run-on, of course, should be used sparingly, for specific effect (the run-on nearly always conveys breathlessness or an elevated consciousness), but they are, in literary prose, just as legitimate as the overused simple sentence.

The point of all this is to remind you that what you make is music. In poetry, we are explicitly musical. Prose should avoid *explicit* musicality (of which, more below), but it may celebrate the implicitly musical. It should delight in its materiality, in the sheer play of words and sound. *Church door*, my teacher Angela Carter used to say, is among the oldest continuously used phrases in English. I am not certain this is true, but I know that when she said it she got me thinking of Anglo-Saxon words, and things even older than Anglo-Saxon, words from High Gothic, and the way in which national and historical

character are bestowed on people just because their language sounds a certain way.

Hewing close to our linguistic origins in a context of rhythmical thinking is another way to construct a moving and persuasive paragraph.

4. *Replace “To Be” and “To Have”*

Further to the goal of making the most of the dramatic potential of your prose, consider eliminating verbs (and their related verb forms and tenses) that are overused. “To be” is the most overused verb of all. It bleats like a lost ewe in weak prose: *is is is is is is is is is*. You can glimpse “to be” up ahead on a page like one of those plastic garden fences that you buy by the yard from the big-box retailers. And “to have” is not much better. By reason of the ubiquity of these words in contemporary literature, it appears that our literary protagonists these days exist only in terms of “being” and “having.” Apparently, they can do little else. They own a lot of *stuff*, and then they hang around their stuff *having* it, and *being* with it. Surely our protagonists can act more ambiguously and/or decisively than this! Can they not long and fail and weep and rail and mourn and guffaw and tremble and idle and amble and leap and celebrate and caution and dodge and bilk and muster and deny and atone and expiate?

5. *Simplify Tenses*

Nothing clots a paragraph up faster than tenses that disagree with one another. This can result from a lack of care about making sure the tenses cohere in the first place

—ever a problem for the beginning writer. Or it can result from having a lot of complex movement back and forth through the eons in a short space. Proust can pull this off. Alice Munro can pull it off. Proust often uses very ornate tense constructions as a result of his preoccupation with the rigors of synchrony and asynchrony. You are not going to be so lucky. Wherever possible, keep your tenses simple and readable, so that you are able to visit your creativity on the other parts of speech. Here's an example of rather awkward tense usage in a very strong recent novel: "Last night at 3:00 a.m. President Kennedy had been killed." I admire the book in question, but I am convinced that its great length made so many demands on the author that he didn't have time to pause over this sentence. First, the opening features a hackneyed verb—"had been"—in this case the past perfect tense of the verb "to be." Then it expresses this past perfect in a clumsy manner. The sentence that follows proves the case: "Seaman Houston and the other two recruits slept while the first reports traveled around the world." Retroactively, especially in "Last night at 3:00 a.m.," the second sentence seems to suggest in the Houston character an awareness of the moment of the assassination that he can't have had, since, at the time, he slept. For me, the only possible rationale for the first sentence is that it suggests a narrator (or an author) who needs to be present at Kennedy's assassination, for thematic reasons. The novel, after all, purports to be an *entire* secret history of the Vietnam War. I sympathize with this thematic concern. But does the first sentence make sense? Was it not possible that a better first sentence would have been something along the lines of: "As Seaman Houston and the other recruits slept, the first reports of the president's assassination circled the world." Or: "Seaman Houston and the other two recruits slept while the first reports of the assassination reverberated around the globe." (Because "traveled" is not a very

electrifying verb either.) Is it possible that the author who composed this sentence also opened a novel thus: “In the Oakland Greyhound all the people were dwarfs, and they pushed and shoved to get on the bus, even cutting ahead of the two nuns, who were there first.” Just the comma after “nuns,” alone, suggests the work of a compelling and original stylist.

6. *Spill Your Parentheticals*

It's in his foreword to *Speak, Memory*, that Nabokov alludes to a point in his composition when he began to rethink parentheticals: “Certain tight parentheses had been opened and allowed to spill their still active contents.” As a general approach to the parenthetical, this makes good sense to me. A parenthetical is an interruption of the prose (and with habitual interruptors (like Stanley Elkin) you sometimes get interruptions within the interruption), and the question is, to what end? What do all these parentheses get us (if anything)? The parenthetical suggests a writer who has insufficiently rewritten, because he or she has not thought enough ahead about the material inside (the same may be true of the footnote, and, notwithstanding Nicholson Baker's masterful novel *The Mezzanine*, or in the work of David Foster Wallace, the footnote is probably to be used judiciously), has merely flung it into the parentheses, and has not gone back over the passage sufficiently to rethink this approach. A parenthetical often feels tentative, then, or haphazard, and revision offers us a fine opportunity to eliminate it. In this parenthetical tendency I also include all appositives, the material in double dashes. Digressions should be very specifically motivated, for a specific purpose, and if they're

not, they should come out. The mind, it's true, is a digressive place, and linearity is the ultimate *simulation*, the ultimate fraud, in the representation of the mind, but the merest hint of digression can often do the deed. A wholesale abuse of asides, digressions, and/or parentheticals, results in prose that is hard to follow, and this is sometimes good, but often not.

7. *Avoid Alliteration*

My writing teacher in college, John Hawkes, expressed contempt for alliteration, and in his case, I think it was because his prose was so beautiful that it verged on linguistic decadence. By way of expiation, Hawkes was especially good at calling attention to language that took too much pleasure in itself. Poetry, according to this view, is poetry, and prose is prose. As I've said, the job of poetry is to make the most of the two registers in which it operates. The first of these is the register of language. Assonance, consonance, alliteration, meter, these are all appropriate celebrations of this surface layer of poetry, and without it, poetry just doesn't seem special enough. The second register of poetry, of course, is the register of its meaning. Since the advent of modernism, this second register can sometimes be difficult to hazard, so fixed is the poem on its linguistic ambitions.

Prose is different. More often than not, prose is first about its content, its meaning, and to the extent that it works up its veneer, aping the elevation of poetry, the meaning becomes difficult to apprehend. The work, as a consequence, starts to seem a self-important or sometimes precious. There are exceptions to this rule, of course, as there are

to all rules, and Hawkes, while opposing alliteration, fervently esteemed Nabokov, who is a habitual offender in this account. (“A torch of lipstick now gave her mouth an air of deadpan sullenness, which, by contrast, increased the shock of beauty when, in gayety or greed, she revealed the moist shine of her large teeth and the red riches of tongue and palate,” from *Ada*.) But in general, until writers have reckoned with the matter of voice, or unless they know exactly who is doing the narrating and have established that this speaker is afflicted with *the purple*, they would do best to eschew alliteration and to make substitutions so as to avoid it.

A related point: Angela Carter liked to insist that when Dickens was lazy he sometimes wrote automatically in iambic pentameter. I’m not sure I had much of an ear for this at the time that Angela made this claim, and anyway a preliminary examination of the immemorial opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* indicates that it falls in a twelve beat line. Four three-beat phrases? “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope . . .” And so on. An Alexandrine, composed of tribrach, dactyl, tribrach, dactyl? Or molossus, dactyl. Or tribach followed by innumerable variants in the sentences following the first. The point is that the laziness in Dickens led him to sentences that sounded *pretty*, but didn’t do enough besides. Prettiness can be sublime, but it can also slay, outright, the signifying register of the sentences.

8. *Rethink Abstraction*

Upon trying out these suggestions in a class recently, a very talented younger writer complained most pointedly about this one. *Can I put it back in later on?* Meaning his abstraction. And, yes, this is, perhaps, one of the lessons that one gets early, and then, having learned it, begins to violate almost immediately. However, for the duration of this lesson, as we approach revising, let's think in terms of the specific and concrete, rather than in terms of the lofty and diaphanous. The removal of the word "love" from a novel or short story, for example, has never harmed that story. The story may still be *about* love, and it may give all evidence of its romantic passion is, but if the characters are described as sweaty and dressed in unwashed polyesters, it will do a lot more for me than if they thrum with the sweet harmonies of Cupid. What are those harmonies, why are they sweet, and why should I believe this sort of thing? The same goes for such other abstract concepts as time, death, loneliness, sorrow, envy, etc. That human emotional and psychological life is the proper theme for a work of fiction is self-evident (those who argue otherwise are just being perverse), but the evidence of these ideas must be, as the poet said, in *things*, not in the atmospheric elaboration of the ideas themselves.

If you take this bit of advice even further, you will at some point collide with Eliot's notion that the expression of abstract feelings is difficult, if not impossible, in any case, and that you had better, instead, supplant the abstraction with what Eliot called an *objective correlative*, a concrete object or person which becomes the repository, in a clarifying way, of the feeling under discussion. This, then, might be the approach to take in revision, and if it becomes impossible for you to let go of your abstractions later on in your writing process (note that Mann, in *The Magic Mountain* did write the line: "Time is

my theme”), then note their effect, and move on. But remember: the abstraction is occasionally the portion of the meal that the reader rejects for being already full.

9. Use Figurative Language Sparingly

In these days of not very thoughtful writing, of writing that often inclines toward the trappings of seriousness without being terribly serious at all, there’s a *sine qua non* of figurative language, a trope that in all cases is intended to give evidence of the author’s literary earnestness, and that is the simile. As others have noted, even the metaphor has gone all but extinct in the rush to employ the simile to say whatever cannot otherwise be said. As with writers who boast of having no adverbs in their novels, I have also heard of writers who have eliminated each and every simile from their work. This *is* one possible approach. I have seen student work in which back-to-back sentences were overstuffed with its similes, as though narrative were a bed and breakfast and every possible surface needed its embroidered throw pillow.

If comparison (which is the means of the simile, as with the metaphor) is absolutely essential in your prose work, then consider Proust’s notion of how to make your comparisons do more. A comparison is most arresting when it compares items at the greatest possible remove from one another. The Surrealists got the most use out of this metaphorical approach, by absurdly yoking together disparate elements in their obliquities. (“The window overlooked a ship lying on the prairie, breathing regularly. In the distance could be seen an immense tiara made of the wealth of ancient cities. The sun lassoed the finest adventures. . . . There was a call button for the realization of each of our

desires and there was time for everything. The bedspread was made of news items close at hand," *Soluble Fish*.) This is metaphor by a *Cors Exquis* of comparison. The energy the Surrealists brought to their process indicates how much creative thinking can be done here with figurative language. Comparison ought to say of the primary item under examination that it is *like* something improbable. Love is not like a rollercoaster; it's like gypsy moths deforesting the suburbs.

And, quantitatively speaking, where similes are concerned, less is more. Lest you should seem to be straining for high literary purpose. The veneer of high literary purpose, in general, is to be avoided anyway. When I behold a writer certain of his or her literary seriousness, I am almost always certain that I will, instead, find the work unintentionally funny. That is part of the dialectical nature of reading, in any event. Reading is an act of liberation, and the reader wants to feel encouraged in a certain direction, but resolutely *unforced*. The reader probably wants to imagine that she or he is arriving at the conclusion on her own. Thus, interpretation ought to be left *open*, and that can only happen if the work doesn't give everything away. The work shouldn't know exactly what it's about, exactly what it means, and the writing should reflect this, by being sure-footed, but somewhat polymorphous—not too much one thing, not too much another.

10. Engage All Five Senses

To suggest the richness of human experience in prose, don't fall back on the relentless obviousness of the *visible*. As Stephen Dedalus revealed, in *Ulysses*, when he undertook the rather simple activity of closing his eyes, prose begins to do something very exciting

as it moves away from the register of the sighted. The same can be said for the taste of Proust's Madeleine. Not only did that specific taste bring back for Marcel the sensations of childhood in a rich way, but the novel itself lifted off with the alternative that is Marcel's sightless engagement with that cookie.

Smell, probably, is the most magisterial of the senses in a fictive context, perhaps because it is yoked so firmly to memory. So: any time you get a smell onto a page, you have done yourself a service. For me, as a reader also engaged with the auditory and with music, a specifically described *sound* can also go a long way toward making the difference in a paragraph. (I think of, for example, the way Jonathan Lethem cleverly evoked eras in *The Fortress of Solitude* just by describing the R&B songs of particular moments—not only did this gesture have the desired calendar-related effect, it also, for me called forth the auditory sense memories associated with these neglected pop chestnuts).

The real reason to avoid limiting your prose to observable phenomena is that the visible is already being depleted at the movies. This has been the case for a long time. The movies are ever our narrative competitor. Cinema is a medium that almost always, almost every day, annexes a little more cultural terrain to itself. It's like Phoenix. Or Las Vegas. The only possible response to this assault on our own storytelling tradition is to continue to emphasize skills and effects that are specifically the domain of the written. Until film becomes more synergistic than it is now, the consciousness of multiple senses at the same time is an aesthetic capability uniquely suited to prose and poetry.

11. Cut the Last Sentence

This is one of my favorite bits of advice, and also the one that I have had the most trouble learning myself. The tendency on the part of many contemporary prose writers is to want to explain too much. That is, many contemporary prose writers want to make sure that each paragraph makes its indelible point more than indelibly, so that a paragraph that simply *ends* becomes, to these writers, insufficient. They add an additional sentence or two that restates what there is to be said, just for good measure, making the end of the paragraph forced, even overwrought.

My advice, in general, is to cut the last sentence of almost everything. My advice, in fact, is cut the last sentence without even looking at it. You will likely find that the better end, the more graceful one, the more allusive one, is back a ways, awaiting your admiration.

In part, this is to say something about endings. What is an ending finally? And what is it you imagine you want to do by stopping? On the one hand, the ending is just where a story peters out. That much is indisputable. The conflict that opens the narrative must ultimately leave off eventually, and the ending is where it does so. In the folk tale, on which the modern short story rests (whether it wants to or not), the ending is always tidy. In the folk tale, the ending sutures up the bloody psychic wound with which the story has begun—a prince turned into a frog, children in the woods stolen by an old crone. In these cases, however, there's an almost knowing tidiness, as if the tellers of the tales well understood that nothing but optimism and a childlike simplicity could create such a preposterous symmetry as we find in the ending.

The 19th century novel, especially as construed by Austen, the Brontes, and Dickens, largely accepted on faith this tidy ending, and it wasn't until the realism of Flaubert, and, even more so, in the slice-of-life structures of Chekhov, that a much different ending, an untidy and often rather blunt ending became fashionable. Maybe this obscure and slightly unsettling ending simply became more accurate, and accuracy ultimately counted for more than optimism and childlike simplicity. Whatever the historical requirement, by the time of Hemingway and Sherwood Anderson (not to mention such heroes of early twentieth century short fiction as Babel and Kafka), the tidy ending was more or less dispensed with. Now one finds it only in Hollywood romantic comedies and other highly suspect popular forms.

With regard to endings: as goes the story as a whole, so goes the paragraph. I imagine this is the case because I imagine that stories are *fractally structured*, in which the paragraph (and even the sentence) has a specific conflict and a specific resolution, even if this conflict only involves moving a character from one side of the room to another. The key to the ambiguous, open, inviting paragraph, as with the modernist and post-modernist short story in general, is to cut the last sentence. Maybe even, in some cases, cut the last two.

12. Read the Passage Aloud

Though I know certain writers (Steven Millhauser, whom I admire greatly, is one example) who insist that how the story looks on the page is of absolute importance and that it is not *meant* to be read aloud, myself, I am always looking for ways in revision to

root out the vanity and affectation that hide beneath the lines of my own prose. For example, one way to be sure to conceal this vanity and affectation from myself is to attempt to handwrite my own work. My own handwriting flatters me. It's so precise, so architectural, so *me*. What my handwriting is *not* is good for the kind of selflessness that is essential for moving around characters, textures, and ideas about the world. Word processing, on the other hand, is many bad things, but one thing it is *not* is a good system for the preservation of idiosyncrasy. Some will find, these days, that they incline toward very strange typefaces or emoticons in an effort to preserve their vaunted eccentricities, but in the end we are all doubled-spaced in some readable font, Garamond or Times New Roman, at which point our affectations fall away. This is not to say that anyone's prose can be free of singularities, nor should your prose be, but to the extent that you double-check idiosyncrasy, you get closest to the heart of the material, at the expense of intrusion.

Reading aloud, for me, is one of the best ways to find the last few blobs of self-centeredness hiding out in my prose. There's a catch here, however. Always read the piece aloud *to someone else*. This performative requirement demonstrates how literature is, in the end, a community production. Even though you are writing your prose alone, your prose is ultimately being whispered, as it were, into the ear of a particular reader somewhere, and when you read it aloud, you enact this seductive conversation with the reader, and, more than this, you see how there are certain rules of conduct here—no matter what kind of material you are writing. Some things that you have considered wonderful on the page are going to fail when read aloud. There's a leanness that comes with recasting prose along the lines that are successful *aloud*. I would be disappointed, of

course, if all prose rhythms were *spoken* prose rhythms, because I, for one, love the tangled long lines that are cerebral, subjective, that are prose as musical gesture, as *interior* musical gesture. This variety of prose is challenging in a reading setting. But challenging is not bad. Affectation, however, is bad, and affectation is what you get if the work has never been read aloud.

13. Put the Draft Away

If I had one bit of advice for all younger writers, all beginning writers, all apprentice writers, that advice would be as follows: *be patient*. There's no rush. When I was writing my first novel I was still working at Farrar, Straus & Giroux in New York City, my boss, the estimable editor in chief, and I were once talking about writing and trying to edit at the same time, and how work inevitably took a toll on the writing. My boss pointed out that if it took six years to write my novel *what difference did that make?* At 28 years old, I felt like it made a lot of difference. I was young, and I had a schedule. I was wrong, it seems to me now, to be so hasty. It's the patience that confers on the prose the commitment that it needs.

In this regard, it's important to build into the process of redrafting the kind of resolution that you only get from ruminating on the work. There's no rush! The world is not going to be made better by your story or essay or novel if you get it done this week as opposed to three weeks from now, or in six months, or in six years. The way I make certain to build in a cooling off period with the work is to work on multiple pieces at a time. I put one draft in a drawer for a little while I work on something else. When I'm

ready, I turn my attention back to the prior piece, and, upon improving it, I return *it* to the drawer. In this way, I am not preoccupied with the charms of work. I am not the indulgent parent, the crushed-out romantic.

Taken to its conclusion, this approach suggests that the typewriter was the superior writing tool. I loved my IBM Selectric II. I got really good with that correcting key. The IBM Selectric II forced me to retype *all* the drafts. This allowed me to rethink every sentence. You had better really want that change, if you're going to go to all the trouble. Word processing does just the opposite. It adores haste, it adores capricious, whimsical edits.

I often think that I can tell which books have never been printed out on 8 ½ x 11 paper, but have, rather, gone straight from word processor to book. There's an insularity to that virtual prose. It might have been banged into shape by editor and copyeditor, but it has never lived and breathed, nor been *pronounced*, nor had things crossed out and rewritten. It's like the new ring binder, which has had, so far, not even one assignment filed within.

14. Do The Above Twelve to Twenty Times

And when I say do it twelve to twenty times, what I don't mean is that you do all the revision on the screen—twelve to twenty times. I mean print out the file, and look at it patiently, and read it aloud. Why do it twelve to twenty times? Because this is the path to commitment, and commitment is the thing that literature does that more popular uses of language never bother to do. This is how you make something that bears reading ten

years later, or after your death. There's a lot of prose out there that has no great purpose at all, and that's fine. I don't address these suggestions to those writers. I actually admire a certain sloppy quality in some fiction (Phillip K. Dick, for example). And yet I don't want those qualities in my own work, because in my work sloppiness seems irresolute.

I know, in my heart, that I am not a good enough writer, that I will never be as good as the dead writers I admire, nor even, probably, a great many of my contemporaries. This is a truth that disappoints me. But I do make myself better, and give myself a leg up, by rewriting. I improve my chances, and I get closer to saying something that will *last*.

There are lots of cultural productions out there that are designed to be temporary—the popular song, the Hollywood summer film, the greeting card. Literature is one of the forms that, unfashionably, has no such ephemeral interest. If a book can't outlast its six weeks on the *new fiction* shelf at one of the big retailers, it is nothing. If it can't stand being read and reread and handed from friend to friend, it is nothing. I for one don't have a chance to get there, to the land of multiply read novels, unless I revise.