as much aesthetic pleasure (and use!) to be found in opposing those expectations as in acquiescing to them.

Sixty years ago, that witty and sensible critic Leonard Knights (“How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth,” 1948) noted: “Only as precipitates from memory are plot and character tangible; yet only in solution has either any emotive valency.” This is what Forster’s dull, ugly worm is all about. Plot, character, and the structure that constrains and embodies them are the solutes that effloresce into emotive force within the solution of those “finer growths.” Those “finer growths” through which the plot and characters achieve their emotive fullness are, themselves, controlled by structure. Most of the interminable discussions of plot in writing texts are useless because finally plot has no existence by itself; it is only a single aspect of a more complex process (which I call structure); and if the writer tries to deal with only the plot by itself, he or she ends up twisting at that dried-up little worm, which, when it effloresces, may or may not swell to proper shape and effect, depending entirely on the solute—the finer growths—it arrives in.

This book teases apart how writing works: what the process of its making consists of; and how its making is made by and remakes the world.

These are huge topics.

As the reader can see, this is not a large book.

My comments about them are suggestive rather than definitive. Still, with what notions we can harvest here—the ones we can speak of intelligibly—I hope my readers can begin to figure out how to do what they want on their own.

VIII

What sorts of stories do I enjoy?

What do I read for?

I read for information. Clearly, forcefully, and economically given, information constitutes my greatest reading pleasure. I cotton to Ezra Pound’s oft-quoted dictum, “Fundamental accuracy of statement is the ONE sole morality of writing.” (Raymond Carver quotes it in his fine essay “On Writing.”) Notice, however, Pound says “morality,” not value. The first informa-
tion I read for, at least in fiction, is usually visual and generally sensual. I want to know where I am, and in particular what that place looks like, smells like, sounds like, and feels like. If the writer can make me sensorily aware of his or her setting—trick me into seeing/hearing/smelling it vividly (again, vivid description is a trick, and a more complex trick than simply laying out what’s there), so much the better. Throughout my fictions I want Stein’s one-third “description simple concentrated description not of what happened nor what is thought or what is dreamed but what exists and so makes the life the island life the daily island life”—or, if not, then something that I will find equally interesting.

The next kind of information I read for is any tone of voice in the writing that is informative itself about the story, about how the story is getting told. Just who is the narrator? Should I trust that narrator? Should the narrator awake my suspicions? Should I like the narrator or not like the narrator? Should I look up to the narrator? Or should I assume the narrator is my equal? What is the narrator’s attitude toward the characters who occupy the foreground of the fictive field? And toward those in the background? And to the other characters? And the situation and the setting itself? If the writer keeps giving me those shots of vocal and sensory information, forcefully and with skill, I can be happy with any one of the narrative stances above, because I am disposed to trust the writer creating that voice and painting the pictures—whether I “like” a character or not. Even if the narrator gives me mostly vocally modulated analysis (Proust, James, Musil . . . ), I can be happy with the tale—though probably a reader other than I will have to discover that book and alert me to its excellences before I read it. (Proust, James, and Musil are not writers I’d have been likely to pick up on my own and stick to without some critical preparation. Joyce or Nabokov I might well have.) Those fictive works that make their initial appeal through tone of voice—often a tone solidly bourgeois, educated, ironic—can take on more complex concepts and explore them through a level of formal recomplication that is often richer than the relatively direct fiction writer can achieve. But the greatest failures in this mode occur when the voice runs on and on without ever managing to erect the narrative structures
that create beauty, resonance, and finally meaning itself. These failures usually hinge on a misunderstanding we have already seen: the confusion of “the literary effect” with an effect of tone rather than an effect of form that can even contour the tone (a confusion I would say my very smart twenty-six-year-old male creative writing student had fallen into).

Writers working in this mode, however, should avoid creative writing workshops. Little or nothing in such works can be criticized on the workshop level. Often the resonating structures take 60, 130, 300 pages to construct. By the same token the most successful works in this mode (Proust, late James, Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage, Anthony Powell’s Dance to the Music of Time, Joyce of Finnegans Wake, Gertrude Stein of The Making of Americans and Lucy Church Amiably, Marguerite Young’s Miss McIntosh, My Darling, James McElroy’s Plus and Men and Women, William Gaddis’s The Recognitions . . . ) do not find their audience quickly. (In his Alexandria Quartet, Lawrence Durrell tried to have it both ways and was, I feel, remarkably successful—though the reader has to commit himself to the whole thing. Moreover, most of Durrell’s theoretical folderol about axes and so forth is simply distracting nonsense.) Those structures have to be built just as clearly—in their own larger, more generous terms—and the writing must eventually seem just as economical, if such works are to garner a readership.

When I read, I am also aware of tone (apart from tone of voice) and mood, and often a quality that can only be called beauty. Still, a writer who tries to go for them directly without giving me a hefty handful of writerly stuff on the way is usually not going to make it.

He walked into the room and saw Karola sitting there. She was beautiful. He thought of flowers. He thought of butterflies. He thought of water running in the forest.

The writer who begins a story with these sentences is probably very aware of tone—but is not really giving me, as a reader, much else. (I would be getting even less, if it were in the present tense—“He walks into the room and sees Karola sitting there. She is beautiful. He thinks of flowers. He thinks of butterflies. He thinks of water running in the forest”—more “tone” and
even less voice.) It is much easier for me to be interested in a story that begins:

He walked into the little room with the white plaster ceiling and the wooden two-by-fours making rough lintels above its three windows. Karola sat at a small table, her forearm in the sunlight. When he looked at her ear, he remembered the pink and white flowers in his aunt’s kitchen garden back in New Zealand. By her tanned cheek, some of her white-blond hair lifted and shook in the breeze, and he remembered the flaxen butterflies flicking in and out of the sunlight and shadow of the big Catalpa outside in the green and gray Bordeaux landscape they’d been staying in three summer months now. Just standing there, just looking at her, he felt the same surge of pleasure he’d felt, a year before, when he’d come around the rocks in the twelve acres of forest his aunt had purchased for the farm in that last, sweltering New Zealand winter, and he’d seen the falling water for the first time, how high it was, how it filled his head with the sound of itself, how cool it looked in the winter heat. Karola did that to him.

Although I can’t know or even be sure, I suspect the first writer wanted to describe something as interesting and richly detailed as the second writer, but was afraid to, or was just imaginatively incapable of it—or, perhaps, had gotten distracted by thinking only about tone. But as a reader, I find the second more interesting.

As I said, the vocal approach I can also find interesting:

He stepped into the room—Jesus, it was so white—but Karola was sitting there. If you’d asked him, later, what he’d been thinking right then, he would have answered, “I don’t know what to tell you. I thought she was beautiful. I did, really. It’s stupid, yeah. But I thought about flowers. You think about flowers, you think about butterflies. That’s just what’s going to happen with some guys. And waterfalls in the forests, that kind of thing—I thought about them, too.” But then—right then—standing just
inside the door, a dozen memories flickering in and out of his consciousness, he thought only: “She’s beautiful.”

Here, in terms of direct information about the scene described, this third writer is giving no more than the first one. But what it lacks in specific detail and associative richness, it starts to compensate for by giving a sense of a person, with a voice, that lets us know a fair amount about the character, either as it infects the narrative voice (“Jesus, it was so white!”) or directly (“I don’t know what to tell you. I thought she was beautiful. I did, really”).

Personally I find the tone and the mood of the second and third examples much more interesting than the tone and mood of the first. In all three cases, tone and mood would be things not to violate, as the story—or at least the scene—progresses. With number 3 (“He stepped into the room—Jesus, it was so white—”), I’d probably want something to start happening on Forster’s “pure story” level faster than I would with number 2. (In number 1, I’d want something to happen almost by the next sentence, or the tale would lose me.) Too much of number 3’s foot shuffling and embarrassment grows quickly tiresome though. Soon I’d want some proof that this personality, this sensibility, this observer was worth my time to stay with. He’s got perhaps another three sentences in which to observe something interesting and tell it to me in an interesting way. Almost certainly I’d have more patience with the second narrator—because what he gives me is informatively richer. I’m more willing to let the second narrator take time to build up my picture of where these people are, who they are, what their relationship is, and suggest how, in the course of the tale, it’s going to develop. So the second narrator has about five more sentences in which to let me know a lot more about the woman at the table (or let me know why the narrator doesn’t know it). Wouldn’t it be interesting if, say, in either example 2 or 3, Karola turned out to be a Palestinian and six or seven years older than our narrator? As soon as her hair began to turn white, she bleached it platinum. There, in France, with her current young New Zealander, who finds her so fascinating, she’s working on a book about her country’s archaeology . . .

Still, with examples two and three I have more trust in the
writer than I do with example 1—a trust that, in terms ranging from mood to plot, either writer 2 or 3 may still betray with
the next sentence. However promising I find their openings,
both tales could dissolve, equally and easily, into clutter. Un-
less the writer is really setting us up for a very conscious effect,
number 1 telegraphs a general thinness that is the hallmark of
contemporary dullness. And if the narrator doesn’t win my trust
soon, I’m likely to enjoy only a narrator whose tone and char-
acter I personally like. And if the narrator never gains my trust,
however much I personally like the narrator or sympathize with
his or her politics or recognize the situation, for me the work
remains—if I keep reading, and most of the time I don’t—
an entertainment, rather than a work of art. Finally, I want all
this information—whether sensual or tonal—given me economi-
cally. If, after even three, five, seven sentences, I have not gotten
one or the other of these orders of information, and I find my-
self spotting extraneous words and phrases that tell me nothing
of interest, phrases that withhold information rather than pre-
sent it, expressive clumsinesses and general lack of writerly skill,
then I am disgruntled. (Vast amounts of fine literature wait to
be read. Many more skilled writers exist than I can read in a
lifetime. Unskilled writers don’t hold much interest for me. Bad
writing makes me angry.) If the elements of the sentence could
be better arranged so as to give the information more swiftly,
logically, forcefully, I am equally unhappy. (I don’t particularly
enjoy having to rewrite the writers I read, sentence by sentence.
I want the writer to have done that work for me.) In my expe-
rience, three such clumsy sentences in a row usually indicate
that the text will be littered with them. Despite whatever talent
is manifested, they signal that the imaginative force needed to
develop an idea clearly and explore it richly is likely lacking.
In turn this means that even should I enjoy the story, I am not
likely to point it out as an exemplum of one idea or another
(unless it’s an example of what not to do); nor am I likely to
sketch out the development of its idea as praiseworthy in any
of my own critical writing. (As Emily Dickinson wrote, “Noth-
ing survives except fine execution.”) While any of the informa-
tion I enjoy might be worked up to form what might easily be
called a good story, if I don’t enjoy the economy and force of
the presentation (the word for this level of presentation is “style”), from experience I know the tale will simply not be worth the time and energy I must put into reading it. These are the books—the nineteen out of twenty—I put down and rarely come back to.

Fortunately there are other readers who read—no less critically than I—for a different order of writerly and readerly priorities and pleasures. In their critical writing, such readers are always guiding me to things I might have missed, as I hope, in turn, now and again I can guide them to something interesting. Of course what is likely the case is not absolutely the case. Three dull, bland, or clumsy sentences don’t always mean an impoverished work. I would have missed out entirely on the considerable pleasures of Leonid Tsypkin or W. G. Sebald had I only read the opening page or pages of either, under my own critical regime—not to mention Theodore Dreiser, a great novelist (for many readers, including me) despite his style.

Nevertheless, the above represents my own priorities. It outlines my own aesthetic gamble, if you will, in the greater process of working to sediment the new or revised discourses that stabilize the systems of the world and make them better. (The purpose of fiction in particular and art in general is not to make the world better, directly and per se. But, despite the protests of all the apolitical critics, they [art and fiction] still help, if only because, as critics from Pater to Foucault have acknowledged, they do make life more enjoyable—specifically the time we spend reading them. If they didn’t, we wouldn’t bother.) In pursuit of such ends, the above gives the parameters around which my own set of dos and don’ts for fiction are organized—and thus suggests where their limits lie. Unless another critic has alerted me to pleasures that will only come after 50, 75, 150 pages, these are the texts I’m likely to abandon after a few thousand words or so—if not a few hundred.

Although I believe thirty-five years of teaching creative writing have helped me become more articulate about my readerly responses than I might have been without them, and while there are many other good readers of types different from mine, I do not think I am all that uncommon. I believe the kind of reader I am has a contribution to make in the contestatory wrangle.
producing that social construct, literary quality. But because human beings are a multiplicity, there can be no fixed and final canon, despite whatever appearance of stability any given view of the canon suggests. This is why no single book can tell folks how to write fiction that will join the canon. Having seen the canon change as much as it has in the years between my adolescence and the (I hope) forward edge of my dotage, I’m content with the forces that retard that change as much as they do.

Balzac, Dreiser, and Sebald; Lawrence, Barthelme, and Bukowski are all extraordinary writers, for extraordinarily different reasons. All are writers who at one time or another I’ve gorged on; but all are writers about whom I end up feeling, finally, that a little goes a long way. To enjoy any and all of them requires a fertile and lively mind; fertile and lively minds find things of interest, and thus may also find greater or lesser amounts of what’s in this book interesting. They may also find some things here painful, if not crashingly irrelevant, even as they marvel that someone could go on at such lengths as I do about fiction while spending so little time on fiction’s oh-so-necessary social content.

Because in the realm of art all absolute statements are suspect, the most I can say is that I am still willing to gamble on the fact that, by and large, most of the writers whose works I would lay down and not return to are ones who don’t contribute very much (except by their all-important negative examples), and the exceptions are precisely those glorious ones that prove, in the sense of test, the rules and principles on which my overarching aesthetic rests.

The less interested either we or our characters are in their jobs, incomes, families, social class, landlords, friends, neighbors, and landscapes (i.e., how they are connected to the material world around them), the less we have to write about. This may be why the highly individualistic but highly isolated heroes of genre fiction—from Conan the Conqueror to James Bond—often seem so thin in relation to those of literary fiction. This is why the strength of such stories that feature them tends to be on an allegorical—i.e., poetic—level, rather than on the level of psychological (not to mention sociological) veracity.