Let Us Build Us a City: Literary Lives in the United States

In the *Convivio*, a book left unfinished for reasons no one knows, Dante says that a person should not write or speak of himself except under extraordinary circumstances: a) when “great disgrace and danger cannot be avoided” without self-reference, or b) when “great advantage to others” may be had by reference to one’s own example.

I can’t claim that today’s occasion matches either of these circumstances, but Dante’s conviction reminds me that those of us who write fiction often go out of our way to indicate that our works are not autobiographical and that our characters do not necessarily speak for us. This is not because we don’t want to be held accountable for our words, but because we want our words to point to the world and not back at us. The fiction writer’s preferred location is on the periphery, quietly taking notes so as to be able to render the world accurately. It’s hard to take sensible measure of a place when you become the center of attention, even momentarily. Dante understood this. His advice springs from a pragmatic as well as an ethical core: the best material is *out there* somewhere, beyond the mirror; none of us, individually, is ever more important than the world around us.

That said, and with all due respect to our greatest poet, I confess that a character in a recent story of mine does echo my sentiments when he says, “Periodically, most professionals seek a renewal. A return to first principles. When the business starts to feel stale or the ideas dry up, we try to remember what drew us to our work in the first place—that initial euphoria, the falling-in-love.”

This moment has provided me with an unexpected opportunity to reflect on how I first fell in love with what I do. In the spirit of Dante, these reflections naturally center on those around me: family, friends, and colleagues. No individual is remotely capable apart from community, and I have been blessed with an unusually patient and supportive family, at home and at OSU.

In institutional life, we often speak of “collegiality,” and we mean various things by that word. As a student of the humanities, I look first to the human subtext of any definition, so for me, in the most basic sense, to be colleagues means to grow old with one another. Next time you’re in a meeting here on campus, headshore from competing agendas, unfocused discussion, and bureaucratic roadblocks, look around the room at the folks next to you and think, “These are the people with whom I am growing old.”

Such a perspective carries several layers of emotion: it has a melancholy tinge to it, but also a degree of comfort; it contextualizes our daily tasks, reduces everything to first principles and to the oh-so-human. It reminds us that everything we do as individuals and as colleagues is complex and mysterious and always shifting, and I’m grateful to have been able to share the mysteries with superlative partners in the College of Liberal Arts, and across this campus.
Besides prompting self-examination, attempts at renewal always involve reappraisals of one’s specialty, which, in my case, is literature—specifically, American literature—and I’ve found it useful, lately, to return to a book that reminds me of what it means to live a literary life in this country.

The novelist and short story writer John Cheever was a model for many writers of my generation. In re-reading *Home Before Dark*, his daughter’s memoir of him, I have been reminded that Cheever arrived in Manhattan in 1930, nearly penniless and alone, determined to succeed, like so many writers before him. He rented a room on Hudson Street for three dollars a week and began composing the first of the stories that are today widely anthologized and read. According to his daughter, Susan, he struggled for twenty-five years to write his first novel. In 1978, his third novel, *Falconer*, as well as *The Collected Stories of John Cheever*, with its unforgettably bold red cover, won him fame and lasting recognition.

He seems never to have heard Dante’s warnings about humility, because suddenly “he seemed to be his own number one groupie,” Susan recalls. “Conversations with him often resorted to discussions of his own success, his celebrity, and the way Lauren (Betty) Bacall had ardently kissed him the last time they met.”

At the height of this success, Cheever came to Dallas, Texas for a literary festival, a week of readings and panel discussions, at Southern Methodist University. I was a teaching assistant there, an eager writing student, and festival co-chair. My job was to escort Cheever wherever he wanted to go—a local bakery, where he ate free pastries and doffed a paper chef’s hat; the Amon Carter Museum in Ft. Worth, where he marveled at Frederick Remington’s paintings of American deserts. “I’m grateful for this steady autumn sun,” he told me quietly one morning, as though confessing a vice. He was amazed that two cities the size of Dallas and Ft. Worth could have developed so closely together. “What are their economies based on? Is there much political in-fighting between them?” he asked me. Ignorant of business and socio-politics, I had no answers for him, but noted, These are the kinds of things a writer worries about.

I had no idea how to engage this man whose achievements set an impossibly high standard for my own pale efforts. At one point, a swift red car passed us on a freeway. “That’s the color of your book of stories,” I said, a comment so inane it deserved no response. “Yes, it is,” he said, looking pleased. “Yes, it is.”

He made a point of addressing each student he met by name, and spoke to us all as though we were our intimate friend. All week, despite his brush with success, he appeared less than modest only once, when he discovered that Louis Simpson, another festival guest, had won a Pulitzer Prize in 1964. For an hour or so, Cheever ignored Simpson. He had thought *he* was the only prize-winner present.

One night, toward the festival’s close, an English professor held a small dinner party in his Craftsman-style home, a cramped place with wooden floors, massive square furnishings, volumes of Freud and Lionel Trilling on the shelves. Candles were lit and Cheever held forth in front of the hearth, waving a cup of ginger ale. He said he’d given up liquor for Lent (in fact, though none of us knew it then, he’d stopped drinking, with great anguish, in 1975). Someone asked him what else he’d given up. He smiled. His skin, still supple at sixty-seven, folded over the grand, rolling bones in his cheeks. “Well,” he said, turning in every direction, mischievously eyeing each person in the room. “My genitalia fell off at Easter.”
A writer is charming, I said to myself.

The following afternoon, I moderated a symposium featuring Cheever, Simpson, a young writer named David Huddle, and my writing teacher, Marsh Terry. I was terrified, especially since Simpson, whose manner was sharp, had taken a seat next to mine on the dais. My first question was, “Is it possible to come up with original literary forms now, or has everything been done?”

Simpson turned to me disdainfully. “Every generation has its own resounding cliches, but one that every generation seems to agree on is that it’s ex post facto good to be original,” he said. “But why? Lunatics are original. They’re original all their lives.”

He might as well have run me over with a swift red car. My mind and my mouth froze. Then I became aware of Cheever’s voice. “Idiocy is an unlikely subject, Louis. It lacks a certain universality.”

My shoulders and back relaxed, and I could feel an easing of tension in the audience.

“Of course, everyone pursues the mysteries of love and death,” Cheever went on. “Perhaps originality isn’t the word. What one is involved in is arousal. Literature is basically a heresy. It is very much in the nature of a discovery, of bringing totally unrelated experiences into focus with one another and throwing some light on yourself. Furthermore, there is a word that’s used in universities: verisimilitude. One has to give the reader a sense of truthfulness. Say you put the reader on a carpet. He’s got to absolutely believe in the authenticity of that carpet before you can—and you will—pull it out from beneath him.”

The word “universities” initiated a debate among the panelists about whether writing can be taught. “Why the heck can’t it?” Huddle said. “Is it possible to teach somebody to play tennis? Yes, of course it is. If somebody has an athletic ability, you can teach them to play. Can you teach somebody to play the piano? Yes, the answer is yes. You can’t make somebody be gifted at writing if they’re not. If they are, there are things you can do to help them.”

“What’s the point of teaching someone who isn’t gifted?” Simpson asked. “Is it just a commercial proposition?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Marsh Terry answered. “A person may take a fiction writing workshop and become a better reader.”

Simpson said, “I’ve heard that argument before, and it seems to me like saying that the way to learn to fly an airplane is to drive a truck.”

“Louis, you know, I’d hate to be piloted in an airplane by someone who couldn’t drive a truck,” Marsh said.

“I taught for a couple of years at Sing-Sing and the students there were not gifted,” Cheever offered. “There were two thousand inmates and only a few of them had the ability to put a sentence together. When I told the warden I wanted to teach a writing workshop, he said, ‘Get out.’ I said, ‘If you don’t let me in, I’m going to make trouble,’ and we announced over the prison radio that we would have a class. I had decided to call it Advanced Composition. This was nine years ago. Thirty-five people signed up. It turned out that a lot of former gang members signed up, and I had to explain that this would not be a militant literature course or a power contest. One day, a student asked if he could be recognized and I said yes. He said, ‘Oh what a cool mean dude was that Machiavelli.’ Seven of the men I taught have been released since then.”
That symposium, that afternoon of my terror and awe, was twenty-nine years ago. Now, when a student in one of my classes complains to me, as someone does each year, “It’s impossible to be original. Everything’s been done,” I think of the week I spent in John Cheever’s presence, watching him, trying to learn from him a writer’s moves, a writer’s way of being in the world.

In 1979 I knew nothing of Cheever’s struggles with alcohol, or the uneasy truces he’d formed with his children and his wife, but the grace of his speech and behavior, his elfin humor, seemed to answer certain questions I’d been asking myself. How does one continue to write when the money gets thin? How does one continue to craft sentences while caught in the vicissitudes of friendships, jobs, love affairs, family lives and deaths?

Cheever provided no direct answers, but I can’t overstate the importance, for me, of seeing him that week, day to day. For it’s in the day to day, in each of our lives, that these questions get worked on, if not worked out. That’s what I was grateful to learn one sunny week in Texas in 1979.

After the symposium, all but a few hangers-on seeking autographs left the auditorium. Cheever sat at the foot of the dais, signing books. I stood at the back of the hall waiting to take him to his hotel. When the last person had gone, and I approached him, he looked at me with sadness, wonder, and exhaustion on his face. “Tracy, are you still here?” he said.

Where the sadness and wonder came from, I don’t know. Amazement, perhaps, at his recent celebrity. Melancholy over how quickly a room can empty, fame or no fame. The exhaustion was easier to account for, but it was mitigated, somewhere beneath those high, knobby cheeks, by a determination, an almost indomitable perseverance which served as his final lesson that week: the need each of us has, from time to time, whether we’re writers or not, to ask ourselves, with doggedness and a bit of surprise, “Are you still here?”

Of course, these days, that question is frequently asked of literature itself. In the volcanic landscapes of the internet, virtual reality, Blackberries, and other interactive technologies, are our traditional notions of novel, poem, and short story still viable? Can the book survive? Is literature still here, in any significant way?

In the spirit of renewal, each of us must occasionally widen our gaze, take in the whole horizon of our pursuit to examine, in all honesty, what it has meant, and why, and what it still might have to offer—to us, as well as to our students who hope to follow our paths.

So: what has American literature been, what has it meant? Where were we and where are we going? I’d like to turn, briefly, to these questions.

In a book called *Harvests of Change: American Literature 1865-1914*, Jay Martin notes that the modern American novel developed as the United States, for the first time in its history, began transporting people and goods on a vast scale. After the Civil War, thousands of decommissioned soldiers canvassed the country selling paperback books. European novels were extremely popular with the new American middle class. Until the first copyright laws in 1891, U. S. publishers didn’t have to pay foreign authors for their work. Dickens, Carlyle, and Thackeray swelled the salesmen’s packs.
William Dean Howells and Henry James came to fiction through travel writing, Stephen Crane traveled extensively, and Mark Twain went innocently abroad.

If the modern American novel began on the road it tended, in the twentieth century, to stick closer to home—by which I mean it took an inward, if not a regionally provincial, turn. Gertrude Stein, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Willa Cather, and others writing just after the First World War raised serious doubts about the efficacy and ethics of words. Their novels are not, as Hugh Kenner puts it, climactic masterworks the way James’s were. They are attempts to reshape the American language in the aftermath of war, and the resulting loss of innocence. Picture Hemingway, at dusk, in scuffed boots and khakis, kicking “honor” and “glory”—concepts as tattered as blown-apart gas masks—around a steaming field of wounded men, the homeless and the dead.

This is the literary legacy that my teachers inherited from their teachers, and passed on to my peers and me.

In the 1960s and 70s—the period when people my age first began to think seriously of becoming writers—many American novelists, shaken by the misuse of language in service to a disastrous war or to corrupt domestic politics felt an even greater urgency to refashion American idioms. The language of the daily newspapers filled them with “wonder and awe,” Philip Roth wrote in a famous essay, “also with sickness and despair,” he said. “The fixes, the scandals, the insanity, the idiocy, the piety, the lies, the noise . . . ” Roth trails off at this point: familiar words fail to do the trick for him, to convey the depth of his dismay.

He and his contemporaries had been educated by the ironic stances of novelists who had emerged, rueful and traumatized, from the Second World War: Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller. “Catch-22” became the buzzword for ruinous, unsafe language. Much of the literary fiction published in the United States during the 1960s and 70s—books by Roth, Thomas Pynchon, Susan Sontag, Ishmael Reed, William Gaddis, Joan Didion, and Donald Barthelme—was, broadly speaking, more concerned with its own fictional processes than in the shattering, post-atomic world, as if by dissecting itself and examining its wounds, it could purge itself of linguistic contamination.

All of this turmoil—reflected in the university curricula to which my generation was exposed—occurred against a larger philosophical debate about the nature of truth, and of literature’s ability to expose the truth. I remember that Immanuel Kant was a popular figure in the philosophy and literature classes I took. In the eighteenth century, Kant had said that the world and its truths are largely fictions, a notion that seemed to find support in ancient atlases, journals, and maps, long before the Americas were a sunny gleam in a sailor’s eye.

For example, Gerald of Wales, reporting in 1183 on the history and topography of Ireland, wrote

There is a lake in the north of Munster which contains two islands, one rather large and the other rather small . . . No woman or animal of the female sex could ever enter the larger island without dying immediately. This has been proved many times by instances of dogs and cats and other animals of the female sex. When brought
there . . . they immediately died.

Gerald also mentions an island where unburied human corpses never putrefy, where half-men, half-oxen and bearded women roam the fields. His account claims to be factual and was considered so by his contemporaries.

As children of the 1950s and 60s, we didn’t find Gerald’s absurdities, or Kant’s assertions, terribly startling. After all, we had grown up with television news broadcasts whose staged interviews and variety-show formats manipulated details with subtle skill and shaped life’s mulch-pile into one obvious fiction after another. It was in twentieth century America that Kant’s view of the world may have received its strongest vindication, though perhaps not in the way he intended.

These days, we’re all too aware that the fictionalization—or, in current parlance, the virtualization—of reality has quickened beyond most people’s ability to reckon with it. The nature of truth has become even more elusive. And what of literature’s ability to expose the truth?

Whatever we may think, individually, of the explosion of interactive media, one of its clear positive general consequences has been our exposure to a greater variety of voices, a development that has touched every aspect of U. S. culture, including literature. As the twenty-first century staggers to its start, American fiction seems to have hit the road again, and to have discovered truths that were part of its bedrock all along. Challenged, in part, by new media, publishers have created or sensed a new marketing trend based on shifting populations. Simultaneously, creative writing programs, housed on campuses, like ours, that are sensitive to diversity issues, are encouraging a wider range of talents than ever before. As a result, U. S. fiction is finally beginning to reflect the mix of blood, belief, and outlook that has blessed this nation—but not many of its books—from the first. Voices we’ve not been privileged to listen to before, from ethnic enclaves, from deep within our midst, are telling us of change and the harvests we’re likely to reap from it. The writers’ very names suggest the varied roads these young talents have taken to get here: Julia Alvarez, Chang-rae Lee, Gish Jen, Junot Diaz, Diana Abu-Jaber. More and more we’re learning to hear these as American names and not as exoticisms like the ox-men in the accounts of Gerald of Wales.

What a far piece we’ve traveled! In 1884, Mark Twain could afford to publish, without harm to his literary reputation, a novel whose main character spoke a slangy, black-inflected dialect. No one reading The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, then or now, would assume that Twain was unschooled. Ernest Hemingway claimed that Huck’s voice marked the start of real American literature. Yet Twain’s contemporary, William Wells Brown, the son of a slave, was forced to write his novel Clotel in stiff, so-called “proper” English to prove himself book-worthy. If he had used a dialect similar to Twain’s in Huckleberry Finn, a dialect that was in fact what he had spoken growing up, publishers would have written him off as illiterate.

Since Wells’s time, Richard Wright, Zora Neal Hurston, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and others have paved fresh new roads. Nowadays, when we read Junot Diaz—“He’s a big, goofy guy,” says one of his characters, “I don’t understand why the girls dig his stuff”—we’re aware that this is an author who’s free to speak naturally, with nothing to prove except the extravagance of his talent.
Yet, in the midst of this cultural motion, this renewal of American idioms, we hear warnings, from various sources, that our diversity may become so fragmented, so large that eventually we’ll fly apart, leaving nothing but a hollow center. Earlier, heeding Dante’s words, I said that no individual is capable without community—which begs the question: awash in so much variety, is American literature’s core, its communal impulse, still here and if so, what is it? The question is not new. Even in his day, in his country, Dante sought to discover, beneath the various dialects he heard while wandering in exile, the true national language, which seemed near but elusive, he said, like a “panther whose fragrance hovers everywhere, tantalizing beyond entrapment.”

A look back at first principles tells us that literature’s core is, simply, words—a truth so obvious we tend to overlook it. As William Gass, a contemporary philosopher and writer, says, “[Novels and the] places and the people in them are merely made of words as chairs are made of smoothed sticks.”

However varied American idioms, styles, and dialects become, however wide a net our national community casts, the individual writer is tasked, day to day, with what Philip Roth refers to as making sentences and turning them around, again and again and again, until their power is irresistible. This is often a tedious process, and frequently, in the midst of it, the writer’s need for renewal grows acute. Paradoxically, visits to the past, to first principles, often spark a renewal and map the next steps forward.

So, briefly, let’s drift back in time to consider a sentence by that old American travel writer, Henry James. This is from a novel called The Golden Bowl:

She continued to walk and continued to pause; she stopped afresh for the look into the smoking-room, and by this time—it was as if the recognition itself arrested her—she saw as in a picture, with the temptation she had fled from quite extinct, why it was she had been able to give herself from the first so little to the vulgar heat of her wrong.

The power of this sentence is the sentence. It is its own core. How does the sentence work? How does it assert its presence in our minds?

Listen to it again. Repetition of the word “continued” creates a nervous, claustrophobic rhythm in sync with the woman’s pacing. The sentence stills itself with a parenthetical aside (becoming more abstract) at the very moment the woman’s attention is riveted by her glance into the smoking-room. The wording gathers force, pushed by breathy, sighing sounds—“with,” “why,” “give”—as the woman’s realization grows, and ends abruptly on growling ‘r’ sounds with the source of her agitation, her “wrong.”

James may not have been as wary of language as his techno-savvy literary descendents have come to be. Still, he was keenly aware of its contingencies, its gifts of prestidigitation, its power to shape the world the way a potter wets, spins, and slims a lump of clay. Characters in The Golden Bowl study one another, the way the reader studies James’s words, for the complications of consciousness and the patterns they form. Each singular consciousness in the book delineates existence for itself, and that, as any American novelist of any era will tell you, is a hard road to illuminate. It’s the heart of every trip that fiction takes.

What language shows us and what remains beyond its reach; how much we can trust it: these are the shifting boundaries that make us all, on the road or locked inside
our heads, perpetual refugees, perpetual immigrants in the world of words. We’re
reminded, again, of Kant, of how fictionalized our knowledge of the world is; of James,
of the movement and pausing in his paragraphs that circumscribe accidental stumblings
into meaning. And it just so happens—another paradox—that restlessness, perpetual
movement, and accidental stumblings are further aspects of our commonality, our
Americanness, to which our literature gives voice.

One year after my encounter with John Cheever in Dallas, I hit the road, restless
to find myself as a writer. After a series of stumbles and happy accidents, I ended up in
Houston under the tutelage of the short story writer Donald Barthelme. An assignment
he gave me, early on, remains in my mind as one of those seminal moments of renewal
that set my life’s path, and showed me—in ways that are still somewhat mysterious—the
core of the literary enterprise, the imaginative risks and the discipline involved.

The assignment was simple: find a copy of John Ashbery’s *Three Poems*, read it,
buy a bottle of wine, go home, sit in front of the typewriter, drink the wine, don’t sleep,
and produce, by dawn, twelve pages of Ashbery imitation.

A dutiful student, I walked to a bookstore a few blocks from my apartment,
and purchased a paperback edition of the book (nobody walks in Houston, so this was
more dutiful than it sounds). Next I made my way to Weingarten’s to pick up a bottle of
red. I didn’t drink much, and didn’t know one wine
from another. Then I went home.

I lived in an efficiency apartment in a slightly fixed-up, but not fixed-up
enough, old building near a freeway underpass southwest of downtown. Always, when I
unlocked my door, I was greeted by loud scurrying. The bugs were so big, I felt sure I’d
return some day to find them pulling books from my shelves, rearranging the space more
to their liking. The apartment was close to where my teacher lived when he was a young
man, writing and publishing his first short stories. I didn’t know this then, and if I had, it
would have made me more self-conscious than I already was about my work.

Thus the assignment. I was in my first year of a Ph.D. program, but really I
was just stalling for time while trying to write a novel. My fellow students, talented and
confident, intimidated me. Determined to meet their standards and to perform perfectly, I
wasn’t performing at all. I edited in my head long before my hands scooched near a
keyboard. My pages remained pristinely, sadly blank.

My teacher’s solution: Ashbery, sleeplessness, and alcohol. He didn’t tell me I
needed to loosen up, but we both knew that this was the case. I fed the stray cats in the
weeds behind my building so they wouldn’t mew all night, then settled at the card table
where I ate and tried to write each evening. I switched on my Smith Corona electric
typewriter. This was in the days before Microsoft Word or WordPerfect. The only
mouse in my place had four legs and a tail. I opened the book:

At this time of life whatever being there is is doing a lot of listening, as though
to the feeling of the wind before it starts, and it slides down this anticipation of itself,
already full-fledged, a lightning existence that has come into our own.

What in the world was this? I rubbed my neck and tried again:
From the outset it was apparent that someone had played a colossal trick on something. The switches had been tripped, as it were; the entire world or one’s limited but accurate idea of it was bathed in glowing love, of a sort that need never have come into being but was now indispensable . . .

A colossal trick. Right. Well, my task was not to analyze or understand Three Poems but to respond to its rhythms, take its music into my body, and come up with a similar score. I finished reading, only half-concentrating. My front window was busted, and mosquitoes invited themselves in and out of the room. I had tried covering the window with a sheet but the sheet flapped raggedly in a breeze. The night before, my upstairs neighbor, another student, had shattered the pane by trying to climb the wall. He had come home around midnight and discovered that he’d lost his key, so he shimmied up the rainspout to reach his window. He slipped. His foot crashed through my glass, startling me awake.

I fiddled with the sheet. Through the window I glimpsed a streetwalker standing beside a light pole on the corner. She wore a long blue dress and flicked a Bic lighter off and on. The vice squad had chased streetwalkers from one end of my neighborhood to another. Soon, they would be driven from my block, too, but for now their presence charged the area with an undercurrent of danger and morbid titillation.

This was my life in Houston, in the grad student boondocks of the neighborhood known as Montrose. I had gone there because I wanted to be a writer. And now, because I wanted to be a writer, I was stuck with Ashbery. I started to open the wine and realized I didn’t own a corkscrew. Another walk to the store, keeping my head down as I passed the streetwalker. “Evening, sugar,” she said. I nodded and sped up. Back in my apartment I poured a little wine into a Dixie cup. I sat down and started to type.

By one o’clock my flesh had served as an all-you-can-eat smorgasbord for the mosquitoes. I was bleary, yawning, and tipsy. A third of the bottle remained. My shirtsleeves sagged with sweat. I had filled four pages with abstract nonsense. I poured more wine and hit the keyboard again. “All fall, my father held a trouble light beneath the car,” I wrote. “My family was not on the move.”

Two more hours passed. Just after three a.m., the phone rang. I jumped, tipping the cup. Someone’s dead, I thought. A car crash, a stroke. I picked up.

“How’s it coming?” said Donald Barthelme.


“Good,” said my teacher. “Twelve pages, on my desk. In five hours.” He clicked off.

I hasten to tell you that I do not give my students such assignments. A responsible mentor, I would never suggest something as heinous and corrupting as alcohol in the pursuit of achievement . . .

Let me close, then, with the kinds of things I do tell students, in my attempts to inspire them with the principles of literary art, and to renew my commitment to the core
of the enterprise. In 2001, after nearly fourteen years of trying—years of sitting in
meetings, growing old with people—my colleagues and I managed, against heavy odds,
to establish an MFA degree program in creative writing here at OSU, a program I am
happy to say is flourishing as a result of dedicated and truly impressive community effort.

In an orientation session with the first MFA class, to inaugurate our fledgling
program, I made the following brief remarks, and I end with them now as a reminder to
all of us who work in this institution that the best thing that could happen to us is that we
renew ourselves again and again so that our work, like Dante’s *Convivio*, is never
finished. Here is what I said to that first class of MFA students:

Samuel Beckett once taped to the wall above his desk in Paris a slip of paper with
an appeal on it to help him through his writing days. It said, “Fail. Fail again. Fail
better.”

And that was Beckett at his most optimistic. In a more somber mood he wrote,
“Nothing to paint. Nothing to paint with.” Donald Barthelme, Beckett’s most faithful
American disciple, echoed the Irishman’s uncertainty. “What an artist does is fail,” he
said, adding that “not-knowing”—at best having a “slender intuition”—is “crucial to art,
is what permits art to be made.”

While celebrating creativity, it may seem odd for me to dwell on so many
negatives about making literature. But I want to suggest the mystery and power of
creating new worlds, which is precisely what poets and storytellers do, and it is what
teachers and students embark upon whenever they gather to build a community. Just as a
page holds nothing before we mark it with words, a setting, a place, an institution, a
town, can be spiritually empty without enormous cooperative and creative effort. “Let us
build us a city!” says the Book of Genesis, and the mystery and power behind that simple
statement rests in the implication that out of nothing will come—somehow, gloriously—
something.

Back to that blank piece of paper: say you draw a line on it, the beginning of your
favorite word. If the paper is waxy, your pen may slip. If it’s lightly wrinkled, your line
will skitter off-center. Noting all this, a scientist might say *blankness* has properties that
affect *what is*. Beckett and Barthelme would argue, after Shakespeare, that *nothing*
determines the kind of *something* we get. Here’s Leontes, from Shakespeare’s *The
Winter’s Tale*:

Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
. . . Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? . . .
Why then the world, and all that’s in’t, is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing . . .
If this be nothing.

From the slenderest provocations—whispers, little nothings in the ear, the thick
ticking of a tin clock—worlds are built. Nothing, or as near to nothing as human affairs
can get, is something after all. It is what permits the universe to be made.
In the beginning, says the old story, the earth was without form and void. Then language asserted its power: “Let there be light!” Now here we sit, soaked in warm illumination from the ceiling above us. We have someone to pay the electric bills, to keep the lights burning. We have shelter, a viable infrastructure, all founded, if you believe the story, on a single sentence, a grouping of words so light as to be nearly nothing: miraculously, mysteriously, we have built us a city. Here, in our little subdivision of it, we meet because we do believe in stories.

But this place will be uninspired unless we animate it by turning our whispering, our wishing, above all our narratives, into a communal something. Just because we’ve plunged into a university (for we’ve heard that this is the way to better ourselves, even U. S. News & World Report says so), we have no guarantees that the world we’ve entered will succeed. I’m not speaking here of the tangibles—budgets, publicity, academic support—though those are crucial to any institution whose imprimatur we seek. I’m thinking of the intangibles invisible to surveys and productivity charts, but that will ultimately determine the kind of something we get here. Personal chemistry. Cooperation. Generosity. Imagination.

What an artist does is fail? Communities fail, too, daily. Inevitably, they fail to meet our expectations. Tensions mar them. Glitches. They are vulnerable to hazy planning, bad timing, unforeseen circumstances. Entering an academic program, we invite all sorts of risk. Will we be generous enough, cooperative enough, imaginative enough to overcome our frustrations with bureaucratic burdens, insufficient resources, and each other to fail and fail again, better, more productively, until from our faltering comes whatever we agree to call success? Is this really the place for a writer to be?

In 1967, there were only thirteen creative writing programs in the United States, according to the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. Now there are nearly 350, receiving, annually, over 20,000 applications from aspiring authors. Literary agents and editors mine these programs for talent, universities depend on them for teaching, so whatever our concerns may be—the possible professionalizing of creativity, or the promotion of a shallow celebrity mentality—it seems moot to ask if this is the route young writers should take. They are taking it, some with spectacular success. For better or worse, for the foreseeable future, a generous portion of American literature will be MFA-inflected.

So, now that we’re haunting the halls of academe, what are some of the advantages we can expect? What will happen here that can make us better writers? Already, at the outset, we’re lucky enough to be accompanied by invisible comrades, only a few of whose names I’ve invoked—Beckett, Barthelme, Shakespeare, Bernard Malamud (“the thick ticking of the tin clock” is from his story, “Idiots First”) and Ernest Hemingway, who sprinted with Shakespeare’s “nothings,” trailing behind him a dark web of nadas. Ghosts circle us—whispering absences, carrying on with us the world’s literary conversation. And our personal ghosts are here, too, losses and failures which often support our boldest stories and poems.

Let’s face it: many of us have reached this point because of failure. The world has failed to satisfy us, so we want to revise it. Our revisions have let us down, so we hope to improve them. Our family’s demands, our peers’ pressures, have left us unfulfilled, so we’ve thrown ourselves at the mercy of a slender intuition, and wound up—of all places—at a university.
No one can foresee the somethings we’ll create out of our experiences here, and afterwards. We can only hope to fail better, not worse.

Ultimately, only you, the individual, can determine what your talent is, what will nurture it best, how and where to take it. A university program offers time, structure, and companionship that can help you clarify these things. It offers appeals to get you through your writing days. And on such slender assurances, worlds are built.

Already, you understand that nothing may come of your efforts, that your best work may wind up skulking in corners. In part, that uncertainty—the need to face it—is what brought you here. And I want to encourage you to see this not-knowing as one of your strongest assets. Anxiety, like light, is a fine source of energy, failure a robust motivator.

I’ll finish by offering one more filament of hope cloaked in the negative: it’s the useless we’re chasing, the intuitions and emotions, beyond the practical, that nearly elude our words—whatever is, for each of us, sublime. These things sustain us, abide with us, but can’t be put to firm use. Whatever is used routinely, merely to fill a function, is soon faded, worn, broken. Art does something else.

Thinking about baseball, William Carlos Williams wrote:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them

all the exciting details
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius

all to no end save beauty
the eternal

To find the delights in uselessness, the flash of genius in error, the somethings in nothing—that’s why we gather in places like this with only the slightest notion of what might happen, to build communities of thinkers, readers, writers. That’s why we fill empty pages, to risk the mystery and power of creating new worlds, which can explode in every word. In his first short stanza, for example, Williams offers us the useless delight of a pun: the word “uniformly,” noting both the crowd’s solidarity, and the visual spectacle of uniformed men on the field. And the final lines: eternity, of course, has no end, but “no end” also means, in Williams’s context, “no purpose.” The word “save” does double-duty here, whispering both “salvation” and “exception.”

Stripping things to the near-nothing of their strictest essence, their first principles. No end to no purpose. These were the hallmarks of Williams’s art, from which we all can learn. They are the kinds of things we hope to learn in a university, the lessons on which we build a literate—and useful—society.
Sources


