On Writing Well; Or, Springing the Genie from the Inkpot: A Not-So-Modest Proposal

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"Nature's chief Masterpiece is writing well."
—Alexander Pope, quoting the Earl of Roscommon

First scene: A conversation with Lori Whitten, secretary-extraordinaire and my technological amanuensis, able to decipher and transcribe my handwritten pages. We are discussing the sorry state of writing—not my penmanship but, rather, large issues of rhetoric, composition theory, and creative writing. Or, more accurately, I had embarked on a lecture, and she was, with her usual patience and grace, listening, maybe half-interested, poised to begin typing. The occasion was a brilliant essay by an exchange student from Northern Ireland, an undergraduate at Stirling University in Scotland, who was enrolled in my advanced nonfiction workshop. In a class of able writers—twenty eight in all!—Rachel M. Orr stood out, crafting what Cynthia Ozick would call "comely and muscular" sentences and engaging narrations, all in a voice mature and sophisticated far beyond her twenty years. Simply put: Rachel put American writers to shame, even the best of us. "Whence the talent, skills, and craft?" I wondered to Lori. Lori asked a simple question of surpassing significance and insight: "Do they teach writing over there?"

Second scene: Edmund White, contemporary novelist, essayist, memoirist, prize-winning biographer: "I write in longhand, and I write in very beautiful notebooks and with very beautiful pens" (108). Hilaire Belloc, prolific essayist, travel writer, and Catholic apologist: "To know the thing with which you work is the core of the affair. Good verse is best written on good paper with an easy pen, not with a lump of coal on a whitewashed wall. The pen thinks for you . . ." ("Mowing" 147). Novelist and short-story writer Barry Hannah echoes Belloc: "A pen kind of wants to write by itself sometimes when you get it going" (26).

My title repeats, deliberately, that of William Zinsser, well-known teacher and editor. His book is nontechnical, well written, and helpful—
helpful in considerable part because it is readable, an example of practicing what you preach. Being so readable, it is quite unlike the weighty rhetorics, monstrous "readers," leaden "composition books," and arcane writings about writing, composition theory, culture and composition—what you have to slog through these days and somehow know about if you're going to teach writing ("Why?" I can hear Lori asking, insightfully). With some exceptions, these ponderous tomes are as unhelpful as they are unreadable, examples of how not to write in the guise of teaching how to write. Little wonder we lament the sorry state of writing today, at least in this country. We might be better off not teaching writing at all, as such.

I shall forgo the temptation to illustrate because examples of ineffectiveness are legion and all too familiar. Nor shall I flog particular "compositionists," despite the prevailing expectation in scholarly writing that one should shoot-to-kill one's opponent. Instead, I shall accentuate the positive, which may or may not accord with British educational policy.

Let me, while in the cliché mood, lay my cards on the table. I believe strongly in five things. First, with Alexander Pope, I believe this even as I fall short of the goal: "Let such teach others who themselves excel, / And censure freely who have written well" (15-16). Writers know best how to write. Second, if writing classes be necessary, writing workshops are the best place to learn both how to write and how to teach: the latter involves learning how to treat and touch people, the former how to do that and how to treat words and sentences. As Annie Dillard says so well in The Writing Life, how can you be a writer if you don't like sentences? Just as painters become painters because they like "the smell of the paint," so with writing (70). Thus, Hilaire Belloc trumpeted, "To know the thing with which you work is the core of the affair" ("Mowing" 147). Third, we write best about what we know firsthand and what we care about. That is, students produce strong writing when they write personally and are required to attempt craft and artistry. I say "personally," not "autobiographically"; the latter bogs too many down in "the cult of confession," the slough of self, and what Phillip Lopate calls "the stench of the ego" (xxxii). The pilgrim-writer progresses when required to produce essays, personal writing that, instead of merely chronicling experience, makes meaning by deriving significance from experience. The essay is therefore what we should be teaching our students to write—in first-year composition, advanced composition, and, not least, in our literature classes at all levels—not the only thing, of course, but in a place of prominence, along with expository and argumentative articles (I insist on the distinction that William H. Gass, among
others, has adumbrated and punctuated). Fourth, I believe, at the same time, that writing students should be reading—that's another difference, perhaps, between our "system" and the British way, for young readers should be expected to write in response to (maybe in the spirit of) what they read, spared both the boredom and the positive dangers of composition courses (you can't read jargon-laden, graceless, and convoluted sentences without your prose responding in kind). Fifth, rather than composition theory or textbooks, let them read Cynthia Ozick. In a beautiful essay titled "The Seam of the Snail" (originally "Excellence"), her sentences resonate with those of her master, Henry James:

The fact that I am an exacting perfectionist in a narrow strait only, and nowhere else, is hardly to the point, since nothing matters to me so much as a comely and muscular sentence. It is my narrow strait, this snail's road; the track of the sentence I am writing now; and when I have eked out the wet substance, ink or blood, that is its mark, I will begin the next sentence. Only in treading out sentences am I perfectionist; but then there is nothing else I know to do, or take much interest in. I miter every pair of abutting sentences as scrupulously as Uncle Jake fitted one strip of rosewood against another. The sentence I am writing is my cabin and my shell, compact, self-sufficient. It is the burnished horizon—a merciless planet where flawlessness is the single standard, where even the inmost seams, however hidden from a laxer eye, must meet perfection. Here "excellence" is not strewn casually from a tipped cornucopia, here disorder does not account for charm, here trifles rule like tyrants. (109-10)

Instead of some contemporary opinion-piece, journalistic and political, have them read Hilaire Belloc's mellow and beautiful essay "The Mowing of a Field"; stand by him as he practices the art and craft of blade-sharpening, mowing, and writing well with his Waterman "Ideal" fountain pen, the pen also preferred by Harriet Ward Beecher and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Students will read and appreciate passages such as this, perhaps recognizing that the stakes are high and coming to appreciate that, indeed, "to know the thing with which you work is the core of the affair":

Mowing well and mowing badly—or rather not mowing at all—are separated by very little; as is also true of writing verse, of playing the fiddle, and of dozens of other things, but of nothing more than of believing. For the bad or young or untaught mower without tradition, the mower Promethean, the mower original and contemptuous of the past, does all these things: He leaves great crescents of grass uncut. He digs the
point of the scythe hard into the ground with a jerk. He loosens the handles and even the fastening of the blade. He twists the blade with his blunders, he blunts the blade, he chips it, dulls it, or breaks it clean off at the tip. If anyone is standing by he cuts him in the ankle. He sweeps up into the air wildly, with nothing to resist his stroke. He drags up earth with the grass, which is like making the meadow bleed. But the good mower who does things just as they should be done and have been for a hundred thousand years, falls into none of these fooleries. He goes forward very steadily, his scythe-blade just barely missing the ground, every grass falling; the swish and rhythm of his mowing are always the same. (146-47)

And so to my main and devilishly simple argument: that with which you work, your tool, your implement, your writing instrument matters. "Good verse is best written on good paper with an easy pen," claims Hilaire Belloc, and writers before and after agree, extending the contention to prose. Author of such works as Airships, Hey Jack!, Boomerang, and Bats Out of Hell, Barry Hannah reports hearing that editors can tell when their writers are using word processors. "There's a facility," he says, "with a typewriter and a word processor. They facilitate so much that one begins writing generic prose." But Hannah feels that he does not compose generic prose when he writes with his Parker Duofold (27). Fay Weldon, author of Letters to Alice: On First Reading Jane Austen and other novels, says that she started writing better when she stopped using a typewriter. And why? "It has something to do with the pace at which you move along and the ways you fill the space on the page. You use more adjectives when you type; it's just not as clean. Besides, typing is not a natural thing to do..." (qtd. in S. Steinberg 528). Critic, novelist, poet, and biographer of John Steinbeck and Robert Frost, Jay Parini agrees: "The strange visceral connection between hand and brain is somehow lost in the subliminal click of keyboards and the computer screen's unyielding gaze. Furthermore, one misses the slight rustle of paper, the smell of freshly sharpened pencils or wet ink, the ancient and alluring texture of text making." If that isn't enough, continues Parini, there's also this: thanks to pen or pencil, "you can delete what you don't like with a quick horizontal stroke that both rids you of the unwanted phrase and simultaneously preserves the deletion—just in case it was better than the revised version, which is often the case" (43). What's more, film maker and novelist Clive Barker, who owns neither a computer nor a typewriter, claims that writing everything in longhand is "the most primitive, and for me the most direct, association I can make between what's going on in my mind's eye, and what's going to appear on the page" (35). The great problem in writing,
I reckon. We should be grateful for anything that makes the association more direct. It’s not a matter, though, of “facilitating experience.” If it were, a Bic pen would do just fine, suggests Roland Barthes, the great semioticist and essayist, himself a confessed and passionate pen-fancier. You need something more, and other, when you’re not just “churning out copy, writing that merely transcribes thought” (178). In the novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, Umberto Eco admits to a similar difference between “being creative” and his character Belbo’s “not writing but . . . only testing . . . an electric skill” (21).

Anne Fadiman, scion of a famous literary family, editor of *The American Scholar*, and author of the modest familiar essays collected in *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader*, grew up with a favorite fountain pen. Hers was a “Parker 51, circa 1945”; the poet J.D. McClatchy’s, at about the same time, was an Esterbrook; my own was a Sheaffer that I’m ashamed to say I recall only as nondescript. Fadiman confesses to apostasy, having recently taken on a Compaq Deskpro 4/25 Model 125 (whatever that is), but it can never replace in her mind’s eye or in her heart the pen she cherished—only a pen, I suspect, being able to earn the epithet that John Barth lavishes on his: “faithful” (44).

Let me be clear: I have no wish to bash the computer, or any other machine for that matter. Although I am computer-illiterate and blissfully so, I admit that the computer is not without value. On occasion I have encouraged offspring, friends, even students to expedite my quest of books through our labyrinthine library system or from Amazon.com. And although I have not (yet, at least) advanced to the point of a dictaphone as intermediary for my hieroglyphics, I’ve certainly reaped the benefits of Lori Whitten’s skill in using WordPerfect. I simply have no abiding interest in computers, except as a convenience (which I expect to continue via intermediary, mechanical or human), nor do I know the lingo or care to learn it so as to appear techno- rather than retro-grade. I’m an ancient (or Ancient) in a world of postmoderns and have no intention of allowing myself to be “connected”—so long as I don’t need to. I’ve read, and taken to heart, both the aforementioned Umberto Eco’s asseverations against and his apologia for the “brave new world” in *Travels in Hyperreality* (see, especially, the chapter “De Consolatione Philosophiae”). I simply prefer to grow greenly in the familiar.

That is, I’m speaking of “the traditional” reining in the Promethean tendencies endemic to our culture. As much as the essay is the mode that criticism has traditionally adopted (rather than the—definite—article), the pen is the instrument by which writing is best made. I can’t imagine
Cynthia Ozick crafting the glorious sentences I adduced above with anything but a pen—can you? Of course, Ozick couldn’t have written what she did without a pen and the oozing (but eternal) ink that makes the connection with her central metaphor. But the question is: could she have written so well without a pen to write about and a pen to write with? I think not.

How do I know? Well, like Matthew Arnold defending his large claims for the power and insight of great literature, I appeal both to experience and to authority. Another writer of beautiful prose, fiction and nonfiction alike, Edmund White chooses to “write in very beautiful notebooks and with very beautiful pens.” His claim and mine is also Hilaire Belloc’s (“the pen thinks for you”), and there is an intimate connection between what the writing instrument is and what it and you together can and do achieve. As the great Polish poet and essayist Zbigniew Herbert wrote in “Elegy for the Departure of Pen Ink and Lamp,” lamenting the loss of “silver nib/outlet of the critical mind/messenger of soothing knowledge,”

who remembers you today
dear companion
you left quietly
beyond the last cataract of time
who recalls you with gratitude
in the era of fatheaded ball-point pens
arrogant objects
without grace
name
or past (121, 128-29)

As the poet suggests, it’s the nib that makes the difference. Not all the difference, for the texture, the color, the design of the barrel and cap also matter—and not a little; still, it’s the nib that determines the character of the writing. Rudyard Kipling, who averred that he could write fiction only with a pen and black ink, had, like so many others, a favorite, his “a slim, octagonal-sided, agate penholder with a Waverley nib” (qtd. in Fadiman 89). Roland Barthes, who took to felt-tipped models when they first appeared (he once confessed he craved every new pen he saw and evidently bought, tried, and kept huge numbers, this in an interview published as “An Almost Obsessive Relation to Writing Instruments”) preferred a fine point: “I’ve also used pen nibs—not the ‘Sergeant-Major,’ which is too dry, but softer nibs, like the ‘J’” (178). Why these
writers felt that the nib is so important is suggested by Jonathan Steinberg in his helpful *Identifying Fountain Pens*. Like others with a passion for pens, he espouses quality, writing specifically of the quality represented in vintage pens:

Not only are the look of the pen and the writing different; writing with a vintage fountain pen *feels* different. The reason for the differences lies in the method of construction of the nib. Even a cursory glance will show that using a ballpoint pen offers no opportunity to impart character to handwriting. Modern pens that have a stub or a chisel-point nib can be used to create something of the effect achieved by a vintage pen. On down strokes, for example, such a nib will describe broad lines because the surface presented by the nib to the paper will be broad; on cross strokes the lines will be thin because the surface presented will be thin. However, the relative inflexibility of the nib will mean that there will be little variation between the thick and thin lines. (6)

Detail, difference, subtlety, and character—these the carefully crafted fountain pen inscribes. And not just vintage pens, I hasten to add, for in the current renaissance of the fountain pen, the quality produced in the halcyon 1920s and 1930s is, if not matched, at least approached.

Still, Steinberg is writing only about handwriting, or penmanship, not literary creativity. There can be little doubt that the fountain pen enhances penmanship, the lost art of handwriting. But does it similarly enhance *writing*, in the larger sense? Hilaire Belloc, Edmund White, Fay Weldon, and others think so, and their graceful prose raises the question of from whence such prose comes. My own experience supports the notion that writing with a good fountain pen helps us write well in every sense. “I will actually write better stories with a given pen, and then I’ll stick with it,” affirms Barry Hannah, gratefully acknowledging his Parker Duofold, worthy successor to a Cross. The pen creates a rhythm, he says, and “so much of writing is rhythm, a visibility on the page. It’s beyond superstition. It’s an actual inner rhythm you achieve with a pen like this” (26).

Consider: Getting started is notoriously hard. Thus, in interviews writers are typically asked about “the writing process,” and in their assorted discussions of “the writing life” they characteristically confront their ways of getting down to work in the morning. No mistake about it, the blank page—or screen, maybe more—is terrifying, and so we subscribe to myriad rituals in hopes of warding off the demon or summoning the Muse. These rituals range from reading (often, poetry) to listening to music (usually classical) to sharpening a whole fistful of pencils to
brewing imported coffee—all in hopes of easing up on blankness that demands addressing, emptiness that requires filling. For me, an inclined desk helps. I tried a drafting table for awhile, but an inexpensive “editor’s desk,” which I purchased from Levenger’s, serves me better. It takes up only a part of my writing table while providing the angle that feels natural. That the blank page is thus inclined to receive my pen represents both symbolic value and a psychological advantage not to be taken lightly—and when it comes to serious writing, you bless any advantage and curse any impediment, imagined or otherwise.

Thus equipped, I take up my pen. A good, “easy” pen is a joy both to have and to hold. It looks good and feels good. It also creates a certain expectation. Writing with a pen of craft and character, you are encouraged to put forth your best efforts. The pen proscribes sloppiness as well as haste. As Barry Hannah says, “You don’t want to make anything ugly. You want to be worthy of the pen” (58). It demands a care from you similar to the care that went into its crafting. And craft is what writing is all about: craft in the appearance, which fosters craft in the substance.

I’m not sure I ever looked forward to taking up a pencil. There’s no thrill comparable to that which Hilaire Belloc describes in his “On the Pleasure of Taking up One’s Pen.” In anticipation of the inclination of the page and the joy my pen brings me, I rise early, head downstairs by six o’clock or earlier, a cup of General Foods Irish Cream coffee in hand, eager to begin. Yes, eager. I anticipate what Belloc calls “devilish pleasing.” This is what he wrote, with poise and becoming modesty:

> When you take up your pen you do something devilish pleasing: there is a prospect before you. You are going to develop a germ: I don’t know what it is, and I promise you I won’t call it creation—but possibly a god is creating through you, and at least you are making believe at creation. Anyhow, it is a sense of mastery and of origin, and you know that when you have done, something will be added to the world, and little destroyed. (“On the Pleasure” 3)

As I’ve said, writing with an “easy” pen, such as Belloc’s Waterman Ideal, militates against haste. Speed and efficiency are bred by the computer, even the typewriter; they are the bane of good writing. Interestingly, the quicker we are, the faster we go, the more wind we find in our sails. As Anne Fadiman puts it, echoing Hannah’s remarks, “I often feel I can detect the spoor of word processing in books, particularly long ones. The writers, no longer slowed by having to . . . fill their fountain pens, or sharpen their quills, tend to be prolix” (93). “Tend” is putting it
mildly. Not only do unnecessary adjectives proliferate, as Fay Weldon
says, but the computer breeds prose neither comely nor muscular because
too often such prose is not subjected to the lapidary care that pen-writing
encourages and seems to insist upon. A good pen is a class act, and with
one in hand it’s hard not to engage reciprocally.

Slowing down produces a benefit that may initially appear contradic-
tory. Simply put, writing with a pen produces or induces thoughtfulness,
and that thoughtfulness works against prolixity, verbosity, and long-
windedness while—and here’s the magic—allowing events, scenes,
descriptions to accumulate meaning. Think of E.B. White’s great teacher
at Cornell, Will Strunk, coauthor of Elements of Style, barking, “Omit
needless words! Omit needless words! Omit needless words!” (viii). This
advice reminds me of my own problems in writing and my attempts to
address them. The best teachers of writing that I’ve ever been blessed with
are two: Aubrey Williams, one of Alexander Pope’s best readers, who
convinced me to put my first book-length manuscript “in short skirts”; and
Deanne Urmy, editor at Beacon Press, who, in rejecting a recent submis-
sion of mine, gave the different but complementary and equally simple
and obvious advice: slow down and allow your accounts room to accu-
ulate meaning. Fundamentals of writing well, if I’ve ever heard them.

There’s more, and it connects with an earlier point. Pen-writing
represents at least a quasi-permanence, further educing care: if you cannot
click and delete, you are likely to be more careful—which is unusual in
our “throw-away culture.” Anne Fadiman wisely titles the essay I’ve more
than once mentioned, and more often borrowed from, “Eternal Ink.” That
notion she borrows from Richard Selzer, whose writing process she
describes: the surgeon-essayist, author of “The Pen and the Scalpel,”
sitting down to work, “fills his fountain pen from a lacquered Chinese
inkwell with a bronze dragon on its lid. To feed the genie that he says
dwells therein, he mixes, from an old recipe, his own version of Higgins
Eternal Ink, the brand he used when he learned to write sixty years ago.”
Fadiman then aha’s: “Eternal! To what other medium could that word
possibly be applied?” (91).

More is involved than the lasting, than what transcends our oh-so-
modern ephemerality and renderings of the eminently disposable, epito-
mized in computer transcription. I mean the age-old idea of a genie
dwelling in the inkpot, another name for the long-invoked Muses,
themselves signifiers of such power—from without that Plato banished all
thus-inspired poets from the polis and that Swift ruthlessly satirized as
“enthusiasm” and fancy sitting astride reason. Hilaire Belloc, you recall,
thought that when you avail yourself of the "devilish pleasing" act of taking up your pen, "possibly a god is creating through you." Leonard Michaels, author of *Shuffle* and many stories and novels, scoffs at any such notion persisting in enlightened times. He finds abhorrent the notion that "the thing with which one works" preserves some magical qualities, the writing instrument somehow becoming a medium in the ghostly sense. In his contribution to Daniel Halpern's *Who's Writing This?* Michaels wonders if some people "think the instrument has magical power, or they believe writing is still haunted by gods. Not Apollo and Dionysus, but IBM and Apple." I don't know how to read his subsequent sentence; has the medium gotten astride Michaels?: "Of course the instrument makes no difference if writing lacks supernatural sanction" (122).

That the instrument one uses *does* make a difference seems indisputable. How much and what kind are the only questions.

Whether my Aurora Solé has allowed me to make "comely and muscular" sentences or to write well generally, I leave for you to judge—even magic has limits, even the Muses bound subject to the capacity of the vessel they enter. *I know* I enjoy writing more, and I believe the pen does as Hilaire Belloc claims: it "thinks for" me, at least in the sense that as it and my hand are working in unison, gliding across the page, whose surface the pen caresses, thoughts are generated as if brought forth by that loving contact. That is, when writing with a beautiful, easy, comfortable pen that I respect, I find idea leading to idea, thought to thought, as in essayist Joseph Epstein's notion (borrowed from the painter Paul Klee) of "a line out for a walk." Klee's words, says Epstein, describe "exactly, precisely, absolutely what I do." They also describe what any essayist does—and what the pen enables, enhances. Listen to Epstein, the former editor of *The American Scholar*:

> The "line" is of course my subject. A subject is all the familiar essayist needs. Character, point of view, observation, past reading, these he has, or ought already to have, in his kit. But where his subject will take him he is unlikely to know in advance, just as Paul Klee did not know where his line would take him. "I am writing a Theme and Variations," the composer William Walton wrote to Herbert von Karajan. "I've written the Variations but I don't yet have the Theme." The familiar essayist knows whereof William Walton speaks. The chanciness of the enterprise, the element of discovery and surprise in it, are among the pleasures of writing the familiar essay. . . . (11-12)

You don't have to write with a pen to make such an essay, but it helps. Essay-writing and pen-writing: double first-cousins. Michel de Montaigne,
acknowledged progenitor of the essay, famously declared for writing "ondoyant et divers," and pen fancier Barry Hannah believes that a fountain pen promotes a cognate "mental hygiene. It will make you have a more athletic and supple mind" (58).

They share a line-age, essay-writing and pen-writing. The capaciousness I have elsewhere ascribed to the essay—which I have characterized, borrowing from Cynthia Ozick, as prompting, indeed requiring us "to envision the stranger's heart"—that capaciousness, or a similar one, I have felt in the use of the fountain pen. It has literally opened up worlds to me, enriching, layering, expanding. The pen has taught me much about itself, leading me to learn more and more. I might well otherwise have missed Pushkin, Goldoni, and the great Italian Romantic poet Leopardi, among others; and I'm grateful, too, for its leading me to Edmund White as well as for its unearthing sadly neglected early twentieth-century essayist Charles S. Brooks. All this because of the "faithful" pen, from which, genus and individual alike, I'm learning. The pen has led me—"pen of work, pen of drudgery, pen of letters, pen of posings, pen rabid, pen ridiculous, pen glorified" (Belloc, "On the Pleasure" 5)—to Japanese art (with its respect both for tradition and for nature and with its fidelity to symbolism) and to Zen Buddhism. I not only write with an "easy" fountain pen, but, like Roland Barthes, I also now collect them: Montblanc's Writers Series and Maki'e from Dunhill—Namiki, Pilot, Platinum, and vintage Dunhill-Namikis. Along the way, I've discovered, if not (yet) the art of living, a way of looking that is at once aesthetic and profound. As a result, I write with and collect pens that—whether crafted in Japan, Germany, Italy, or America—represent ideals. Ideal is the proper name of a fine, easy writing instrument, not merely "churning out copy" or transcribing thought but inspiring.

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