

Meridel Le Sueur Essay

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WRITING LESSON (excerpt from a work-in-progress, *Fanon*)

These are the rules for writing a novel, and Thomas mutters them over his shoulder while he writes the rules on the black board. Let's begin today with point of view, the telling voice, the voice telling the story, the narrative heart that must always be alive, beating at the telling center or there would be no story, no novel, and to illustrate his point, various diagrams and underlined words with arrows like guided missiles connecting the dots begin to appear on the dusty chalkboard – green not black, its actual color – at the front of a small classroom holding a dozen or so hopeful college students – white because their actual color is not green or black – who have gathered together in the name of fiction, wanna-be's yearning to learn the secret of what Thomas has done – break into print – break into the conversation about their lives that books have been conducting, fairly or unfairly, long before the students were born, books mostly unread by them, books whose authors are mostly dead or much older, and therefore, not exactly qualified to speak about the new, unfolding lives. Does Thomas concur, hearing the nub of chalk in his hand *tap-tap-tapping* as if the green blackboard's a wall between cells and he's tapping a message to another prisoner, or the board's a door he's humbly tapping, seeking permission to enter the office of a senior colleague, much older, smarter, more distinguished than Thomas will ever be, the chalk a blind man's cane *tap-tap-tapping* the way impressionist painters compose a world with dots of color, and sure enough a picture, familiar and embarrassing, greets Thomas when he steps back to regard his

handiwork, a photo remembered from a thirty-year-old article in the alumni magazine of the college where he copped his first gig, a feature about neophyte instructors, featuring rare Thomas, the only member of his race on the faculty. Thomas wearing a sharp herringbone suit facing a class, the shaggy backs of student heads blurry in the foreground, and behind Thomas in the photo's background, the rules for writing a novel sketched on a chalkboard – actual color unknown since the photo's black and white – rules appearing just as spontaneously improvised and freshly minted in the ancient picture as they seem today, same ole, same ole shit, recycled almost exactly, startling then shaming Thomas.

What if a former student fast-forwarded to this classroom, or one of his present students bumped into the old photo. Would she or he call foul. Fraud. Demand a tuition rebate. Sue for damages. Didn't all professors teach from yellowed lecture notes, scruffy index cards, falling-apart, loose-leaf notebooks, manila folders stuffed with brown-around-the-edges clippings. Why bother with dispensing information any chump can download from the Internet. Once you pay your dues to get the hang of your subject, why wouldn't you pass on what you'd sacrificed rivers of sweat, tears, and blood to acquire. What do you have to teach, if not the truth of your experience, your witness. Your old school theories precious yours, like the music you grew up listening to, dancing to, fucking to. Midnighters. Five Royales. Turbans, Dells, Diablos, Spaniels, Flamingos. Oldies but goodies. Aging with you. Better now. Right on now. All the questions and answers in one harmonized swooning, do-wah falsetto riff. Same rhythms and rimes, same hopeless wishes and lost, lost loves. All good. All true then and now. Word.

Rules are truth, aren't they. Rules remember truths and pass them on. They are called rules because they truly work. Because truth and beauty mate when we apply the rules. Sometimes. Do. Wah. Why would the rules change each semester. Each decade. Each century. A century lucky if it produces a few examples to add to the list of geniuses who suffered under the rules, disciplined their art within the straight and narrow of the rules to achieve lasting greatness.

Now don't get me wrong, folks. This ain't about some Daffy Duck, Woody Woodpecker, Dats all folks, neo-classical, socialist-realism, know-it-all set of do's and don'ts carved in stone guaranteeing good writing. Knowing the rules is one thing; applying them another. One's mostly a head thing, the other a heart thing, but neither works, heart nor head, ying nor yang, without the presence of the other. Though art's about heart, no art, including narrative, flourishes without rules. And storytelling is an extremely self-aware, contrived, self-conscious art. No matter how natural, slick, innocent, polished, hip-hop vernacular a story sounds. People don't eat recipes, and a good meal is never simply the sum of its parts. Art depends upon a careful gathering of the proper ingredients and preparing them with luck, pluck, wit, and experience, just so, never the same process twice. What I've scribbled on the board are not instructions for assembling a novel. Rather, I'm suggesting, no, *asserting*, there's some, I repeat *some* method in the writing madness. Writing madness, isn't that precisely what we do. On another day we might begin class just as profitably there, with the madness and accomplish as much, maybe more than beginning with method. Two sides of the same coin. Same shield as the Ebo say. Can't brandish one side without lifting the other. Heads and tails. Dionysus and Apollo, spirit and flesh. Wine and reason. An eternal *pas de*

deux. The old soft shoe. Good enough to eat. Hear what I'm saying. Listen up to Otis telling the truth : *Faaa-la-la, lala, lala, la/ Faaa-la-la, la-la, la-la, la/ I keep singing that old sad song.*

Though the rules decorating a blackboard in the xeroxed photo your classmate Ms. Jones or Mr. Smith unearthed on the Internet and kindly distributed may resemble the rules I've outlined on the board today, I assure you, girls and boys, they ain't the same. Not the same no matter how much they look the same. I'm a different man today. Times have changed. You're different people today than you were yesterday, I hope. You must be, whether or not you know it or like it. None of you kiddies born yet that day thirty years ago in Phila when I covered a U of P blackboard with rules for constructing narrative. Everything changes; nothing remains the same. Not even remains. You can't slam dunk your donut in the same coffee twice. The single exception being rules. Rules are rules because they contradict and circumvent conventional wisdom even though they might seem from the outside to be rigid conduits and enforcers of conventional wisdom. Unfortunately, certain rules serve that incarcerating purpose. Operate in society like strait jackets, colors, jobs, jails. Rules for art a different species, a special case. Permanent, unbending, never-ending truths, yet if you understand the writing rules wisely, from the inside, humbly, with respect and skepticism and impatience, the rules, supple as whips and weather, always apply (Check out Nietzsche's metaphorical metamorphosis of the artist, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, I believe.)

I don't apologize, therefore, for repeating myself, perhaps contradicting myself, when I offer to you what I've offered to countless other students, some of whom, by the

way, a precious few I admit (many are called, few chosen, and those few not necessarily the best writers) have gone on, if not to greatness, at least into print.

So, back to the task at hand. Which we've never deserted, of course, the rules. My understanding of them. Offered to assist your understanding of them, of yourselves, of me, of our stories.

It had never happened. No overzealous, disgruntled, jealous, vengeful, ungrateful, terrorist student had stumbled upon sensitive material and busted Thomas. No one had attempted to jack his class nor out him to the administration. Very unlikely circumstances. As unlikely as receiving a severed human head in the mail (an event that did happen to Thomas once upon a time). In the fiction writing endeavor, sisters and brothers, we pursue truth. And truth pursues us. We don't catch up to the truth, and truth, thank goodness, doesn't catch us. Perhaps the first rule is: Don't stop and look back. Because, as Mr. Satchel Paige warned, truth is a hungry wolf. When a book's just about finished or just about scrapped, you're most vulnerable. The wily wolf is quite aware of this vulnerability. Snaps harder at your heels. Or entices you with sexy flourishes of its funky, bushy tail. Never hurry. Learn to reverse the flow of the chase precisely at the moment it's about to end badly. A cartoon turn-around, whip-around, reversal of hunter and hunted so truth's elusive again or you're eluding truth again. Both really, always. Point being – stay in the race. The race your reward. Privilege process not product. Process matters. You can have some say about process – about how, when, how hard and why you work. Publications are accidents along the way. They happen or not. Good and bad shit gets published. Other people's, maybe yours. Remember, dead people are published every day. So, publication doesn't equal life. Chasing and being chased mean

you're alive. In the race. The book or story just about completed or just about scrapped becomes another book, another pursuit if you stay in the race. Rules 2, 3, 4.,etc – forget about winning or losing. Stay hungry, stay scared, my friends.

In the old days when I was a student, if a course had been particularly worthwhile, we would applaud the professor at the close of the final class. The responses could be quite boisterous, and at the end of the semester in classrooms up and down the corridors of College Hall you'd hear spontaneous bursts of noise. And hear painful, lemme-out-a-here silences. By the time I had commenced my teaching career, the tradition of applause had degenerated from rule to custom, and whether students appreciated a course or not, they clapped on the last day of class. Those polite, perfunctory, uniform ripples of handclapping illustrate the problem with rules. The problem of schools. Of teaching and learning. Let's do the last class thing now, students. Let's get it over with our first day so no one will feel disappointed or obliged later. Let's revive a dying rule by breaking it. Celebrate it by mangling, ignoring, and interrogating it. Anyway, he looked good in the herringbone suit. Plus the suit, whose distinctive weave is named for the fish it resembles, tells its own story about story telling. Though Thomas can't claim to have known this fact thirty years ago when he chose to wear the suit for a photo-session, herring fart. In a study published just yesterday a British scientist revealed that herring frequently expel from their assholes a lengthy series of rather voluminous – given the tininess of the fish – pellets of gas. This farting behavior appears to be a form of communication and intensifies in crowds. Since they are quite social creatures, those huge swarms of migrating herring W. G. Sebald eloquently described must have generated epic booms as

they swam through the ocean depths, their conversations an evocative model of narrative whose possibilities Thomas will explore next class.

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