

FROM: THE FATH OF A
WRITER: LIFE, CRAFT, ART
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TO
A YOUNG WRITER

Write your heart out.

Never be ashamed of your subject, and of your passion for your subject.

Your "forbidden" passions are likely to be the fuel for your writing. Like our great American dramatist Eugene O'Neill raging through his life against a long-deceased father; like our great American prose stylist Ernest Hemingway raging through his life against his mother; like Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton struggling through their lives with the seductive Angel of Death, tempting them to the ecstasy of self-murder. The instinct for violent self-laceration in Dostoyevsky, and for the sadistic punishment of "disbelievers" in Flannery O'Connor. The fear of going mad in Edgar Allan Poe and committing an irrevocable, unspeakable act—mur-

dering an elder or a wife, hanging and putting out the eyes of one's "beloved" pet cat. Your struggle with your buried self, or selves, yields your art; these emotions are the fuel that drives your writing and makes possible hours, days, weeks, months and years of what will appear to others, at a distance, as "work." Without these ill-understood drives you might be a superficially happier person, and a more involved citizen of your community, but it isn't likely that you will create anything of substance.

What advice can an older writer presume to offer to a younger? Only what he or she might wish to have been told years ago. Don't be discouraged! Don't cast sidelong glances, and compare yourself to others among your peers! (Writing is not a race. No one really "wins." The satisfaction is in the effort, and rarely in the consequent rewards, if there are any.) And again, *write your heart out.*

Read widely, and without apology. Read what you want to read, not what someone tells you you should read. (As Hamlet remarks, "I know not 'should.'") Immerse yourself in a writer you love, and read everything he or she has written, including the very earliest work. Especially the very earliest work. Before the great writer became great, or even good, he/she was groping for a way, fumbling to acquire a voice, perhaps just like you.

Write for your own time, if not for your own generation

exclusively. You can't write for "posterity"—it doesn't exist. You can't write for a departed world. You may be addressing, unconsciously, an audience that doesn't exist; you may be trying to please someone who won't be pleased, and who isn't worth pleasing.

(But if you feel unable to "write your heart out"—inhibited, embarrassed, fearful of hurting or offending the feelings of others—you may want to try a practical solution and write under a pseudonym. There's something wonderfully liberating, even childlike, about a "pen-name": a fictitious name given to the instrument with which you write, and not attached to *you*. If your circumstances change, you could always claim your writing self. You could always abandon your writing self, and cultivate another. Early publication can be a dubious blessing: we all know writers who would give anything to have not published their first book, and go about trying to buy up all existing copies. Too late!)

(Of course, if you want a professional life that involves teaching, lectures, readings—you will have to acknowledge a public writing name. But only *one*.)

Don't expect to be treated justly by the world. Don't even expect to be treated mercifully.

Life is lived head-on, like a roller coaster ride: "art" is coolly selective, and can be created only in retrospect. But don't live life in order to write about it since the "life" so lived

will be artificial and pointless. Better to invent wholly an alternate life. Far better!

Most of us fall in love with works of art, many times during the course of our lifetimes. Give yourself up in admiration, even in adoration, of another's art. (How Degas worshipped Manet! How Melville loved Hawthorne! And how many young, yearning, brimming-with-emotion poets has Walt Whitman sired!) If you find an exciting, arresting, disturbing voice or vision, immerse yourself in it. You will learn from it. In my life I've fallen in love with (and never wholly fallen out of love from) writers as diverse as Lewis Carroll, Emily Brontë, Kafka, Poe, Melville, Emily Dickinson, William Faulkner, Charlotte Brontë, Dostoyevsky . . . In reading the new edition of Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* not long ago, I discovered I'd memorized entire passages of this novel. In rereading the now virtually unread Studs Lonigan trilogy, by James T. Farrell, I discovered I'd memorized entire passages. There are poems of Emily Dickinson I probably know more intimately than Emily Dickinson herself knew them; they are imprinted in my memory in a way they would not have been imprinted in hers. There are poems of William Butler Yeats, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, D. H. Lawrence that leave me chilled with excitement decades after I'd first discovered them.

Don't be ashamed of being an idealist, of being romantic

and "yearning." If you yearn for people who won't reciprocate your interest in them, you should know that your yearning for them is probably the most valuable thing about them. So long as it's unrequited.

Don't too quickly prejudge classics. Or contemporaries. Choose a book to read, now and then, against the grain of your taste, or what you believe is your taste. It *is* a man's world; a woman whose sensibility has been stoked by feminism will find much to annoy and offend, but perhaps there's much to learn, and to be inspired by, if only in knowing what it is to be an outsider gazing in. Such great works as Homer's *Odyssey* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, read from the perspective of the twenty-first century, the one primitive in its genius, the other unnervingly "modern," strike male and female readers in very different ways. A woman should acknowledge her hurt, her anger and her hope of "justice"; even a hope for revenge might be a good thing, in her work if not in her life.

Language is an icy-cool medium, on the page. Unlike performers and athletes, we get to re-imagine, revise and rewrite completely if we wish. Before our work is set *in print*, as *in stone*, we maintain our power over it. The first draft may be stumbling and exhausting, but the next draft or drafts will be soaring and exhilarating. Only have faith: the first sentence can't be written until the last sentence has been written. Only

then do you know where you've been going, and where you've been.

The novel is the affliction for which only the novel is the cure.

And one final time: *Write your heart out.*



RUNNING
AND WRITING

Running! If there's any activity happier, more exhilarating, more nourishing to the imagination, I can't think what it might be. In running, the mind flies with the body; the mysterious efflorescence of language seems to pulse in the brain, in rhythm with our feet and the swinging of our arms. Ideally, the runner-who's-a-writer is running through the land- and cityscapes of her fiction, like a ghost in a real setting.

There must be some analogue between running and dreaming. The dreaming mind is usually bodiless, has peculiar powers of locomotion and, in my experience at least, often runs or glides or "flies" along the ground, or in the air. (Leaving aside the blunt, deflating theory that dreams are merely compensatory: you fly in sleep because in life you crawl, barely; you're soaring above others in sleep because in life others soar above you.) Possibly these fairy-tale feats of locomo-