

# The Gordon Lish Notes

“Writing is not about self-expression; it is about putting words on paper.” — Gordon Lish

Gordon Lish is a renowned American author, editor, and teacher of creative writing. He was the fiction editor of *Esquire* for most of the 1970s, an editor at Alfred A. Knopf for nearly twenty years, and editor of *The Quarterly* from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s. He taught at Columbia and Yale, and also taught private courses. His books include *Dear Mr. Capote*, *Peru*, *What I Know So Far*, *Mourner at the Door*, *Zimzum*, and others.

In the autumn of 1990, I attended a series of Lish’s private masters’ classes in New York City. Initially I took no notes, but after the first few weeks I realized that what I was learning was of such value to me as a writer, I should make a record of it that I could refer to again in the future. In the spring of 1991, I fashioned the notes into a more comprehensible and useful document. With the exception of minor cosmetic changes, this is that document.

The classes could be inspiring and excruciating. Lish was a brilliant editor, a gifted teacher, and a painfully demanding critic. The class sessions ran for six hours each, on Tuesday and Thursday nights. The first night of class, Lish talked for all six hours. Every succeeding night, he talked for about an hour, we read from our writings and he critiqued — very often shutting us down after only a sentence or two — and for the last hour or so, he talked. This document contains the notes from the class meetings, which notes I expanded upon with memory and interpretation in the months that followed. Any misinterpretation or misunderstanding is, of course, my fault. Quotes enclosed in double quotation marks are verbatim quotes of Lish. They give only a hint of the force of his personality and of his passion for the written word.

— Tetman Callis, 2011

OCTOBER 9, 1990

Escape the hegemony of the object. While you must render your object with precision, staying on its surface, ever sliding, ever moving, ever illuminating a facet here and a crevasse there, remember that you are in control of the rendering; while you must speak truly of your object, you must not be helpless in the face of the truth of your object.

Keep analogies close to their objects. ‘The white wall was as white as the whitest white,’ is a stronger analogy than ‘The white wall was as white as a virgin’s heart.’

“The only sentence that matters is the one you’re writing.” Do not look ahead two or three sentences, thinking, Oh, but wait, I have to get through two or three more of these sentences before I can get to the really good stuff. Make the sentence you are at the place you are at, and make it a place of stone and steel, not a place of sand and clay. Fashion this sentence out of what has gone before on your page, always moving forward by looking back. Turn, swerve, torque and twist upon what you have written, finding new ways to render your object, and through these maneuvers, finding the way to write your heart out.

“The job is not to know what you are going to find.” What you will end up finding is your own heart, and finding that, you will find the hearts of all other women and men.

It takes courage to speak your heart, to really speak all that is in your heart. This courage, this is what made the great writers great — their audacity, their will, their courage to speak. They did not wait for permission to speak their hearts — they spoke out of having no other choice but to speak.

“No one is chosen. One chooses one’s self.” No one owes any debt of attention to be paid to you; there are a million people just like you clamoring to be heard. Do not wait your turn — take your turn, take everyone else’s besides. Do you dare to “piss with the big dogs”? Who told you you could? Who told you you could not? Bite their cocks off and spit them back in their faces; tell them, ‘I am here, in town and on the page, and I’m not here to piss with the big dogs, I’m here to piss *on* the big dogs.’

Not just any speech will turn the trick. “You want a sentence that has pressure pressure pressure.” You want a sentence, and not just a sentence but every sentence, to be like an ace in tennis, like a line drive with “high spin, low wobble.”

You want, in your work, repetition and closure, a peripeteia, a tying up of the loose ends. You want to unpack your object again and again.

Find the major, basal, fundamental, ineradicable losses of your life. In these losses lie your artistic powers. “The thing taken from you is your gift.”

Stick to it. Stick to your object, stick to your writing, stick to your dreams, stick to yourself. You will find that such steadfastness will perpetuate itself.

Beware of exposition in dialogue. Keep your dialogue numinous, not narrative. Curve back in your stories in every possible way: thematically, structurally, acoustically; be aware of the power of assonance; be aware that *every morpheme*, *every phoneme* counts. Do not write in a linear fashion — such writing is weak. Do not spew out actions and ideas in the manner of a comedian or magician whose every trick or joke is bombing, who tosses new material out in a desperate attempt to connect with his or her audience.

‘The act of writing is an opportunistic act.’ — Dennis Donoghue. Do not confine your work to plodding plot; rather, let your work go where it and your heart will lead you.

“Stay on the body.” Do not go below the surfaces of your objects, seeking to explain their inner truths. Write for the readers who will be able to find the signs of depth and truth through empathic reading of accurate description.

Don’t hold back, and don’t save it up. Love your work and love your reader, and give every line everything you have. Remember, in reaching through your writing to a reader, you are engaged in nothing so much as an act of seduction. Seduce the whole fucking world, for all time.

Shun the “airy persiflage.” By all means, keep your sense of irony about yourself and your work, but hit as a heavyweight would hit. Write with gravitas.

“Render the object.” This is it: describe the thing as to you it is, and through such description the truths of your heart and of all humanity will be revealed.

“Before I traveled my road, I was my road.” (Gordon quoting Merwin translating Porchia.)

Stick to simple, concrete objects. For instance, as an opening sentence, ‘The table held a book,’ is no great shakes, but think of where you could go from there. What you want, really, is an exorbitant opening sentence, a hook that hooks your reader to a line that could lead anywhere and everywhere.

The more you tell your grand truth, the more you become embedded in your own mythology — make a mythic figure of yourself. Kick Shakespeare in the balls and shove Homer down the stairs. It’s easy — it costs you no less than your life.

OCTOBER 11, 1990

As Thoreau said, there are two kinds of writing: the one reports on the event; the other *is* the event.

Remember your Zen koan — ‘First there is a mountain, then there is no mountain, then there is.’ It is the same with developing power on the page. First you have to know how, then you must forget you know how. You must practice all the time. You must fall in love with your language, learn its strengths and weaknesses, come to the point where you are automatically making strong sentences in your mind all the time, sentences you have no fear of discarding as with your language you become more and more adept. You must never fear throwing your work away. Such a sloughing-off will make you stronger, larger, more mature in your art.

Gordon told us beginners at the end of the first night of class to go home and throw everything away. He told us not a one of us knew how to write, that our present and past work would be the anchor that would surely sink our boats, that our ability to emblazon the page would be directly connected to our ability to throw our work away. He said most of us would not be able to do it, and most of us would never make it — and even the ability to throw work away will not guarantee success.

Consider cadence; consider the value of ending sentences on an upbeat note; consider the various stops and how you want to make use of them in your work.

Write it out, write it out, stretch it out and write it out some more. Write your heart out, write your mind out, write your soul out, give, give, and give again, and great rewards will be yours in return.

Beware units of measure, numbered or otherwise. Like brand names, they do not wear well. ‘All afternoon’ is much better than ‘For five hours after lunch.’

It is this simple: simply say what a thing is.

“When you put down a word, immediately interrogate it for its opposite.” Question everything you put down, all the time, always asking yourself, ‘How can I find a stronger way to say this?’

“Presentation, not representation.”

Write it out. Tell what it is. The reader cannot see what is in the eye of your mind.

“Anything is a story; everything is a story; you can start anywhere.”

Do not automatically use contractions. Consider the power, the acoustics, the cadences involved, the tone of your piece, your stance and your authority, when you make a decision regarding contractions and their employment.

“Never judge, unless the voice of the judger is clearly suspect.”

Like units of measure, directions are to be regarded as suspect. Any time you say, for instance, ‘He went north,’ you plant in the reader’s mind a world of wondering about what was going on in every other direction but north. Same with saying, for instance, ‘She was six-foot-seven.’ You leave the reader open to ask, ‘Are you sure she wasn’t six-foot-six-and-seven-eighths?’ Any such questioning on the reader’s part is an undermining of your authority to speak about your object.

Keep focused, keep concentrated in time and space. Any change in time and locale, most particularly any jump-cut, is a blow struck against the unity, the strength and integrity of the piece.

Keep mystery in your work. Mystery gives power to a story, but remember — mystery is not the same thing as confusion.

Read your work aloud. Your work must work aloud. Prose fiction should be speech, and that doesn’t necessarily mean it should be ignorant speech.

Build patterns in your work.

“You want to write in cadence, not in meter.”

Be chary in the giving of the news. The story is not in the news, it is in the moment.

OCTOBER 16, 1990

Strive for perfect cadence in your sentences; strive to utter “utterable statements,” statements which not only could not have been said in any other way, but through their very saying reveal that they were of necessity said. Herein lies power — an absence of self-consciousness, bent only on finding speech. You ask yourself, “What can I say? What can be said?”

Speak to be the *only one* who is heard.

Little changes reveal whole worlds. Every phoneme counts.

“Doing prose fiction is an occasion for you to invent yourself.”

“You are the god of the page. Be God first. Entirely. Wholly. The rest follows.” The page is your world, and you are supreme there. You are Siva, the creator and destroyer of worlds, and you dance upon the infant page. You control the horizontal; you control the vertical. “Don’t waste your time reporting on the event — *be* the event.” Be liberated by the page, not inhibited by the page.

If you can make an audacious, complex, exorbitant beginning, in the first page or two, “the rest of the piece is a coast.”

“The farther you can get from the history of your life, the closer you may get to the story that is you.”

Courtesy Rick Whitaker, here follow Dennis Donoghue’s three levels through which a writer passes, one would hope, to arrive at, finally, greatness:

- 1) Self-expression;
- 2) Communication;
- 3) Exploring the form of the language itself.

Shun conventional metaphor, making your metaphor of your prose itself. Individual analogies subtract from the overall metaphorical effect of the piece.

OCTOBER 18, 1990

If you diminish yourself in your work, you make yourself larger than life.

Consider the phoniness of flashing back. Consider how flashing back rips apart what should be the seamless fabric of your piece.

Be patient in the giving of the information, in the spewing of the news. “If it goes without saying, don’t say it.” If it can wait, and it almost always can, make it wait. “Pay it out later.”

“Form to begin with. The substance will take care of itself . . . Form, format, formulations.” The force of the form can overcome the discouraging actuality of the words; always, the words, somehow unsatisfactory, never getting quite to the truth of your heart, always acting as signs that block the way to which they point.

“The work must be worthy of your death.”

Respecting so-called ‘characters,’ and paraphrasing Grace Paley, in a story, there are no characters — there are people; furthermore, they are not people, they are ink on a page. What gets onto the page is not well-rounded characters, it is the evidence of your desire to be heard.

Write from the Oedipal principle; write to overcome the preceding generation, be it those writers who have gone before you, the last piece you wrote, or in what you are writing now, the most recent sentence you have placed upon the page.

Write in a self-reflexive, self-referential way. This extends from constantly turning your piece back on itself to never referring to other writers or their work.

Opening a sentence, especially your attack sentence, with an adverb, adverbial clause, or prepositional phrase, this is a weak move.

In your attack, which is, of course, your opening, present objects real, physical, tangible, visible — do not present the abstract. The abstract arises most naturally, most powerfully, and most subtly out of the presentation of the concrete.

Stripping away the adjectives, those pretty, petty flourishes, this will make a more powerful piece of work.

Pay attention to “the conduit of knowledge” — who knows what in a story and how is it known. The strongest position to take is to reveal only that which could be known by whatever ‘person’ is speaking in the story, and to reveal as little of that as you can get away with.

A strong story is unpredictable, “is its own pattern.”

“I’m trying to get you to dance with the language.”

OCTOBER 23, 1990

“The Ur-sentence:” a basic sentence form, reflecting the acoustics and cadences of the language as you learned it. Every writer has an Ur-sentence, and the development of this form is the development of your style.

A repetition of the Oedipal principle in the making of art:

- 1) Belatedness must be defeated, and the feelings of belatedness arising in your heart when you see a piece of work you wish you had done first, these feelings must be overtaken. Defeat the feeling of “the absence of priority . . . . Stand on the shoulders of giants.”
- 2) You must overtake, you must consume, that which has gone before. “You take strength from the parent by eating the parent. You honor the parent by eating the parent.”
- 3) Eating the parent makes the parent part of the child. Consider, what is the parent? What is your parent, the parent of your work, the parent of the sentence you are writing right now?
- 4) When you fashion each sentence to consume the previous sentence, each sentence, in a way, becomes the first, the attack sentence. “The sentence I’m putting down must contend with the prior sentence.”
- 5) Through such contention and consumption is irony born.
- 6) Yes, this is very, very hard work. “Priority is truly the undoing of us all.”
- 7) Each sentence struggles against each sentence, each story contends with each story, and through such struggle and contention, your work is made stronger.

“Refactoring” — searching for better ways to put a thing. There is always a better way. “If you refactor, you don’t have to invent.”

Always be prepared to overtake, argue with, and undercut what you just wrote. Cultivate a memory for what you have written, so you learn to almost automatically capitalize on resonances phonemic, morphemic, and thematic.

You are always showing one whole object, but piece by piece, its wholeness implicit, its every part contingent upon its every other part, such contingency leaving the reader ever alert to the wholeness of your object.

To be the only one who speaks, go far — “You can’t go far enough.”

“You can’t go far enough.”

“You can’t go far enough.”

“You can’t go far enough.”

“You can’t go far enough.”

Get way the hell out there. DO NOT BE AFRAID — YOU SIMPLY CANNOT GO FAR ENOUGH.

You must write with consecution, so that each sentence follows naturally from each preceding sentence, but the range of what constitutes consecution is broad. You want to swerve and torque, going forwards by looking backwards.

“Please, for pity’s sake, read slowly, write slowly.”

Pronouns give mystery, but when misused, they are weightless; nouns possess less mystery, but more weight. Pronouns do not gain mystery automatically, but must be invested with it by the way they function within the piece.

Each part of your writing must resonate with every other part of your writing, throughout your life.

Never defer to other stories in your stories — this undermines your authority.

Reinvent what is prior — do not be in service to what is prior.

“There’s no end to the labor. There’s no end to the labor. There’s no end to the labor. There’s no end to the labor. But isn’t that wonderful?”

“You must learn to see things in a many-eyed way.” You overcome the priority of what has gone before by looking at it anew, finding a new view. As you compose, you constantly ask yourself, “What else might I say?” You “unpack your objects . . . . You unname and rename.”

The moment you write a sentence, you look down the line to negate it, but you take the source, the seed, the root of this negation from what you have already written in the piece.

“Render the thing such that we are meant to see it.”

“It isn’t enough to be a writer — be a *re*-writer.”

You must be most careful about the consistencies of various voices, especially the authorial voice, if your authority is to be maintained. If you do not have authority on the page, you have nothing on the page.

Being a great writer is little more than learning how to move the words around; how to put them in, how to take them out.

You must be attentive to consecution in every detail.

“Your task is to develop intimate relations with the reader.”

In no small way, you are engaged in an act of self-psychoanalysis.

Your attack sentence is a provoking sentence; you then follow it with a series of provoking sentences.

Speaking of `then,' leave off with using `then'. Same goes with `later.' These go without saying, following from the very structure of a piece of prose — of course it happened then, and of course it happened later. Same with `after a while.' If it was later, if it was after a while, write it out. Tell when it was.

OCTOBER 25, 1990

“If anybody can see your sentence better than you can see your sentence, you do not own it — they own it.”

Attention to detail is of importance paramount. As in the work of a great painter, it is in the brush strokes that the presence of the artist can most strongly be perceived.

On the matter of courage: the writer must come to grips with his deepest knowledge of herself. “Undoing the self is the greatest jeopardy,” but without this jeopardy, there is not greatness as a writer to be had. “Truly, on the page, you can get away with anything, anything, anything. It’s just words . . . . You must be liberated from this fear to have the life of a literary artist.” Don’t pull your punches — there is nothing to be gained from it, and greatness to be lost. Don’t hold back.

Address “the objects that are at the center of you.” There are only a few of them, of these truly vital objects of yours. Turn to them, speak to them, speak of them.

“If you can learn to follow Emerson, you will be a great artist.”

The only stories to write are the stories that come from “that centrality that is ineluctably you.”

“Speak from your center of gravity.”

Refactoring has nothing to do with a thesaurus; throw your fucking thesaurus away, if you have one, and throw away every fucking thesaurus that might be foolish enough to cross your path. Refactoring has to do with re-using the same words, the same tightly-focused idea, the same phoneme or morpheme, repeatedly in altered contexts. This refactoring is the turning of a chosen unit into a trope.

“You wanna be a great bullshitter. For God.”

Write like a jazz musician plays.

“The art of all art is making out of a meagerness a muchness.”

You hit repeatedly upon your initial conditions, following non-linear dynamics.

You don’t need much. All you need are stamina, will, desire, confidence, and courage.

Never think you need to stop learning — don’t get soft! Get hard, and harder still.

You also need patience, the patience to develop power on the page. The more powerful you become, the quicker you will become.

“You must have infinite respect for the infinitesimally small, because, believe me, it’s waiting for you to fuck up.”

Fuck plot. “There are only two plots anyway — there’s Cinderella, and there’s Moby-Dick.” Therefore, be careful with the revealing of the news. The more you tell, the less you give your reader.

“It’s like music, it’s like painting, it’s like engineering, this making of well-wrought prose fiction.” Ascertain within yourself the cadence which you can tap into when you compose your sentences. “You dress in harmony — write in harmony.”

Cadence!

Pressure!

“It is not about writing, this thing that you are doing — it is about composition. Com. Po. Si. Tion.”

It is about knowing what to put in and what to leave out, and knowing that knowing what to leave out is just as important as knowing what to put in.

From each moment to each moment as you write, leave yourself free to abandon whatever direction you think you may be taking, and write opportunistically. Throw away your plots, throw away your history of you, and write from your heart.

A convenient piece of narration which then moves directly into conversation is “the death of so many stories.” It’s a set-up smacking of its phoniness, and is structurally weak. If your structure is A to B to C to B to C, etc., instead of A to A<sub>1</sub> to A<sub>2</sub> to A<sub>3</sub>, etc., you are not building on your initial conditions, you are not unpacking your object, you are not creating a self-sustaining world.

There is a certain amount of authority in the negative assertion, eg, ‘I want to tell you this story but I don’t know how it ends.’

You want to make as many points of contact with the reader as possible. Metatextuality is one way to do this.

Position yourself as an artist with respect to what is going on around you in all media of art, as the best of that art expresses the human heart.

The English language is a lot larger than the confines within which most writers work and move, larger both in vocabulary and in its structural possibilities. Being a hybrid of Teutonic and Romance languages provides to English great structural flexibility

and a natural musicality. If you start listening for the musicality, for the cadences and the phonemes, you will find the structure opening up for you as you write. As for vocabulary, witness Shakespeare, who used four times as many words as most writers use — no few of which words he coined himself. Be a regent if you dare, rule the language and mint the new coin of its realm.

OCTOBER 30, 1990

What happens between the reader and the writer has more to do with form than with narrative — all the stories have been told, and anyway, there are only two of them.

You must be able to feel greatly while maintaining an ironic distance — you must be able to be in the place where the mountain both is and is not. You cannot create an effect on the page if you are a victim of the feeling you are trying to recreate. This does not mean that you do not feel this feeling; rather, this means that you write as a schizophrenic, or as a lusty lover, a lover who sincerely pleads, ‘Oh, baby, please, you are everything to me, you are my *joie de vivre* and my *raison d’etre*,’ while at the same time thinking, ‘One more line like that and I’ll have the pants peeled right off this babe.’ While you are writing you learn, as a dancer dancing dances learns, to make the precise moves necessary to generate an effect which you do not feel in the moment, though of course it lives in your heart and you know you are creating it and what it feels like. The only reality for you in creating is the will to create; the will to do your best, phoneme by phoneme; the will to power on the page. You don’t have it and somebody else does? Tough shit. You don’t make the canon. You don’t become immortal even as would be and befit a god. Great effect will live in your writing if all you feel is desire to be great as a writer. That’s all — seduce and subdue, that’s all. Words fail in themselves and because of themselves to express emotion, to illumine the truly human side of human being, but taken as a whole, as a story, as an artistic form, they can provide such illumination. Remember, it’s not content that counts, not what’s-this-about, but form that counts — you take care of the form and the content will take care of itself.

A work of art is not an expression of feeling, but is the demonstration of the artist’s knowledge of many feelings. Thereby is your connection to your audience made, for whether we like it or not, we all feel all there is to feel.

You don’t want to make a static thing, you want to make a dynamic form, intentional in the phenomenological sense, a form the truth from which emerges in the interaction between you and it and the reader, a form with a life of its own, a form that will endure as long as endures the human heart.

You create such a dynamic form when you interact with your story as you compose it, as you swerve, as you torque, as you consecute, unpacking and turning back to look and look again, to see and see anew — you make a motor that starts every time somebody reads it. It’s a virtual entity. This entity will reveal to the reader profundities you would have missed entirely had you aimed directly at attempting to reveal them.

If you reach a point in a piece where you have an obvious situation developing, you’ve narrowed your story down to two choices — either it happens, or it doesn’t,

and you have become predictable. Be not predictable. Keep your reader guessing, keep your reader on seat's edge, keep your reader coming back for more and still more.

You do not want to explain a thing. "You want to bewitch by the preservation of mystery."

You undercut your authority by declaring a plain facticity with overwrought prose. Decongest your pages. Triple space. Leave wide margins. Use paragraphing the same way you would use any other trick of your trade — play with it, make it work for you, not confine you. The white spaces count, too — you are making a visually-perceived work of art. Play with it.

Don't turn your trade tricks simply because you can. Too many writers move from clever trick to clever trick because they can do that, and because that is all they can do. Instead, ask yourself, "Is this trick really necessary?"

Just as you can never go too far, you can never be too tough on yourself. You must learn to look and see if what you are writing is appropriate to the form of your story, or if it is mere decoration, empty and pointless fluff. Your work "must be shorn of everything that is incidental."

As for symbolism, you make the piece a symbol in itself through powerful form — nothing else will achieve this symbol-making effect.

What you are doing is not about self-expression — it is about obtaining dominion over the reader, about obtaining power on the page.

"Your job is to be larger than you are."

If you have an argument, a point to make, an ideology, some trendy political correctness, you weaken your work. If you have no other point than making a piece of art powerful and true, said piece becomes its own point.

NOVEMBER 1, 1990

If you consecute, if you refactor, if you unpack your object, if what comes next is a function of what you have already put on the page, form is inevitable.

What you are making is a virtual object — more than the artist, the viewer, or the object, it is the interaction between the three, and the ever-shifting contexts within which they are embedded.

Ultimately, what this is about is the human heart.

You want your work to have the status of a symbol, a sign. You must write from a position of authority to be possessed by, in possession of, and liberated from your object — and ultimately “the object is `what does it feel like to be alive?” Liberation from your object is achieved through maintaining an ironic distance from yourself. Liberate yourself from your own feelings. Lose your moral center. Adopt a stance of continuous disavowal, in your mind, on the page, in your life. Don’t be captured by one feeling — be filled by all feeling. Take whatever position you need to take in order to make your work work. Your ambition must be uncontained. Your desire must be to be God. “It’s all about your determination to become immortal.”

Don’t do the best that you can do, do the best that can be done. Unbind your ambition, free yourself from whatever hold your object may have over you and instead have hold of your object — remain bound to it. When you work on a story, remain bound to that story — think about it, dream about it, fold it up and carry it in your purse, on your person, next to your heart, so you can work on it.

“You must be psychotically ambitious.”

You must free yourself from your own pettiness.

“‘I am the maker of worlds, I am the destroyer of worlds.’” It is important to throw your old work away. It is *so* important. To create you must be able, with equal desire and aplomb, to destroy. You are not making private fetish objects. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by throwing away work that does not work. The form of your art will always be with you, if you remain with it — if you remain “open for business.”

“All the piece has to do is say, ‘Be with me — I am with you.’ Sometimes I am fucking profound.”

Contemporary popular prose fiction is simply folklore, not art. How do you free yourself from the folklore? “‘How do you get out of your time?’ is the fundamental problem of the great artist.”

Pressure in every line! Reinvent the language to suit your own purposes!

“Style is a defect writ large.”

Beware this common failure in writers: an exorbitant attack sentence that peters out. If you start out high, you have to go even higher. If you start out low, you have more room in which to move. `The table held the book' looks more promising now. “All you gotta do is be a believer!”

Reinvent the syntax, redeploy the sentence.

Go all the way, be extravagant, be bold! The trick is, don't be sentimental — be ironic.

The more mystery you leave, the more persuasive you are, the more human you are. “You're not writing a legal brief.”

When you use adjectives, bring them to nouns in new ways. Shun the “received text.”

“Try to be alert to the ruin that comes on when the piece becomes linear.” You need consecution, not linearity.

In “the I-mode of discourse,” never talk about your feelings or thoughts. You most need to objectify when you are in the “I-mode.” To express feelings and thoughts, you find for them their “objective correlatives;” for example, you describe a person by describing her walls. “You have to present an object that we take to be a symbol for feeling.”

“You come down to objects that are rampant on the heart.” If these objects have an innate energy for you, so too for the reader they will.

“It's essential to render the object with great precision.”

“You don't ever want to take the moral high ground.” If you accuse someone of a crime, immediately accuse yourself of ten crimes worse. Do not use the page to get even with people — use it to get even with death.

Your goal: “Absolute, supreme control over what your stuff is.”

It's just like learning to drive a car, this learning to have power on the page. It will become part of you, and you will wonder that you ever wrote as you once did.

NOVEMBER 6, 1990

You cannot go too far. In the face of death, you cannot be too obsessive or excessive. “One has to be an artist all the time.”

Are you adding to the noise or saying something that must be said?

The importance of a story, its timeless, signal self, is almost antagonistic to the event or the news or the locale. “You want to produce a sign that is holistically ingestible.”

The act of responding to non-discursive, or pre-discursive, signs has deeper roots in us than do our responses to discursive signs; roots rooted in the survival of our specific and genetic ancestors, roots extending now into, among other things, our responses to art.

“You have to be willing to dip into the pettiness of narrative without being entrapped by it.”

Do not love your work so much that you become imprisoned in worship of idols in a temple of your own making; be a high priest in the religion of Art; be a creator of worlds and a destroyer of worlds. Overcome yourself, which overcoming should become an increasingly difficult task. “You mustn’t ever become a believer in what you have done.”

We are like ruminants, we artists — eating anew and mixing it with our cud, chewing over and over — “And look what we get out of it: ice cream! With chocolate syrup on it!”

“Let `em see your tits. They’ve seen them all anyway, it’s not gonna hurt.”

You never have to worry about what’s going to happen next; you don’t have to wonder what to concoct; simply express what’s implied in what you have already written.

“Art is a religion. It is its own justification. It needs no other. I do it to save my ass.”

NOVEMBER 8, 1990

“Sentimentality is a kind of fraudulence.” Even love stories can be told if you tell the truth completely; if you can strip yourself naked. Usually, though, “one will show the wart that everyone can see anyway, the one here on your face — see? See, everybody? This is my wart, right here. But will one show the suppurating sore next to the genitals? Not likely. Not likely.”

You do not engage in confession, you perform affirmation.

“A bit of madness can’t be seen as a great liability.”

Soul — “that irreducible presence . . . . You have to put your soul out there.” You, as an artist, “are re-enacting the Christ story.” You have to put out, all out.

“The very nature of sentimentality is fraudulence . . . . It’s play-acting . . . . True feeling can never be sentimentality.”

“You’ve got to be alive” on the page, forthcoming, “unafraid of declaration . . . . This writing business is not about being polite . . . it’s not about idle chatter . . . . You could do much worse than being crucified on the page . . . . There’s a large thing called control, there’s a large thing called composition, but first and foremost there’s touching yourself.” How can you truly be an artist if you don’t touch yourself? “You can’t fail if you’re speaking from your seat of power,” and at that locus is your soul.

Regarding the deployment of the “essentially ironic disposition” of the lusting lover, the cynical seducer — “As an artist you have to grapple with this bifurcation of minds.”

With subtlety, alertness, “a lot of giving away,” soul, you end up giving your soul to yourself on the page.

As for the agon, the irony, between your authenticity and your inauthenticity, read and write with “a deep, deep sense of this.”

The more oppressed you feel by language, the better off you are. “You must feel yourself oppressed by the absurdity, the ineffability, of human experience.”

“What do I mean by ‘Make a good getaway of it?’” This is what the artist wants: to get away, but to get away cleanly; to escape every time to “more life!”

With luck, stamina, work, if you “re-address the object, you can never go wrong.” “It’s always the most reliable thing” to return to your first sentence and commence to unpack it some more if — when — you get stuck or get lost.

“Your job as a writer is to resurrect the language, reclaim the language.”

Don't be lazy; shun cliché; “write it out.”

You *must be careful* what you claim to know in your piece. What is the “conduit of knowledge?” How do you know what you claim to know?

`That' versus `this': `that' puts objects at a distance from the reader; `this' has more pressure, putting objects in the reader's face.

“Always stay on the surface of your object.” If you dive under the surface, you lose momentum, you lose the bond of understanding you assume with your reader, which bond is that of harmonious prelingual love. “Many, many ills await the writer who goes under the surface.” We live in a time when what lies beneath surfaces must remain essentially unknown to us.

Be careful about having your so-called characters smile and laugh; for example, `she smiled,' `he laughs.' It's a lazy revelation of the dirty underwear of your technique. Write it out — what did they do while smiling, what did they say while laughing? Be extreme, go all the way to the general or the specific. `Laughing,' `smiling,' `he looked at her,' these are dodges, “in the limp middle.”

Build your story like you're stacking blocks.

You want impedance, you want rebuking — you do not want linearity, “you want turbulence.” Contend with your object.

“There are scribblers everywhere — the thing is to be great.”

NOVEMBER 13, 1990

“The artist is no more than a solicitor and an abandoner.” The great artist, the strong artist, is entirely insincere about anything other than “the theater of being God.” Ironic, playful, slippery is the great artist; she plays a game with himself, believing while remaining in ironic agon with disbelief. Artists cannot be sincere; furthermore, they should not. We are “damned by our own wiliness.”

If you saw yourself as completely fraudulent, what would you write about?

Solutions to problems arising in the creation of a piece are “always present in what is already deployed” in that piece, and are simple and intrinsic to the piece.

Your closing phoneme should have resonances further up in the closing paragraph, and the cadence must be “spot-on.”

Preserve mystery! Skimp on the news!

Follow the intrinsic logic of what you say and what it implies.

To make the piece a non-discursive, holistic symbol, there should be nothing in the piece which does not *need* to be there.

“The idea is always, first and foremost, to render the object. Make them see what you see.”

You should always write what is most difficult for you — that is where to put your pen, in the difficult place. Do what cannot be done.

“Timing is everything. It is everything!” Cadences, harmonies, revelations — the dance of words. Dilate sentences without putting in more news, to relax and extend the sentences harmoniously; adverbially, not adjectivally, but adverbially, to bring more clarity to the sentences — adjectives bring particularity, slowing a piece down to its detriment.

Placing adverbial components at the beginning of a sentence sounds as if you’re begging for permission to speak; otherwise, in other places adverbial components can dilate a sentence to produce better timing, allowing the punch-line to work.

How to write a novel : Gordon told us our first night of class how to write a novel; he knew no few of us were thinking, “When do we get to the good part?” It is really very simple, this good part, this how to do it. You start with a strong opening line, an attack sentence that really attacks. You look backward to go forward, writing one sentence at a time, swerving and torquing, each sentence following from what has gone before in the work. You write with scope, bringing the universal out of the

particular; with stance, from a point of view, a tone of voice, a place of yours that marks you off as different from everybody else; and with authority, so that of the authorial voice the reader has no doubt. You open your heart and never chicken out. Winning or losing in this game of making the canon, of making great art, is a matter of paying attention to details. Check your work exquisitely, always convinced that you are missing some mistake you need to find and correct.

“Insomnia is a gift. Worry. If you are sleeping the sleep of the achieved, something is wrong. Smugness is what will do you in every time.”

The “I-mode”, the first-person singular, is the most powerful mode of story-telling, and the easiest to up-fuck. When in the “I-mode,” suppress the “I”, using it as little as possible.

“You can always see in the work of a second-rater” that point at which he became frightened by his vision and chickened out.

Slow down, go slow, take your time and unpack your object, filling up your sentences with pressure and congestion, making every phoneme count.

Every time you return to your object, you revise (as in ‘see again’), you rotate, you refactor, you enlarge.

English is so nifty, manipulation of syntax is always possible, and such manipulation expands the musical possibilities of the language.

“As soon as you explain you have driven the drama out of it.” Exposition is for essays — the uncanny cannot abide explanation, nor can the weird.

You want to dilate your object, ever refactoring and unpacking, and at its best your dilation should be a multi-dimensional dilation of your text as a whole.

Your relation to your language must move from your having a set of learnings, your parroting of received text, to your being an owner of language, a proprietor of speech.

NOVEMBER 15, 1990

“You must begin to feel very proprietary towards the English language.”

“In the business of world-making, logic is everything. The essence of the task at hand is world-making.” Do not confuse a relating of perceived reality with this making of worlds — there is no translation. You are starting from scratch. “Nothing is known prior to your utterance.” This is of central importance — you write of reality, of the reality of human being, the reality of the human heart, but you are not transcribing reality; rather, you are making worlds. Your reader is tabula rasa to your work. Your work is a world turned in upon itself. Nothing can be there that you don’t put there, so be careful about what you put there, and be careful about what you assume is there but is, in fact, in the eye of your mind and not in the words on your page. Think of what you are doing as being no different from writing a computer program, or writing the rules to a game.

Following from this, employ attribution to speaker when you write dialogue. ‘She said,’ ‘he said,’ all their sibling saids, these are basically extended punctuation, not to mention polite. It is rude to your reader to leave unclear who is speaking — if you wish it to remain unclear, say so: ‘ . . . , someone said, someone whose sex, whose age, whose weight, someone whose anything at all beyond being possessed of voice, could not be told simply from the sound of this voice.’

Do not assume anything of the reader. Like Euclidean geometry, the work of art is a self-referential system. “If what you have written must depend upon a prior actuality, it is not whole unto itself . . . . You want something which is valid in its own terms . . . a closed system. A closed system. Not an open system.” A piece written this way, as a world unto itself, as monolith, this piece will be even stronger and more realistic in its impact than a piece purporting to report on a series of actual events — it will be a piece become symbol for the world itself.

So you wanna be a writer? So whadderya gonna write about? You are going to place your pen at that point which most threatens your sense of stability, and write from there.

Fuck plot; fuck the telling of your life; your life will be told, your plan will reveal itself from itself and in interaction with itself. “Your only teleology when you sit down at the page should be dominion” — dominion over the page, over the language, over yourself, over your audience.

The key to power on the page, greatness in art, is yourself — knowing yourself, being true to yourself, and revealing yourself. “In declaring your self, you invoke them selves.”

You must consider the question, “Do you love sentences more than you love anything else?” You must consider this question every fucking minute for the rest of your miserable writer’s life. You must answer this question in a manner honest and direct.

Travel tip — “Men sleep naked, not nude.”

Get a good grammar and marry it!

Avoid the self-indulgence of continually adding anew in a piece, of continually throwing in more news; instead, reinvent upon your initial conditions.

About writing that is “as pretty as flowers . . . . Let the flowers be crushed. Let the perfume be released.”

“Mystery is at the very center of what engages the fictional transaction . . . but writing is not about telling; it is about showing, and not showing everything.” Do not explain, do not tell what `characters’ are thinking. You want to create the effect of an apparition before the reader; you are the god of the page with your Byzantine smile. It’s just like sex — you don’t say, `Okay, now I’m going to lean in and kiss you on your mouth, and my mouth is going to be open so I hope yours is too, and I’ll touch my tongue lightly to your lips then kiss your closed eyes, and oh, while I’m doing this, I’ll reach one arm around you, brushing your nipple and breast as I move to pull you closer, and while I’m doing all this, you’ll shift in your seat and reach one hand between my legs....’ Sounds like great fun, but you don’t say it, you just do it. Same with making art on the page, the old `Don’t tell it, show it.’

What are your options, since the stories have all been told? To be of the first rank, you must transcend what has gone before, while making your work resonate with what is timeless in what has gone before.

“The job is to make them see what you see, not to tell them what you see.” It’s harder than it sounds.

“You want to have something that is worthy of your death, worthy of your death. You want every story to be your last.” This cannot be stressed enough. You will die tonight, and what will you leave behind? Will you leave behind you even one shining star?

“Be a worshipper, on your knees before everything, judging nothing, explaining nothing.”

When you go to make your sentences, “Go to a hard place. Go to the hardest place you can find.”

Never, but never, fall in love with yourself. You can and will do wrong, everywhere, and certainly upon the page.

“Stay right on the top. Give nothing away.” Stay tight. Stay crisp.

“Being the god of the page is a social transaction, and all the rules of social transactions apply here, too.”

You must be absolutely convinced that you are “entitled to speak the best sentence ever spoken.” You alone are so entitled! Everyone else is a usurper of your privilege and your right! You await no permission, you await no one’s prior turn!

“Show and show and show. `You don’t get it? Fuck you.’ The right ones will get it.”

You really don’t need more than three objects in your attack sentence. Here’s an attack sentence with three objects: `There is nothing.’ Acoustically, it’s weak, being a four-beat sentence ending on a downbeat, which downbeat is also a nasal stop. A more acoustically pleasing sentence might be, for example, `There is not one single thing.’ As far as objects go, you can’t do much better than `There is nothing.’ Well, yeah, you could — you could do something concrete. But still, from `There is nothing,’ where could you go? You could go to `Here is everything.’ You could go to `Here there is even less.’ You could go to `There always was nothing, there always will be nothing.’

One of the worst things you can do in your writing is give in to the temptation to get back at people. Worse yet, it’s easy to do this without realizing you are doing this, with even the thought that what you are engaged in is not petty revenge, but is something else. It is very difficult to speak from your heart without hurting people; but when you speak from your heart, you don’t say, `You are a despicable person, weak and a failure, deservedly lonely and full of deserved hurt for failing in so many ways so many who have loved you.’ Rather, you say, `I am a despicable person, a weakling, failed and empty of all save my loneliness and my hurt, as I have betrayed and abandoned all who wanted nothing more than to love me and find in me a constance, a presence, a verity strong.’ And your reader reads this message and responds with, `Yes, yes, I too have failed, I too am filled with pain, now it’s all coming back and I feel it all over again.’ You’ve touched your reader, pushed the catharsis button, made him want to cry in your lap, made her want to hug you and stroke your hair.

Really, it works. Make yourself the lowest of the low, and you will find yourself elevated above all others, to godlike heights.

NOVEMBER 27, 1990

“There is never any getting it right.” You live and work in a world “that is fraught with compromise and ill-will.” Steel yourself now, if you really want to grab for the brass ring, if you really want to piss with the big dogs, if you really intend to put fire to your pen and attempt to make the canon, steel yourself now for what the critics will say, what they will write. Not a week goes by when someone doesn’t get thoroughly trashed in a major review; if you’re going to make it, your time will come, for “if a fool looks into a book, can a wise man look out?” You will always be tempted to temper your vision by the reactions of the world around you, “which celebrates mediocrity.” As the years go by, it will become more and more difficult, this struggle to stick to your art, to your excellence. You will be set upon by mediocre people — “Mediocre people support mediocre people, and they support mediocre objects.”

If you are utterly possessed by your object, as you must be to begin writing it out, but you are having difficulty rendering it, don’t give it up. Keep turning it and turning it until you get your handle. Don’t try to approach your object as anyone other than yourself. And the object must be your object. “You cannot enter somebody else’s thing . . . . It is monstrously insensitive” to think that you can.

“Whatever it is that is vexing you is your own private thing.”

“Ninety-nine and forty-four one-hundredths percent of the objects out there are false objects” because the artist falsely apprehends the object. You must learn to recognize what is false about your apprehension of your object, and turn and turn your object until you find the true way in. Don’t make it up — don’t pretend. If your object really grabs you, you will find the key. “We all know frauds, and we detest them.”

“You are never ever going to achieve force if you are inexact. You must be precise.”

Form, format, structural concerns, these are what is central to art; for example, sentence structure. Know your grammar! Watch your structure! Know your parts! Structure produces meaning — it produces the symbol which is the art object. For example, if you use fragments, use them often or not at all; for example, do you want to have a sentence with an adverbial prepositional phrase followed immediately by a sentence with an adjectival prepositional phrase?

“It becomes what it becomes, a powerful artistic event, as a result of its structural properties.” You must have “a working understanding of the musicality of the language.”

Your form must be non-normative if you are to stand out in the crowd.

“You’re out there by yourself. Not a happy place to be. The only thing to do is the work.”

“You can do any God damn fucking thing you want.” That is, if you do it right.

Stay on the body. Write it out.

In the “I-mode,” do not analyze your state of mind.

You know when it’s beginning to drag, when you are running out of steam, when you are becoming vapid — that’s the point at which to look back at what you have written and refactor it. Decide, “Where’s the dangerous place to go?” Go there. Raise the stakes. You want to do that which cannot be done.

Beware of doing the easy thing — dipping into the received language.

Explain only in a manner which actually deepens the mystery. “The reader loves the enigmatic, because the enigmatic becomes numinous.”

“Everything should be a provocation.”

“The oxymoronic tension,” for example, “He sold the keys to a woman with no hands.”

“In the deepest sense, art is putting like with like, and like with unlike” (which is not the same as putting together two discrete nonrelations).

When you reach the end of a sentence, and you repeat there a word used in that sentence or in close auditory context, “there is a curious kind of abatement.” Like with like, to be sure, but be careful with like with identical.

It’s problematic in a piece to go back in time, and if you do, don’t stay there long.

NOVEMBER 29, 1990

‘Unpacking the object’ is to get at what is in the object that tells the truth about the object; and that truth is, ultimately, the truth of the human heart.

Conflict is essential. The only way to think of a sentence is in conflict with every other sentence. The only way to think of writing is in conflict with every other writer.

Not just any kind of conflict will do. You want conflict that touches the mystery of human being, not stuff like social conflict — beware the political agenda of any given time. The true, grand political agenda is human being.

Look for the “remarkable self-contradiction inherent in us.” Always look for the nullifying polarities.

Your story must display that it and you know what the story’s object is. “A story must be about what it is about, and continue to be about what it is about.”

Look for dialectical opposites, for the dynamic of the Tao.

If you have foresight in your writing, as opposed to looking back to go forward, the foresight you should allow yourself is the looking for the dialectic. Look ahead only to see what you can oppose to what you just wrote.

When you write your best, you have found “the solution to the problem of yourself.”

“You cannot be every writer that ever was. You can only be the writer only you can be; but in so being, you can be better than any writer that ever was.”

“What is the error in yourself?” Find it, develop it fractally, *a la* non-linear dynamics, to create “a protestation of your error.” You repress everything else to reveal what you otherwise keep repressed. You get a style — “the solution for oneself.”

The error is that which is not normative in you. You must speak from a place of non-normativity in order to stand out.

The solution for yourself comes from “the wrongness in you.”

God damn it — **be bold!**

If your work is to work, it must work the way your mind works — the way your mind really works, deep down inside your secret loathsome self.

“You will always be imperfect against an authority outside yourself.”

“You must want to be someplace else, to take somebody there.”

“You have to want to be elsewhere, yourself. Think of Milton, think of Whitman, and take us there — take us there.”

“There must be some kind of contract between the writer and something durable, something eternal, something enduring.”

“The structure must be balanced, balanced, balanced.” Develop an ear for the sense of equality and order in your work, and remember, balanced does not mean entropic.

The more possessed by your object you are, the more powerful you are. And your object has to be *your object* — not anyone else’s, not the contents of the evening news, not the politically correct.

Your work, if it is to work, must be contiguous with you, and in others it must resonate.

And, you must have character, courage, steadfastness, dedication. Haven’t got them? Get out now. Go do something else with your life.

“You get a riff, you keep a riff going . . . . And what does the story do then? It begins to write itself!”

Refactoring! “It’s by working what the language offers up. The language is everything . . . . The language is an engine insuperably more powerful than you are . . . . Keep agitating your thoughts about language; keep agitating your relationship with language.”

Language — “Let it come on you. Invite it to come on you. Let it come on you, this demon.”

Don’t start with ‘Then.’ “Of course it’s ‘then’ — it’s next.”

Don’t go beneath the surface — “Never, never comment.”

Picture a sentence as a bow, as in bow and arrow, and this bow is strung. Such is a picture of the shape and tension a sentence must bear.

“The job when you are on the page is to be a proper respondent to the object.”

“Torque” is veering away from what has gone before. “Swerve” is contending with what has gone before. “Torque will get you home free,” because through employing

torque you will eventually reach a point which naturally obtains closure on your beginning. Swerving “requires thought that is antagonistic with where you’ve been.” Swerving is wrestling with what is prior. “An extension of the poetics of combat.”

“You can’t go wrong throwing away, there’s much to be said for throwing away, you can’t throw enough away.” You must slough off old skin, banish bad habits, clear the decks for the action that is to come. Shit it out and flush it down. You will lose only what you do not need, only what will poison your writing by holding onto it, and you will gain ... not much — only power, focus, control and confidence, to name a few.

As you work on a piece, picture yourself as a performer spinning plates on sticks. You have to keep them going, and get new ones going, keeping the old ones going, running, frantic, back and forth and back.

Don’t go back in time in a piece. If you do, you are engaging in exposition, and taking away from forward momentum. If you need the past, you must pick up the bits and pieces of it as you go forward.

“It is first, authority; and second, stance. The news is tertiary, if even that important.”

“You must deliver a persona. The writer’s voice must be somewhere in the cosmos.”

“You’ve got to be somewhere.”

You have to go beyond being gifted, beyond being articulate, and mess with the itty bitty stuff — the language, its cadences, stops, syntax, like/like, like/unlike — you must not be content to write, you must demand to compose.

You take your initial sentence, your object, and you extrude and extrude, unpack and unpack, reflect and reflect, all in ways thematically and formally akin to the ways in the attack, the opening, the initial sentence.

Write out, by hand, sentences from a good writer’s work. Diagram the relationships among the parts.

DECEMBER 4, 1990

What one wants to feel in possession of is the necessary form of the work.

If you concentrate on your object, all day long and in your dreams at night, your object will provide you with the revelations you seek. Avoid hopping from story to story without finishing one first. There is a fallacy that one should put work away for a while, get some distance from it. Don't you believe it. You must be intimate with your work, you must know it better than anyone else, you must grow sick of it, you must be married to it and you must divorce it, you must worry it to death, you must bring it to life.

A plotted piece "will always be inferior to . . . an accrual system" which always refers to itself. As for the news, information is entropic. Information interferes with "the activity of the sign." For the piece to be a "holistic event that is wholly perceived in a dynamic manner," use less information, reveal fewer bits of tid. "The more information given, the less meaningful it is." Meaning is revealed of a piece, not piece by piece. "You have to begin to view information with suspicion." Gordon has no use, as far as I can tell, for isms, and denies he teaches a minimalism, unless it is a kind "of minimalism leached" of the typical crap, a minimalism only because "the information that is conveyed is reduced to the absolute minimum." What you get when you reduce the information is "authority, stance, persuasion, the percussiveness of the human heart, the percussiveness of the American language."

You want "a dynamic, nonlinear" process to produce works that will be "the most glorious possible."

Write your error large and you have art. "Reach into your quirkiness of a more basal kind . . . . What is the quirkiness that is at the very bottom of your language?" This is what you want to tap into — "the song inside your head."

"Information is entropy and entropy is bad news."

Information is what comes into a piece anew, as opposed to what comes into a piece as a facet of what is already there in the piece. Ask yourself, when you start to give information, "Is this necessary? Is it "prime?" If it is, "it must go from beginning to end." If it does not so go, leave it on the cutting room floor.

"In lieu of information, what goes on the page? The swerved revision of what was prior." This revision must be performed with concentration on authority and stance. As for form, you don't proceed from design, but to design. For what reason do you want to constrict yourself, your work, from the start? "To protect yourself from the vertigo of doing art," to chicken out, "to have addresses you can call on . . . out of terror."

Proceeding to design produces an artifact that is “full of danger, unpredictable, vital, and informed of a deep, pervading structure . . . . It’s order is a result of — get this — desire.” Not of forethought — by the time you get to your foreseen, plotted and planned destination, you might quite likely no longer desire it.

Non-linear dynamics are key. Non-linear dynamics are more popularly known as ‘chaos theory,’ and fractal geometry is one of the better-known applications of this theory. If you proceed in a non-linear manner, you will produce a piece that is profoundly structured, achieving its structure only by being created, not by being planned or plotted or painted by the numbers. The metaphors involved in such work are “metaphors of allusion.” These are not the old academic metaphors, but are the refactoring, in self-reflecting agon, of what has been already set down in the piece. You end up with a piece appearing irrational, and reflecting the irrationality which is at the root of human being, but “this irrationality proceeds from the rational method” of non-linear refactoring. These self-reflective agons are truer to the soul. Here is an example “that couldn’t be more precise: ‘He gave the keys to the man who wanted to open the lock’ is linear; ‘He gave the keys to the man who had no hands’” is non-linear, is swerving, is ironic. “It’s a version, a very profound version, of irony . . . . Irony is simply the defeat of expectation,” insofar as the object is turned back on itself.

“Control is at every point the energy from which the structure is created.”

“Control is best seen as awareness.”

“Metaphor is at the very center of prose fiction, but not that kind of metaphor;” not the metaphor of “childish obfuscation . . . . The way to make great metaphors is to be as literal, as literal, as literal as you can get.” As for the other kind of metaphor, “for you to begin with this adolescent quaintness, this encoding, is to make a terrible, terrible mistake . . . . Say what it is. If it’s one, say one. If it’s two, say two. Chinese wisdom is very useful on this point — ‘A white horse is not a horse’ . . . . True metaphor exists in the tension between the terms, and in the congestion within the terms.”

Opening with an adverbial clause will always give you less prestige, less power, and will seem to be asking permission from the reader, asking the reader to please believe.

“The point is your object,” and any exposition takes away from that object. Such exposition is unnecessary information, and directly contrary to the maintenance of the mystery of the object. “Writing is bullshit anyway. If you’re offering explanations to make it more plausible,” you’re being foolish. You’re already fucking in front of the mirror — don’t make it any more ridiculous than it already is. Writing is nothing more than the attempt “of a vain, aggressive personality trying to impose his will on the group.... Let’s not kid ourselves;” let’s remember what is real here — words on a page

— not characters, not places, not events. “*No word that you put down is true to the reality that is out there — it can’t be.... You can’t utter a true word.*” Words themselves are the signs that block the way to which they point, the glass through which you can see but not grasp. Don’t worry about making the truth, and don’t aim at it. “Your job is to make a good composition.”

“God is in there in all those details” — in the phonemes, the morphemes, the cadences, the stops, commas and on and on. “The gross stuff, that’s easy. You want to get those details down.”

“The performance must be mad.”

“Discover the place of greatest jeopardy.”

“If it sits there inertly, it is simply information, it is entropy.”

“You want the sign. You want an unmixed state.” Take a lesson from traffic signs.

“Who can come up and flip a coin and make it come out heads each time? That’s a wizard, that’s God who can do that. That’s your task. It is very hard. It requires labor. It requires enormous concentration. It requires discipline.”

“When you do a piece of fiction disjunctive with the world, the more it becomes a world of its own.”

About the academic literary establishment — “They’ll all eat their fucking words, one of these days. I won’t live to see it.”

“Write it out.” Take what you want to say and give it its full extension. Don’t be stingy — you shortchange only yourself.

“The force of English lies in its vowels.” You want to resonate the stressed assonances in your work, in a phrase, a clause, a paragraph, a sentence, especially with respect to the way the closing paragraph feeds into the final clause and word.

You must be the alpha and omega of your object. You create your object, then you work it until there is nothing left in it that you can bring out. The novel, rather than the short story, gives you opportunity to leach your object of life.

“If, as the thing begins, it seems to posit something going before it, the thing cannot be fully put to death.” The best ending, for example that of *Moby-Dick*, is the annihilation of its beginning.

“There’s always another place to go . . . . Whatever it was, just keep talking. Because that’s the blessing of life.”

The very business of storytelling must be subject to being overturned. “The greatest god is the god of the outermost circle.”

DECEMBER 6, 1990

The implications for art of non-linear dynamics, so-called ‘chaos theory,’ “are tremendous.”

“The artistic artifact, quite rightly, should be undecidable. If it’s decidable, it’s exhaustible. It’s rich because it’s undecidable.” Consider Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, consider non-linear dynamics, and consider phenomenology and how what they have to say can be applied to art, to putting words on the page. And don’t forget jazz, the jazz method of improvisation — “I know what I am going to do by virtue of what I have done.” Move beyond uncertainty to undecidability, to the ‘it’ that can never be known. This is an ancient, valuable notion, this notion of the power of the mysterious. “That which is undecidable is mysterious; if it’s decidable, it’s no longer mysterious . . . . I suppose what I’m trying to argue for is the sense of this value as a deeply humane value.” As for non-linear dynamics and art, you put your object into a self-regenerative system, you don’t know what’s going to come out. Like the weather, like the Mandelbrot set, your object becomes infinitely refactorable.

The non-linear method creates its own metaphors, metaphors that are fuller of implied meaning than those ordinary metaphors which the writer reaches for, encoding in a private code. “Always one wants to be clear, but not understood. You don’t want to be understood because *you* don’t understand.” You don’t understand until you’ve done it, if even then. “Language will always, as a dynamic form, produce metaphor, because that’s the nature of the language.” A word always has many referents, including referents peculiar to small, even idiosyncratic, segments of the population. Don’t reach for the coy, self-congratulatory, manufactured metaphor. “Seek the literal; seek the plain; if it is one, say one; and understand that the distance between one and two is colossal . . . . You have no room for metaphor” — your task is to unpack the object. The reader, in the interaction, will provide the metaphor. The reader, following, as you do, the chaotic method, will read more metaphorically the more literally you write.

“Undecidability is collateral to other values” in your work.

It’s quite simple, quite complex, quite difficult; it’s all just words on a page, they are arranged in sentences; these sentences must be sequential, with “some kind of visible ligature.” What the ligature can be is vast in its possibilities; it can be morphological, syntactical, referential, disjunctive, conjunctive, etc.

These poetics, in their way, mimic life, “the way life is . . . . In its structure, it is like life. So it has some kinship with life, with the heart.” Good art is art like life.

Returning to metaphor, here’s a trick to turn — instead of making a metaphor, make a marginal note as to what the metaphor is; later in the story, as a vertical swerve, this metaphor can plug in as an element in its own right.

Metaphor is like any other information — “inert, entropic material.” There is a positive correlation between high information/high noise and low meaning/low signification. If you simply must make a metaphor in the traditional manner, the two compared objects must be of the same class. This can create a dynamic, an agon, that can be repeatedly enlarged to create a trope, a major component, or even the whole piece.

Examine your objects for the tension inherent in them, the polarity, “the natural conflict, the innate conflict, what is already there,” and in the unpacking of this tension, you will reveal, as it is revealed to you, the whole of life, the whole of your heart, and, by the way, the whole of your story, and how each unpacked object relates in a story to every other object.

Ask yourself, what is this beautiful metaphor I make? Are its terms of the same class? Is it necessary? Does it contain its own tension? If it’s not of the same class, it’s off the body. If it’s not necessary, it’s just noise. If it doesn’t contain its own tension, it’s flaccid, weak, ultimately unnecessary.

To make your own, powerful style, you must find “the cure to your own error;” a way to make into art that deep mistake, tic, failure of yourself.

The objects themselves cannot be thought up, cannot proceed from plot or plan, but reveal themselves only in the making.

“You look for that which is going to generate energy, not entropy,” when you unpack your objects with an eye to the polarities inherent in them, and as you unpack, to the polarities in the unpackings — like Chinese boxes or a Mandelbrot set.

“To say the characters laughed about this, cried about that, smiled at this, seems like a kind of a challenge to the reader . . . . You are challenging the reader to react by saying, ‘Aw, c’mon, they didn’t really!’ It’s best left unsaid.”

“First let your heart go, let your mind go, then let language rush in . . . . It seems that without even trying, we reveal ourselves.” The difficulty is, it’s often enough too true, this revelation, for us to touch it. “It should be so easy, but it never, ever is.”

“The effort to clarify can happen in tandem with the deepening of the mystery.” But, always strive to be clear. Simply ask yourself, “What would be the proper word?” “If it’s one, say one; if it’s two, say two; if you don’t know, say you don’t know. A white horse is not a horse.”

You must develop “a deep knowing of what the situation could bear.”

You want each of your sentences to be perfectly comprehensible, while the sum of the sentences generates mystery. “You proceed on the page with the knowledge that the things that really matter cannot be entirely known.” But, you are not in the business of confusing the reader.

“There are a *lot* of things that create a logical discourse.” There are many ways to hook the sentences together, but these ways must be apparent on the page.

Write to be canonized; write as if the only readers who matter are those who are “impatient, informed, eager to be challenged, and have the power to canonize you . . . . Those people who don’t want to read anybody because they’ve read everybody.” “It’s about power in the end. It isn’t about ‘can you get away with it?’ It’s about ‘can you knock them dead with it?’”

People are busy, life is short, eternity is long. Don’t waste on trivial objects your art-making time. “Be efficient in the use of yourself.”

“You want always to speak *ex cathedra* — from your seat of power,” from that part of you most dear to you, most troubling, most true. You want to speak for the truest god, “the one that’s been around forever and says, ‘Yeah? Come show me.’”

The thing to do, to be a great writer, a great artist, is to learn how to play the game. “Learn how to use a bat, learn how to hit a ball, learn how to catch a ball.”

Remember, you are making objects of art, not objects of fetish.

The human heart, the human mind, human existence itself, these “are deeply, deeply mysterious.” To write great fiction “is to give evidence of the deepness of this mystery.”

“The more you are rebuked by what you have in front of you, the better off you are. The best comes not easy — it comes hard, hard, hard.”

“Showing is ‘Look at this.’ Telling is ‘Haven’t you noticed this?’ Commenting is ‘Don’t you think this ought to be?’”

“Be willing to resist what comes to mind first.”

“In the end, your life will be worth that which you have loved. And you will make of your life that which you have loved. See you in a week.”

DECEMBER 11, 1990

About your object, “don’t get into it unless you’re prepared to get into all of it.”

“It is extracting everything there is to extract from the object, and that is what it is to be the death of the object.”

“There’s a way to get inside that which afflicts you . . . . You must agitate your pain . . . until everywhere you look, it surrounds you.” It’s no way to live, but it’s the only way to be a great artist. “You become your own self-referential system. You become your own heaven and hell. You become a being who is truly saved. This is entirely in keeping with chaos theory.” You become your own universe.

Chaos theory works in creating art because it mimics living. “We are not made in a linear system.” You become “the accumulation of the error-rate . . . the disproportionate result of” living. What is outside you is “random muck.” You must make inside you the order of your own universe. “You will be a worshipper in your own religion. You will live in this neurotic world you have created for yourself . . . . Your work becomes the only space in which you are safe.”

If you reach a point where your work no longer transcends itself, skip it. You are no longer an artist, but a vain merchant with a bad habit.

“The work really is done long before you let it go,” before you make it, before you become “now just a shaping hand,” putting the words on the page. From your stance, your authority, and “that place of greatest jeopardy within yourself,” you produce something “truly bewitching.”

You’ll have a hard time, being immersed in a fiction market saturated with work “riddled with irrelevancy.”

“The more information you give them, the less meaning you give them . . . . As the information piles up, the entropy piles up, and when you have complete entropy, you have the death of the system.”

It all comes down to whether or not you are an artist. “Art is about taking risks.”

Think of “that which cannot be known as an ally in doing your work.” Write “in a kind of partnership with ignorance . . . . The sentence comes out very differently if you write in connivance with the unknowable.”

To plot it all out is to make a frame in the shape of an adult and imprison a child within it.

We are immersed in a cultural stream of indeterminacy. “You can dip into it pretty much anywhere you please.”

“You just want that one sentence, that one exorbitant statement of yourself, then you’re home free.” You apply the poetics, not worrying where the piece is going, and you go there. “The initial conditions are all that count.” Make them exorbitant, and find the error in them.

(An amazing amount of doodling went on in these classes, and at least one student brought in her knitting to knit.)

You want to eliminate the metaphorical from your initial conditions. Your error needs to be non-metaphorical. Your error is “your freakishness — you’re always looking for the freakishness.”

“The notion is to discover in your first sentence, where is this mystery, this freakishness, this error, this turbulence. It’s what someone says, it’s what someone does. It’s bewitchingly human. It must bear on the human heart, the human body . . . . Always look for an error which represents a difficulty, a deep difficulty.”

“If you’re stingy, if you’re chickenshit, if you’re afraid, you’ll never ever do it. You have to let go enough.”

“That’s how you find it, by seeing and discarding, by seeing and discarding, till you finally reach that exorbitant place.”

“Metaphor is automatically at a distance from the heart. When you say something that is at a remove from what you mean, you create a void through which the reader cannot be counted on passing, or even wanting to pass.”

“Look, it’s very simple — you got a heart, and you got all the words there are . . . . The closer you are to your own heart, your own body, the stronger you are, ‘cause that’s where your seat of power is.... Think of it as a matter of mechanics.”

For closure, your final sound has “to be provided for by what precedes,” either through continuation or opposition.

You want your piece to be “the irresistible utterance of a heart engaged,” authoritative, proceeding by its own inexorable interior logic.

“If you pick up a cliché, you extrude it through yourself. You never defer to anything exterior to yourself. You subdue everything that is of that world, and make it your object.”

“The minute you stop to tell us the reaction of a character to something that character has done, you impede the progress. It is never worth it.”

Don't be seduced by “the immensely detailed construction of the object.” Don't lose the forest in the trees.

“Don't lose the heart. That's all there is to it. Don't let yourself get captured by the language. The language is not the answer. The answer is in your heart.”

“In the end it's authority. In the end it's the heart. In the end you must be possessed by it, and possess it.”

“If it doesn't have truth for you, it has truth for nobody — and that's the truth, implacably.”

You take contrary terms, juxtapose them, and “energy is the result, tension is the result, drama is the result, power is the result.”

DECEMBER 13, 1990

*Dasein*, 'there-being,' being there. There is a lot to be said for the value of being there, of being present, in your work, in your life — in all of its ramifications, being there.

“A certain generosity of one’s inner domain, I think, prefigures a life in art.” We are, of course, all of us small-hearted; the best we may hope to do is to be great-hearted in doing art. “It is as if one bears forth a chalice, and one is the sole bearer of that chalice. It is a sacred act.”

“We are all petty, small-hearted, mean-spirited persons, but we can create within ourselves a clean, well-lighted place . . . . As cleansed of the small, as empty of the petty, as shorn of the spiteful, as it must be” in order for us to make art that can “save persons not yet born.”

The bifurcation of mind between whole-hearted commitment of your heart to the page and whole-minded concentration on cold, manipulative technique, this bifurcation is a fundamental part of doing the work well; however, do not confuse this irony with the necessary purity, the essential great-spiritedness you must have and must give away to make great art. This irony and this largeness of spirit can and must go hand-in-hand. “The larger you can make your heart, the greater your triumph will be . . . . Petty people make petty art . . . . The more vulnerable you make yourself, the more you will achieve.” We are all Odysseus. “We are all liars, seeking to make our way home.”

“Open up — all the way up.” Be brave, go to the most dangerous place. To bridge the gap between mediocrity and greatness, one must be able to put one’s heart into the advocacy of the other; and otherness “is Mommy, is Daddy, sister, brother, husband, wife, everybody who is not you.” Put yourself lowest of all. Find the opposite sex in yourself.

You must be a mahatma. You must “know, and feel, and forgive everything . . . . The job is to be loving, and that’s a tall order, a very tall order . . . . In the end, the transcendent piece of knowledge that one must acquire, is where to position the heart with relation to the task . . . . You can be so much bigger than you think you can be, and any damn fool can do it . . . . You can levitate yourself right off the face of this earth, you can go to heaven in your own lifetime, all by the sentences you write. Go ahead and dare do it. But don’t delude yourself that you have done it when you haven’t.”

The more you give away, “writing from ground-zero of your heart,” the more you will receive.

Courage.

Largeness.

Dearness.

Openness.

“The question is, will you reach into that store of humanity in you? Be smart. Be smart. Reckon with where that power is . . . . Create within yourself a place where art can happen; a cathedral in yourself; a high and lofty place . . . . Hold yourselves high. Make a place where art can happen . . . . Sit up straight, stand upright — you are artists.”

“It is about sentences, it is about purity of heart, and it is about wanting to make a great thing. This is what it has always been about, and what it is still about.”

There is a lot to be said for, if not mastering, then at least working out the short-story form before doing a novel, especially with regard to non-linear dynamics.

‘Period doubling’ in non-linear dynamics can be seen as an analog to what goes on between sentences, with each sentence being a ‘generation.’ The space between generations is the ‘phase transition.’ “The adventure is in exploiting that phase transition moment.”

Another analog is ‘scale theory’ — the larger the unit of measure, the less precise the measurement. Conversely, the smaller the unit of measure, the more precise the measurement, tending to infinity. In the small, the whole of life can be revealed. “You want your rule to be very, very, very small . . . . Render the object, all of the object, not a version of it . . . . If you leave anything out, all you’ll have is an abstraction.”

You have nothing as a piece of work until you have a sign that is a sign touching the human heart. Non-linear dynamics is the dynamics most reflective of living, of life, of the cosmos, of the heart. “Go figure it out.”

The application of scale theory will lead you to the realization that the initial conditions can never be fully measured, realized, plumbed to their depths; on the other hand, if you come to your initial conditions with a small enough measure, you can unpack an infinity of richness.

You must read your words slowly, aloud, so that you know exactly who they are; so that you may have purchase on them.

“There is much to be gained in reminding the reader of the conduit of knowledge.... You never want to let the observer be confused with the author.”

Don't use 'asked' — 'said' will do — same for 'told me,' etc. 'Said' is forceful, direct, almost a punctuation.

Make sure you say what it is you want the reader to see, and not some sloppy variation of it you present because you didn't pay close enough attention to it.

When you go into your piece at a point of insufficiency, and unpack that point to a level of sufficiency, you have made a provocation for a new beginning. You've thrown your piece out of kilter. You've given that newly-unpacked section an altitude higher than the work around it. What you learn from this is to unpack deeply from the very start. When you unpack a portion of previous insufficiency, you find yourself closer to your enduring objects. This is a way of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. "Your progress is a result of grappling with your failure."

"You must feel yourself entitled; you must feel yourself on the way to having it all . . . . You've got to be able to say, 'God damn it, I'm a good person, I'm telling the truth, I deserve to be heard, the world owes me this, life owes me this.' In everything else, be humble, but in this, be a 'God damn it, I will be heard!'"

"Signification is in stance and authority, not in the information."

Be frugal with your words. Don't spew out any word you don't need.

Witness Matisse — just a few lines, but all the right ones. Witness Durer — the unpacker of the object.

"You'll never get to that great transcendence if you don't let go of what you know, and embrace what you don't know."

When "one is in the I-mode of behavior," one must always be "extremely sensitive" about the 'I' "somehow elevating itself over the circumstance." Your 'I' must be adorable, greatly tactful, avoiding any taint of complaint or self-aggrandizement, and must be extremely forgiving.

"Never explain, never complain."

"This is not a history lesson. We're here in the present. Don't go back in time." There are ways, but not blatant ones, of going back in time — for example, through dialogue. The past comes out best in the pressure of moving forward.

"Authority first. Stance second. You've got nothing without it." Stronger stances issue integrally from the object, as opposed to weaker stances, which seem to be artistic affectations imposed upon the object.

“First is authority — ‘I possess it, and am possessed by it.’”

Stance — to speak from a place no one else is speaking from, a place necessary to the object.

Stance plus authority equals the sign of the truth. Stance you get by working at it, by fooling with the syntax, the ‘-emes.’ “An artist is his stance. Without it, where the hell are you?”

Stance’s “accordance with the object” means your stance has to be flexible.

“The world has in it so much writing, so many writers . . . . Such a staggering, staggering lot of it. And most of it’s just noise . . . . One might succeed enormously at differentiating himself from the noise . . . . You ain’t never gonna get it doing the normative thing.”

You must be able to reconsider everything in your writing, in your approach to your writing, in what you have learned about writing in your past.

“Is it worth putting my pencil here? Is this my life? Is this my death?”

## CODA

“Art is about taking risks. Danger and chaos — those are the real muses an artist must court.”— Robert Rauschenberg

“John Hawkes once said that plot, character, setting and theme are the real enemies of the novel. ` And structure — verbal and psychological coherence — is still my largest concern as a writer. Related or corresponding event, recurring image and recurring action, these constitute the essential substance or meaningful density of writing.”— Ted Mooney

“Let your novel’s important characters dictate their life stories to you, beginning with childhood; write it all down; then throw it away and start the novel.”— Barbara Kingsolver

“Write your heart out.”— Rick Whitaker

In October of 1991, I returned to New York City and again attended one of Gordon’s private classes; again, I took notes. These are they.

- 1) Revealing oneself on the page as a *moral* imperative.
- 2) The moral implications of your approach to life as a whole re: your work on the page
  - a) What asses do you kiss?
- 3) To read:
  - a) *The Log of the S.S. Mrs. Ungentine*, Stanley G. Crawford;
  - b) *Motorman*;
  - c) *Some Instructions to My Wife Concerning the Upkeep of the House . . .*”, Stanley G. Crawford.
- 4) “The only sanity is excess” — Brodkey
  - a) To be totally accepting of oneself
  - b) To embrace one’s natural excess
  - c) To *not be cowed*
  - d) To be full of nothing but the force of one’s own personality
  - e) To emblazon oneself with oneself
  - f) To see what you see and say what you say with all your heart and mind
- 5) You must swerve and swerve and swerve until you defeat your attack.
- 6) As you begin the creation of a piece, you are filled with an energy which is sufficient at the outset, but inevitably winds down. This opening energy gives you authority, but you will lose this — inevitably. What do you do? This is where you

must employ technique. “You can count on the irrationality, the disequilibrium, only so much — only so much.” Then you must employ your mind, your technique, swerve, torque, irony, *sou conversacion*. You will lose this energy in five pages, your initial energy — you must then be cold, calculate, use your mind.

“The conditions of composition that will overtake you as you lose that initial energy.”  
– The mind  
– Know-how  
– The will

“Desire sets you in motion. At a certain point, desire must give way to will.”  
This is what separates the adults from the kids.

Desire gives way to determination.

When the energy runs out, writing from your heart won't do.

7) To read: *Mixed Blood*, by Richard Rodriguez, in Harper's

8) Your world-making act is an adversarial act — “A kind of fuck-you to all the other objects.”

a) “An act in response to reality”

9) The title as “the proclamation of your right object” — The title can come first, if it is standing squarely at the point of being your right object.

10) “My life is an adversarial act against the outrage of being extinguished.”

11) “In the absence of true conflict you get plot. That's all you get. Who needs it? Who needs it?”

12) You don't tell stories — “You proclaim the universe as entirely yours;” that no one has spoken before you speak.

13) “The instant you offer an explanation is the instant you have sentimentality.”

14) The story is where it is — in the attack, in the initial conditions.

15) “Nothing is stronger than the name of the thing.” Name the right name, and you have the secret of the thing.

16) “That's the last word in naming the object — find the right name for the thing.”

17) Acknowledge — be honest — when you don't know what to do, tell the reader that.

18) "Get the reader by his nuts as fast as you possibly can."

a) "Reduce your strategy to the most urgent sentence you can possibly find."

19) "An uncanny sentence contains within it a queer effect of truth."

a) "Always strive for the uncanny."

20) "The only way to demonstrate to yourself that you are the artist you must be is to solve every problem." — Address the unpacking of the object. — Ask yourself, Why this object? Why this facet? Why that facet?

a) "Oppose everything you can oppose" — make polarities — swerve, counter, balance — close your world, make of it a self-contained universe.

21) Think of yourself as creating a memory bank, a relational database which you must thoroughly x-reference.

22) Beware of pretentious attacks. For that matter, beware of pretension, unless it's ironic.

23) Find the dangerous places in yourself.

24) Two ways out of difficulty:

a) Acknowledge difficulty:

b) "Take quite literally something which is metaphorical, and enter into it as if it were real."

25) You make a muchness out of your meagerness, a rightness out of your wrongness.

26) We are victimized by our ability to write. We forget that we are most likely making a mistake every sentence we write.

27) Never take what proves to be simply a convenience in order to get out of a sentence. Return to, refactor, unpack the object.

28) Master two terms:

a) "The infinite elasticity of the English sentence;"

b) "What shall be disclosed that issues out of your quiddity."