

lots of experiences that I won't let writers persuade me to create for myself till I trust them. No one can make me feel terrified or make me cry unless somehow she wins my trust. Thus, a piece of writing is likely to fail with me if someone tries to put an intensely scary or sad scene right at the beginning. I simply won't row if she steers me toward that waterfall. I won't let her play with my feelings. Yet, often the very experience I refuse to create for myself in the opening page or two is one that I am willing to have later on, after I have become involved—which is the same as saying after I have come to trust the writer.

The kinds of experiences I am willing to have at the start of a piece of writing are milder. I'll let the writer tell me an interesting idea or start a narrative going (as long as it's not too strange). I'm open to hearing the sound of a voice talking or a mind working; to seeing a view of a house or room or landscape. I suspect this is one of the reasons why stories and novels so often start with description: it's not that we need to start with images—plenty of writing succeeds without much description at all—but that description is a good way for the writer to show the texture of her mind so we can build up some trust.

This tells me more about the writer's task. The writer steers, sitting in the stern, facing forward; the reader does all the work, rowing and also facing backwards without even knowing where she is going till she gets there. To change metaphors yet again, as writer you must say to your reader, "Why don't you take off your clothes and let me play with your body." Is it any less of an invasion to play with peoples' minds than to play with their bodies? Yes, perhaps they will *read* what you write—if they have to or if they are curious—but they won't *really* read you, they won't expend the additional energy required to have the experience you are trying to convey unless they trust you.

How, then, do you win a reader's trust or permission? I think that writers win my trust when they are completely focused on the experience they want me to have. I'm not talking about getting me to *believe* them. That is really less important. I'm talking about the ability to get me to experience what they are talking about.

When writers fail to win my trust or consent, it is often because I sense them trying to manipulate me, or at least I feel some of their energy and attention not on the experience, but on what they want to do to me. That's what I feel in the magenta sunset piece.

“Manipulative” is too strong a word, but you can feel some of the writer’s attention taken away from the image itself and given over to the fanciness of her language and the impressive effect it is intended to have.

Here is a milder example:

The sun shone through all the tiny driplets of water clinging to the trees as though each one was a tiny prism and surrounded us with sparks. We were really glad to see the sun after our long wait, and what a beautiful reward it was.

The first sentence wins my trust and makes me at least begin to see the image, but there is a letdown in the second sentence, particularly the last half of it, because the writer stopped being wrapped up in the experience itself and started trying, as it were, to urge me to have it.

Another way writers try to gain our trust is by coming on all sincere and honest—proclaiming by their manner, “Trust me, I’m a nice person, I’ll be straight with you.” With some readers this works, but, in the long run, they wonder, “Why is she *trying* so hard to be honest? What is she hiding or trying to sell?” If someone is trying too hard to be honest, she probably doesn’t trust herself—at some level. One of the qualities that distinguishes people we trust is simply that they really do trust themselves. They trust that what they have to say is important and that you will listen. It’s a quality that undamaged children have, and it rivets the attention of a listener. When a writer is too worried about whether you will listen, whether what she is saying is really right or important, this lack of trust takes the form of a fine cloud of fog or static in the air. Sometimes it makes you feel faintly uncomfortable, the way you feel at a party when the person you are talking to is nervous or wonders if she is okay or wishes she could move on to talk to someone else: you *feel* her leakage of attention away from what she is actually saying off into her distracting inner thoughts and feelings. A good talker believes fully in what she is saying and can put *all* her attention into her words, even when the situation is distracting. That second sentence above, “What a beautiful reward it was to see the sun,” is really a piece of insecurity on the writer’s part.

Sometimes, of course, it seems as though a writer *overpowers* us. We don’t happily consent to row while she steers, we have our breath taken away and feel we have no choice. But really the

writer has wrung a genuine consent from us: the same kind of consent we grant when someone tricks us or "commands" us through sheer tone of voice. Sometimes the writer gains unwilling consent by dangling a taboo subject that secretly fascinates, such as sex or torture. (Thus, the power of taboo subjects usually declines after awhile—after we enjoy it enough that it isn't so taboo—and so we become bored with what used to tingle us. Writers must constantly escalate sensationalism to recapture bored readers.) More often, writers overpower us simply by their *authority*: pervasive confidence in themselves, utter conviction about what they are saying, complete command over their craft. But even though we may *feel* overwhelmed, the truth is that we are really consenting to put ourselves in such powerful hands. Besides, it's just reading, after all, not real life. We can afford to let someone snatch us completely into her power in books, even if we have learned to resist it in real life.

Some readers are more likely to be overwhelmed than others. Children, for example, may be more prey to this authority than adults, more apt to go along. That is why we tend to be more sympathetic to the idea of shielding children from certain kinds of reading. They seem more "impressionable," literally, in that they seem more likely to create the impression or experience in themselves. Children seem more apt to have nightmares about something they have read or seen than adults. In a sense, then, they are better readers: they subject themselves more completely to the words.

But as children get older and more sophisticated, they get better at making the kind of *refusal* to experience that most adults are good at. At a certain age—often adolescence—we see a child working overtime to strengthen these refusal muscles. The child takes a delight in deflating all experience from that romantic or scary movie scene: she sees the special artificial lights shining on the faces, imagines the big cameras and dollies moving around, notices the special effects, and sees *through* the mysterious moonlight with clouds scudding across the sky to a broad sunny day of filming with the camera lens stopped down. It may be many years before that adolescent will actually let herself feel deeply thrilled or scared by what's on the screen. And some people, of course, stay numbed. (I wonder if the taste for sensationalist books and movies might not be a healthy, if misguided, attempt on the part of

numbered people to prove themselves alive enough to breathe experience into words.)

It is this mysterious event, then, this difference between reading and really reading, this breathing of life into words, this construction of an experience out of our own materials by someone else's blueprint, this thing we do that we don't usually notice ourselves doing—not just reading the notes, but hearing the music in our heads: this is what I am trying to explore in this chapter. But however mysterious or unconscious the event is, we can often hear it easily. Most everyone has heard it, especially as a child. When someone is reading out loud to us and breathing experience into the words, we can usually hear their investment. It's especially audible to us when that reader, while reading out loud, suddenly stops hearing the music in what she is reading:

What happened? I was there in the forest. It was happening to me. There was no bed, no crack in the ceiling, no wallpaper stripes, no mommy reading to me. I didn't have to go to bed. Now I'm listening to mommy read me the story. Now I have to go to bed. She still reads with all that expression in her voice, she reads just like she was reading before, but now she's thinking about daddy or about having a fight or about going downstairs to do the dishes. We were there in the forest. Then she stopped trying and we fell back here.

The Writer's Job

I emphasize the complexity of reading because I think that what you must do as writer, if you want power in your words, is equally complex, mysterious, and hard to define. But it's simple to say. My entire advice for this chapter—though I will spell it out more fully and practically at the end—can be boiled down to this: if you want readers to breathe life into your writing so that they get a powerful experience from it, then you must breathe experience into your words as you write. I don't know why it should be the case that if you experience what you are writing about—if you go to the bamboo—it increases the chances of the reader's experiencing the bamboo. But that's the way it seems to work. The more you try out this hypothesis about reading and writing, the more you will see it confirmed.

I can illustrate the process most vividly with a workshop game

where you try to tell images so that others actually see them.* What often happens is that the student describes something, perhaps a maple tree in the middle of the front lawn with flowers growing around the trunk. But it doesn't quite work. It doesn't make me *see* it. I say, "Wait. I can't see it. *You* must not have seen it. Close your eyes and wait till you really see it. Stop looking for words, look for the vision itself. Don't hurry." And we wait a bit while the speaker closes her eyes and tries to see the image clearly, and then she says, "I can see it now, but it's a little bit different now." And she tells her image, but the tree isn't in the middle of the lawn. It's really near the sidewalk. And it doesn't have flowers around it, it has long strands of scraggly grass that the lawnmower didn't get. And as she tells it, it *does* work, we all see it clearly. It's as though her first image was an imperfect or distorted view of the "real" image, the second one. The first time she was trying to see it through a poor telescope so she had to invent some details. When I push, she focuses the lens better and can finally see the image clearly.

Of course there is no reason, theoretically, why the speaker couldn't *see* the original image of the tree in the middle of the lawn with flowers around it. And it's a perfectly good image. That's what characterizes a good writer: the ability to see anything. But this inexperienced writer needed to put all her efforts into having an experience instead of trying to stick with any particular image, and when she did so, she got more experience into her words, but the tree moved near to the sidewalk and the flowers changed to scraggly grass. Probably that first image was "constructed" on the basis of a half-remembered scene while the improved image goes back and taps that memory itself. Or perhaps neither image is an exact memory, but the second one makes more use of memory fragments than the first one did. The first one was too much of an idea or conception, not enough of an experience.

I seem to be saying that if you could actually *go* to the bamboo and stand there looking at it—if you could suddenly be transported back to your old childhood bedroom which you are trying to write about now—your words would automatically have more power. And, of course, they probably would. But I can get closer to the

* Part of an approach called "Story Workshop" developed by John Schultz and his associates. See "The Story Workshop Method: Writing from Start to Finish," *College English*, vol. 39, no. 4, December, 1977.

heart of what I mean by "breathing experience into words" by pointing out that actually looking at the bamboo with your own eyes is not necessarily enough. This is the lesson you learn in a drawing class where they have you do push-ups in really seeing, not just looking. You must do the classic Nicolaides* drawing exercise where you are not allowed to take your eyes off the object for the entire time of the drawing, not allowed to look at your paper at all. The goal is to learn to really see—to pour all your energy into your eyes and into the object. Not to let any of your attention leak away from the object you are drawing to anything else, such as whether your drawing looks right.

The drawings people produce when they can't look at their paper are very instructive. They are liable to have obvious distortions of one sort or another. But they usually have more life, energy, and experience in them than drawings produced when you keep looking back to your paper and correcting your line and thereby achieving more accuracy. They give the viewer more of the *experience* of that torso or apple. (I remember a drawing of a nude I made this way, and it was really quite good; I was proud of it and wanted to show it off, but the genitals were embarrassingly large. With this method, you tend to enlarge what you pay good attention to.)

It may be complicated for psychologists or philosophers to deal with this distinction between seeing and really seeing, but it's simple enough to notice it on certain occasions: you stand there on the lawn and really see that beech tree and somehow the perception fills you or fully occupies you—the tree is wholly present to you. Or else, you stand there and, yes, you see it, but somehow you don't see it fully, for you are slightly distracted or numb or unable to focus your attention. Some of your energy or attention is elsewhere. There is incomplete impact or commerce between you and the tree. (Obviously this isn't really a binary distinction between "merely seeing" and "really seeing," but rather a gradual continuum that stretches from pathological distractedness up to mystic participation.)

The principle that emerges, especially after many image workshops, is simple. If you want your words to make a reader have an experience, you have to have an experience yourself—not just deal

* See *The Natural Way to Draw*, Kimon Nicolaides (New York, 1941).

in ideas or concepts. (I will talk about conceptual or idea-writing in the next chapter.) What that means in practice is that you have to put all your energy into seeing—into connecting or making contact or participating with what you are writing about—into being there or having the hallucination. And no effort at all into searching for words. When you *have* the experience, when you have gotten to the bamboo, you can just open your mouth and the words that emerge will be what you need. (In the case of writing, though, you will have to revise later.)

It is probably easier to really experience something if you are actually standing there looking at it. But not necessarily. And it is probably easier to really experience something if you have actually seen it—that is, you will probably do better writing about memories than about made-up events. But not necessarily. For the essential act in experiencing something is wholly internal: the opening of some slippery gland or the clenching of some hidden muscle to allow a full participation between one's self and the object (or event or experience or sensation). To achieve this act of full experience, sometimes it feels as though we must do something positive: clench or scrunch or try harder to focus all our energy. But sometimes, on the other hand, the essential act feels like a letting go. We must learn to release something and just *allow* the perception to fill us up.

I permit myself a grand vagueness here. I think the subject warrants it if we talk at the level of theory. But, in practice, things are simple. When I read a piece of imaginative writing that doesn't work—doesn't give me the experience it is talking about (such as the magenta clouds piece), I have learned that I can tell the student, "I can't *see* it! I don't believe you are really seeing or hearing it as you write. Don't think about words. Go back and experience it. Then see what words come." This advice usually helps.

For you as writer, then, the crucial distinction is between trying to experience your subject fully versus trying to find the right words. In the one activity your energy and attention are directed wholeheartedly to what you are describing, in the other your energy is directed at your language or at your reader or at considerations of what kind of writing you are doing.*

*William Byrd, the Elizabethan composer, said that the right *notes* would come without effort to a composer of religious music who succeeded in wholly fastening his mind upon the divine subject:

I don't mean that you should *never* turn your attention to the words or the audience, or never try to figure out whether you are saying the right thing in the right way. You can and should do exactly that—just as wholeheartedly—during a later revising process. You can make drastic changes as you revise and still win readers to create powerful experiences in their heads, so long as the ingredients you are revising grew out of a full experience of your subject. When you devote all your energy to having an experience, the words that come to you may be a great mess. For one thing, there may be too many words. When you try to experience your subject and let the words come as they please, you often find yourself wordily taking two and three shots at the same target. During revising, you will need to omit many of these words. In addition, you may have to rearrange many things—even make drastic changes of shape. Sometimes there are fewer words because you don't feel obliged to spell out everything you see in your raw version.

If you revise only by cutting and rearranging elements in your raw writing, you end up with a revision made only of first-draft words—words written while you were experiencing your subject matter and not thinking about writing. But you can also add new words and passages as you revise—self-consciously and critically making judgments about what the style, context, audience, and meaning demand. When your raw writing grows directly out of full experience of your subject, the life entrapped in these words enables you to generate more words during the revising process that also contain life. The life in those original words keeps you in touch with the experience and enables you to dart back into it even if only for a moment as you search for a better word or phrase—even though you are engaged in the cold, calculating process of revising.

There is such a profound and hidden power to sacred words that to one thinking upon things divine, diligently and earnestly pondering them, the most suitable of all musical measures occur (I know not how) as of themselves, and suggest themselves spontaneously to the mind that is not indolent and inert.

From the dedication to *Gradualia*, quoted by Joseph Kerman, in "William Byrd and the Catholics," *New York Review of Books*, May 17, 1979.

Some Examples

Consider this story by Chris Magson:

Bill and I were friends, closer than brothers. We grew up on farms next to each other, near Keene. Our families were close, too. When the war broke out, we both signed up, rather than being drafted. We went through basic training, and were assigned to the same unit. We fought for two years on the Pacific atolls and islands. It became hard to remember the days before, in New Hampshire.

One day while establishing a beach-head on some God-forsaken atoll, our unit was wiped out. Bill and me were all that was left. No wounded. I never have figured out what happened. One moment, we were ducking our heads to dodge the flying ammunition, and the next moment everything was quiet, except for the sounds of bloated flies feasting on the sores of the corpses. We kept our heads down, not daring to twitch.

After a while, Bill stuck his head above the mound of sand we were hiding behind. "Frank," he whispered to me, "there's nothing out there." When he said that, I took a peek. Nothing but the mangled bodies strewn on the sand. I recognized a few. Silent, we gathered up the dog tags. Most of them were discolored. We didn't see a sign of the enemy. Not alive, anyway. We took all the water and food we could carry and set off to find the highest part of the small isle. The growth was stunted, and yellow. We didn't say much. We heard nothing, not even a bird.

Bill was walking in front of me about twenty paces, but when he stepped on the mine, it sent me flying. I fetched up against a tree. When I came to, the first thing I saw was the bloody bundle of rags that was Bill. He had no legs or arms anymore. I went over to him. He was alive, but just barely. Numbly, I tourniquetted his seeping stumps and shot an ampule of morphine into his shattered hip. I looked at his face, and turned away again. He was trying to speak, so I leant near his mouth. "Frank," he said, his breath flagging, "don't leave me like this . . . rifle." I knew what he wanted, and I put my gun next to his ear, but I couldn't squeeze the trigger. Blood came out of his mouth and I thought he was dead. I left him, and stumbled weeping uphill. I walked until I noticed that the plants were getting green, and I could hear a bird. I stopped and sat. I poured a little warm water from the canteen over my hair, and wondered what to do next. The sun was white, and it bounced off the rocks nearby and struck my wet eyes.

I got up and walked some more, hoping to find shade. I didn't find

any, so I kept walking. I stumbled into a glade without noticing. I looked down, and the grass under my dusty boots looked trimmed. I sat down and wondered about it. Anything to keep my mind off of Bill. It was about then that I saw something in the middle of the opening. It looked like a bank safe without a door or handle. On the top of it, there was something like a funnel tilted off to one side. The object was a dull grey, and the funnel-thing looked like an old gramophone trumpet. There was no grass around it, just a circle of yellow dust. It hurt my eyes to look at the thing. It made a noise just then, a sound like a pulse beat. I couldn't hear it exactly, but I could feel it in my bones. The pulse got louder, and more vibrant, and it kept increasing until my eyes watered. It went THUM THUM THUM and then, out of the funnel, shapes in dark smoke erupted. They rolled into themselves like furry smoke rings. I remember Bill's grandfather used to delight us when we were little by making them, his creased face working. But it wasn't smoke rings that came out of the thing, but shapes, rectangles, smoky pyramids and perfect spheres. I watched it, not believing. The shapes curled out, and instead of fading, they came to the ground and flattened out, while retaining their shape. The thing let out an anvil-shaped burst, and stopped.

"Hello, I've been waiting so long," something in back of me said. I whirled around, and stood facing the lady. She was dressed in a knee-length black skirt and there were pearls clustered round her throat. She was about fifty, or maybe forty. It was hard to tell. She spoke again. "Now, I can leave. Thank you so much for coming." She held her hands out by her side and closed them, saying, "Come children, we must go now." She walked away, her arms positioned like she was holding hands with two children. She looked back at me smiling, and said, "You must understand. I know they are gone, but the delusion is enough for me." I shouted at her as she left the clearing. "What do you mean! Please!" The thing in the center THRUMed again, and I turned around. Bill was walking toward me, waving his arm and smiling. He broke into a trot.

There are three passages which I feel trying hardest to be powerful: the early silent moment with flies and corpses, the death of the buddy, and the final pathos of the woman's feeling for her children. But though these passages tug at me and ask me to have a powerful experience, I find I refuse. I hold back from putting myself in and constructing the feelings asked for by the words. His rendering of the smoke machine, on the other hand, seems powerful. I experience it vividly. I'm taken out of myself and given a

kind of participation in that strange series of images and in this way I am genuinely moved by it.

My hypothesis is that the writer *experienced* that machine more wholeheartedly, with better focus of attention, than he did any other part of the story. When I spoke to him I discovered that the machine, exactly as he described it, had appeared to him in a dream the night before he wrote the story and that it had indeed been the germ that gave rise to the whole story. He was, in effect, starting off from a powerful experience and I would say that he managed well, as he wrote, to put himself back into that experience, to connect with those perceptions in his dream.

Let me contrast this powerful passage with the other three that are trying but not fully succeeding in making me construct an experience in my head. The final one with the woman and children seems particularly weak. It seems generated almost entirely by a clever (though obscure) *idea* the writer had—a gimmick almost—as he cogitated a way to end the story. He didn't let the story end itself; he had to figure out and manipulate an ending.

The middle passage about the death of the buddy, I would guess, does to some degree grow out of an experience, but I sense it also grows out of the *idea* of this event: it is a conceptualized event as much as it is an *experienced* event. My guess is that the writer had an experience of sorts—some kind of losing of a buddy, yes—but really wasn't willing to pay anywhere near the price in emotional investment it would have taken to go past the feelings to the event itself and experience precisely *this* loss of a buddy through gruesome, close-up death.

That early moment of silence with flies and corpses is an interesting borderline case. It is a powerful sentence with its sudden contrast: "One moment we were ducking our heads to dodge the flying ammunition and the next moment everything was quiet except for the sounds of the bloated flies feasting on the sores of the corpses." It doesn't quite win me to have the experience it is talking about, but I may be more finicky here than some readers: I think my refusal comes as much as anything from the fact that he is trying to make me have such a strong experience so early in the story. If I came on these words later in the story, after I had built up more trust for him (which I do build up—until the gimmicky ending, where I lose it) probably I would consent automatically to

build for myself the experience he was trying to convey. (My hunch is that he was experiencing the time-lapse—a striking psychological event that probably intrigued him in his own experience—more than the gruesome physical details.)

Since I started looking at writing and my reactions in this way, I have begun to sense a kind of small-is-powerful principle. That is, often I find the most powerful parts of a story to be renderings of smaller, less intense experiences. Writers often fail when they try to render deep, harrowing ones. They run into a double barrier. Not only is it harder for them as writers to put themselves wholeheartedly into such strong experiences; but even if they do so, they are asking for an enormous expenditure on the part of the reader.

Of course, it can work the other way around: a powerful or harrowing experience, because of its impact on the writer, can lead her to focus better all her attention upon it so that she experiences it fully again as she sits down to her desk two months or two years later. Notice, however, that bigger is only likely to be better if it is an experience you have actually had. When you try to *make up* intensely powerful events, you are especially likely to fall on your face. And, in general, as I see writers learning really to experience what they are rendering in words, I see them tending to de-escalate the emotional scale, and focus on smaller, humbler events than they used to try for. It is the hallmark of inexperienced writers—corny *True Magazine* writers—constantly to clutch for more and more “powerful” experiences. Since they don’t really experience all these harrowing events as they write, they don’t come up with words which inspire a reader to do so either.

Consider this short piece by Randy Silverman:

Snaggle-toothed, crouched in a hall that is dimly lit, draped in a non-descript raincoat, stands a man. He is drunk, he’s not a poet. Like a dream on a moonless night, he stands there and does not think. He is the remains of a life he would rather not remember. Lost behind the bloodshot doors of misery lay a man of heart. In the eyes of this stranger was no sign of recognition that a rather large, green, iguana was scampering up the hall towards him. The iguana’s tail brushed his shoe as it ran down the hall, followed closely by three or four excited children. The iguana scurried in an open door down the hall, and the kids disappeared close behind it. The door slammed, and the hall was again thrown into dim-lit silence.

The snaggle-toothed man, now leaning against a door frame, gurgled to himself a song he no longer remembered. His eyes wandered around the hall, taking in the old paint and plaster. He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass window of the door across the hall, and he paused. A faint recognition ran through his mind, like a hedgehog moving in its tunnel. He remembered his wife, Mira, as she looked at him with her deep penetrating eyes, so serious. Her mouth showed no sign of a smile or ripple of a frown, a Mona Lisa mouth. Her hat was cloth and fit close to her head, turned up at the edges. One shoulder was bare.

The man looked away from the glass and down to the floor. He hunched his head over and heaved a sob of grief, then another, and another, until his eyes burst into tears. His head bobbed up and down like a cork for a few minutes, then the tears subsided into a calm stream, washing his face and beard.

Suddenly he noticed a tugging at his pants leg. Looking down, he discovered the tugging was coming from a little girl of no more than four, standing there next to him in her nightgown. In her left hand she was holding out a napkin for him to take. He reached out his hand and took the napkin from her and put it to his face.

These words have the power of making me construct the experiences rather than just reading the directions. I hear the music. I believe that in the act of writing, Silverman managed to focus wholeheartedly on the events or images, to participate in the experience he is rendering. There is no energy leaking off to the side in a search for words or concern for the reader or doubt about the value of what he is describing. (Of course, he may have thought about all these things while he revised.)

I sense a slight lessening of power in this early passage: "He is the remains of a life he would rather not remember. Lost behind the bloodshot doors of misery lay a man of heart." The passage *interprets* the scene—*tells* us how to feel—rather than just *giving* us the scene. In contrast, however, the very next sentence about the iguana represents for me a surge of greater than usual experience. In the later simile about the hedgehog and the memory of the wife, I feel a better than usual ability to let the words grow out of experience.

My hypothesis is that Silverman managed in this story, and especially in those strong passages, to stand out of the way—to keep his *self* or *mere thinking* or *feeling* out of the way—and to let the experiences somehow find their way into words under their

own steam. (It is interesting to note that just as when you read something good you don't feel you are expending any effort, so, too, when your writing goes particularly well, you may not feel you are expending effort either. When you make a good enough connection with the bamboo, neither you nor your reader has to do any work; all the energy comes from the bamboo, from the gods, from fission. All the same, you may feel drained and tired at the end of one of these lucky writing sessions.)

My emphasis on the need to *have* the experience is just another way of giving the old traditional writing advice: show, don't tell. That is, if you want readers to feel something, it's no good telling them how to feel ("it was simply *terrifying*"). You have to show them things that will terrify them. When I feel a writer trying to convey an experience by intoning "nevermore" or "ineluctable" or "chthonic," I resist her and do not get the experience: she is taking her attention away from her perception of the bamboo and becoming preoccupied with trying to make an effect. Explaining or trying too hard for fancy language is like holding up laugh cards to the studio audience at a radio or TV show: we resist when they try to *tell* us how to feel.

The advice here is *almost* (but not quite) the same as that other traditional advice: to give lots of specific sensory details and avoid generalizations. That is, if I persuade you to be specific in describing the tree and not just gush about how beautiful it is—to give the color of its leaves and the texture of its bark and the sound of its leaves in the wind—that will probably force you to go back and re-experience that tree. But it is not the sensory details in themselves that will make your description work, it is your experience of the tree that does it.

Sometimes when people are advised again and again to put specific details in their writing, they start to make them up without experiencing them. Here at the end of this passage is a particularly lifeless-because-not-experienced sensory detail.

After work, Don went to a show he had seen advertised in the newspaper. It was in a hotel ballroom not far from the shop. Don went into the main showroom, his feet tipping into the thick crimson carpet.

This was written by a student who seemed to me to suffer from a tendency to write from ideas and conceptions rather than from ex-

perience. I was searching for something to praise—something where I could say, “Do more of this,” not just “Don’t do that”—and I lit on the bit about the feet hitting the carpet. And “tipping into” is an interesting metaphor. I ended up saying, “Do more of that,” but, in truth, I suspect that the whole detail of the feet hitting the red carpet grew out of an idea or a ready-made phrase-and-idea that the writer had encountered in her reading, not out of experience. I couldn’t really feel any experience of feet hitting carpet. (Of course, reading is a source of real experience, too: one can borrow phrases and even long passages out of one’s reading—as many great writers have done—so long as you *experience them* and thereby make them yours.) In short, “See the tree!” or “Experience the tree!” is better advice than “Give more specific details about the tree!” Experiencing the tree can, in fact, lead to *unspecific* writing that is nevertheless powerful—as the following passage illustrates:

We drank in the garden. It was a spring day—one of those green-gold Sundays that excite our incredulity. Everything was blooming, opening, burgeoning. There was more than one could see—prismatic lights, prismatic smells, something that sets one’s teeth on edge with pleasure—but it was the shadow that was most mysterious and exciting, the light one could not define. We sat under a big maple, its leaves not yet fully formed but formed enough to hold the light, and it was astounding in its beauty, and seemed not like a single tree but one of a million, a link in a long train of leafy trees beginning in childhood.

JOHN CHEEVER, “The Lowboy,”
The Stories of John Cheever (New York, 1978)

A Warning about Feelings

“If you want to write well, make sure that you have lots of strong feelings.” That may seem to be my message here, but it is not. I have purposely used the word “experience” for what the writer needs—no doubt till you are very tired of it—and avoided as much as possible the word “feelings” or “emotions.”

But our language is fuzzy in distinguishing the different things people have inside: feelings, experiences, conceptions, ideas. When I say that the writer “should experience” what she is writing about, I mean something much closer to “should see and hear”

than “should feel strongly.” Feelings get confused with experiences because, when we experience something fully, feelings occur, too: real experiences hit us hard. But strong feelings, in themselves, don’t help you breathe experience into words. In fact, some of the worst writing fails precisely because it comes too much out of feelings rather than out of the event or scene itself—out of the bamboo.

Consider, for example, what happens if you decide to write about that car accident you were in. You will find that there is a huge difference between the words that grow out of your *experience* of the accident and those that grow out of your *feelings* about it. To experience it, you have to go back and be there—see, smell, and hear everything. But the feelings you end up with—“It was so awful” or whatever—may well impede you from re-experiencing the accident. (And happy feelings can also block full experience of an event. “It was so wonderful, so glorious, I felt like I’d never felt before” is sometimes all the inexperienced writer can say when she gives in to her *feelings* about an event she wants to write about.)

Of course, it wasn’t just sights and sounds you were experiencing during the car accident, you were probably experiencing feelings, too. So, when you let words grow out of the experience itself—when you manage to go back and connect with or relive the accident—you will have words that issue not only from sensory experiences, but also from feelings, too. As well you should. But it’s not that these are *feelings* that makes them the right source for your words, it’s that they are part of the experience of the accident. What causes so much bad writing is the flood of *later feelings* that tend to follow, if only by an instant or two, any strong experience. These later feelings tend to dominate our memory and, as we write, rush in to monopolize our attention. The reason they do so, I think, is that they are a kind of short cut that saves us from actually re-experiencing the event itself.

In either case feelings, as feelings, are of no value for writing. They are of value only insofar as they are part of the original experience itself that you are trying to render in words. Therefore, you should probably lean a bit away from them since they have such a tendency to numb or mush or blot out the rest of your experiencing. Thus teachers are sometimes led to make an extreme though perhaps useful blanket rule: no feelings! Stick to sense data.

Notice how few feelings there are in the Silverman piece about

the drunk (though it creates feelings in the reader). The weakest sentence results from a slide into telling feelings about how pathetic this man is. Silverman's strength was his ability to zero in on the object and not his feelings about it. The Magson war story is weakest at the three emotional moments and strongest in the smoke machine which is rendered without feelings. In short, having feelings about the bamboo is not the same as going to the bamboo.

You can, of course, write powerfully not about the car accident, but about the feelings you have as a result of it—the funk, the jitters, or whatever. Fine. In that case you should try to let your words grow out of those feelings, or if you are writing much later, you should try to get back and re-experience them. But don't pretend you are writing about a car accident. You are writing about the emotional aftermath of a car accident.

Advice

The goal is to get power into words. If I am right, that means getting your reader to breathe experience into what you write: get her to pedal while you steer, get her to let you play with her mind, get her to hear music and not just read notes. To make this happen, *you* must breathe experience into your words. You must go to the bamboo. But what does this mean in practice?

- Direct all your efforts into experiencing—or re-experiencing—what you are writing about. Put all your energy into connecting with the object. Be there. See it. *Participate* in whatever you are writing about and then just let the words come of their own accord.

- You can fix the words later when you revise. That's when you can be savage: cut, correct, clarify, rearrange entirely. That's when you can and should think carefully about your audience and what style is appropriate; about your topic and what approach will work best. It's easy as you revise to make enormous changes in style, tone, approach, and structure and still keep life in your words.

- In your raw writing, don't let your words grow out of a conception or idea. It's *possible* to start with a conception—"Let's see. What about a story of someone who marries his mother by mistake"—as long as you are then willing to move past your clever idea into actually experiencing the events that are entailed by it.

But that is a dangerous route unless you are a very skilled writer. When you start out from an idea or scheme or gimmick, it is usually harder to *have* the experiences.

- Use memories. It is usually easier to experience things that actually happened to you than to experience made-up events or scenes.

- Write about what is important to you. If it is important, you will probably find the psychic energy you need to really connect with it or open yourself to it. But don't rely on intensity to arouse yourself or your reader. Intensity is often a prophylactic against experience. And peak experiences that never happened to you are especially hard to relive. But I mustn't be dogmatic about these subsidiary rules. Sometimes you can connect better with a big event, sometimes a little one. And some people actually connect better with fantasy events than with remembered ones. It's the main rule that is important: wherever the experience is, go there.

- I suggested earlier that if you want the reader to trust you or give consent to having an experience at your hands, you must trust yourself and not think too calculatingly about what you want to do to her. This may sound like impossible advice ("Don't think about sex" or "Don't put beans up your nose"). But if you follow the main advice in this chapter, you can achieve the purity of heart you need. If you just put all your energy into actually seeing what you are talking about, you won't have any attention left over for creating that distracting fog of self-doubt or manipulateness.

- Don't ask for too big an experience from your reader too soon.

- Learn to coach yourself, to give yourself pep talks as you write—especially if you sense yourself losing contact with what you are trying to write about:

Be there! See it! Hallucinate! Hear it! Feel it! Be that person!

Close your eyes and don't let yourself write down any words until you can actually see and hear and touch what you are writing about.

To hell with words, *see* something!

- Read out loud as much as you can: your own writing and that of others. It develops the crucial muscle you need for learning to focus your attention wholeheartedly upon the meaning of words as you emit them. Listeners can actually hear it when you let even a tiny bit of your attention leak away, and this will help you gradu-

ally to gain control over this slippery inner putting-experience-into-words muscle.

- Whenever you get feedback, always ask readers to point out the bits that actually made them see something or hear something or experience something. Insist on the real thing: not just what feels to them like impressive or earnest writing, but passages that actually caused movies in their heads. It is rare. Much of your writing will cause no movies at all. That's par. But when feedback shows you even a few short passages that actually do it, you will be able to think yourself back into what it felt like as you wrote them. This will give you a seat-of-the-pants feeling for what you must do to get power into your words—what muscle you have to scrunch or let go of to breathe life into your writing.

- Play the image game—with one other person or with a small group. Take turns giving each other images. If the listener doesn't actually *see* the image, then you must stop, stop trying to say words, and go back inside to work harder at actually seeing the image. Others must wait patiently for you to get there. They must allow you the time and silence and concentration you need to tune out your present surroundings and focus all your attention on the image you are trying to experience.

This game helps you most effectively if you start small. Focus only on a couple of objects. Instead of trying to describe that whole scene on the terrace, focus down on the small table next to the canvas chair: the number 2 pencil with a broken point touching a moist ring left by a cold drink on a plastic table.* And don't use narrative. Restrict yourself to what can be captured by a still photograph. Narrative is a way to get your reader's attention, but it is a rudimentary kind of attention, mere curiosity about what happens next. It doesn't make her actually build an experience in her head. Narrative is powerful but you need to have it *in addition* to experience in your words, not as a crutch or substitute for experience.

* It's by illuminating a tiny fragment of a scene and just suggesting the rest of it in a minimal way that you are most likely to get listeners to recreate the scene for themselves. One tiny detail serves as a kind of dust particle that listeners need in order to crystallize a snowflake out of their own imaginations. Trying to describe *everything* usually means that nothing really comes alive. And by zeroing in on just a detail or two, you establish your point of view.

These are good rules of thumb: start small, focus your attention on only a few details, let them be the spark for the listener's more elaborate creation. But the process isn't the same for everyone. The main thing is for the listeners to stop you if they don't get movies in their heads from your words; and your response should not be to search for better words, but to increase your efforts actually to see what you are describing.

- Don't let this chapter trick you back into your worst habits: "No, I'm not ready to write yet. I don't *see* it clearly enough in my head. I'm not having a *real* experience. I'd better go and look through some old photos I have. I will experience things better if I do some research or take a long walk or lie down on the sofa and close my eyes." Sometimes the best way to get to the experience of what you are writing about is through nonstop writing, even if at first the words seem dead, mechanical, and unfelt. It's all right to close your eyes and stop putting out words when you are playing the image game, with a live audience right there listening to you. The presence of others will ensure that you will come up with words before long. And if you happen to be someone who writes easily and is already turning out pages and pages and pages of writing that somehow lack power, *perhaps* it will help you to sit longer in silence before actually putting words to paper. But for most people, the important thing is to keep writing.

Breathing Experience into Expository Writing

What about expository writing: essays, reports, articles, memos, and other conceptual writing? They usually grow more out of thinking than out of sights, sounds, smells, or touch. Must they then fail to have power? fail to make the reader hear music? fail, that is, to make the reader construct an experience for himself? When we look for power in writing we certainly look more often to creative writing—narrative and descriptive and poetic writing—than to expository writing.

But there is the same distinction to be made for expository writing that I made above for descriptive or narrative writing: the distinction between words that have power because they grow out of experience and words that lack power because they do not. For the fact is that thinking about the bamboo is just as much an experience as seeing the bamboo. And just as people sometimes describe a remembered tree without fully experiencing it (thus the weaker image of the tree with flowers in the middle of the lawn)—indeed, people sometimes even describe the tree right in front of them without fully experiencing it—so too people can describe a *thought* without fully experiencing it. In short, seeing a tree, imagining a tree and having a thought about a tree are all mental events that one can experience fully or not so fully. And the problem in giving power to conceptual writing is the same as it is for giving power to descriptive or narrative writing: if you want your reader to *experience* your thinking and not just manage to understand it—if you want him to feel your thoughts alive inside him or

hear the music of your ideas—then *you* must experience your thoughts fully as you write.

But it's not so easy to describe the difference between "really experiencing" a thought and "sort of experiencing" it. For descriptive writing I could just say "See it!" and "Forget about language!" but you can't see thoughts and they only exist in the form of words—for many people at least. It usually helps to say "Feel it!" but feelings are not really the point. The essential act is participating fully in the thought. We say someone "believes what he's saying" or "speaks with conviction" and those phrases probably indicate that the speaker is experiencing his thought. But you don't really have to believe or have conviction about an idea to put your whole self into it—you just have to make some kind of inner investment or concentration of energy.

But in practice the situation turns out to be much the same for expository writing as for descriptive or narrative writing. The same kind of effort is needed: put all your attention into connecting wholeheartedly with your thoughts and get inside them instead of trying so hard to find the right language for communicating them. The same kind of advice makes it happen: "Close your eyes and go there! Be there! Stop worrying so much about describing your thoughts clearly or well!" Most people, in fact, benefit from being told "See it! Hear it! Feel its texture!"

If you are not really experiencing your thoughts as you write, pretend you are the first person who ever had that thought and write excitedly about your new breakthrough. Pretend perhaps that the idea is dangerous and write arguments against it. These are ways to connect with thoughts as though they really matter when you have lost your focus or concentration.

It also helps to put your body into it. Let your *muscles* react in some way as you say or write your thought. See which part of your body the thought wants to erupt through. Some researchers have found that children have a physical reaction—a piece of tension-release in some part of their body, a shiver or jiggle—when they figure something out. What's special about figuring something out is that it always consists of a *new* thought or a *new* connection, and you can't have a new thought without really experiencing it.

Thus you usually get more experience into your words when you are figuring something out for the first time than when you write about an old idea you've long understood. You see more in it and

write more vividly. Watch someone give a lecture he has given many times before. You can tell very easily whether or not he manages to re-experience the ideas as he explains them again.

If we ask why people should do this peculiar thing of "having a thought" enough to remember or explain it, yet not experience it fully, the answer is the same as for why people should describe images without really seeing them in the mind's eye: it's easier. You have to put out energy to experience something—even if it seems to happen without effort under ideal conditions. For example you might have had an important idea or train of thought last week which you want to write about. But now you are very tired or in a completely different frame of mind. You will tend to drift into telling your thinking more or less from memory. Your words will essentially be a reconstruction of a past event. It will take extra effort and investment to put yourself back again fully into last week's thinking, start it up again as a *present* event. If you do so and manage fully to experience your thinking, that will sometimes make your writing clearer ("Oh, *now* I see how I got from P to Q."). But sometimes it will make your writing messier ("This exciting idea seems to lead me in all directions at once. I can't stay on one track."). Coherence is not the goal of raw writing, life is. Coherence is what you must impose on raw writing as you revise.

Much of the writing we are asked to do in school or work involves explaining someone else's thinking. To do this well we must get inside that other person's idea. That's the mark of good popularizers of science, such as Isaac Asimov and Arthur Koestler. Perhaps they are describing what Kepler thought or explaining a basic fact of chemistry, but they manage better than most others to get themselves to *have* the ideas they want to convey. When we have to write about the thinking of others, we are especially likely to slip into the path of least resistance, the energy-efficient method: we summarize the ideas without really being there. That's why children who are never asked in school to write about their own thinking often get worse and worse at experiencing thought.

It's often some kind of distraction or confusion that keeps us from experiencing fully what we are writing about. If you are worried about your writing or about your audience's reaction you cannot keep your whole attention on what you are trying to say. I think of the classic scene where the student comes in to the

teacher about a bad grade on an essay. The teacher says, "I got confused. Tell me what you were driving at," and as the student gets involved in explaining his idea, his meaning gets clearer and his words more alive. "Why didn't you *write* it that way?" the teacher asks, and the student doesn't know why. But the act of writing an essay for the teacher took so much attention away from *experiencing* his idea—attention given to worrying about whether he was saying the right thing and saying it right—that his words ended up dead and dull and probably unclear. Note, however, that his spoken words were not, strictly speaking, *clear* or *coherent*. A transcript would show them as a mess. The teacher praised them because they managed finally to state the essential idea in a pointed and felt way—probably through some crucial distinctions. But this main idea and these distinctions were scattered here and there in a pudding of language which was a mess—but felt and alive. Notice, then, how this is a picture of exactly what that student should have written for a rough draft. The teacher is really praising a messy but lively first draft that the student probably didn't dare write.

In summary, then, I can make the same statements about expository and creative writing. Even though experiencing requires more energy than not experiencing, if things go well you naturally and easily do experience what you are writing about. To experience fully is natural, human, and alive. But when you are tired, under pressure, scared, or distracted, it takes an act of special effort and self-management to get yourself to experience fully what you are writing about. You need to learn to stop, concentrate your energy, and focus your attention wholeheartedly on your meaning—and do it so vigorously that you don't have any energy or attention left over for worries or distractions.

The Special Difficulty of Expository Writing

It seems especially rare to find essays and reports that take you past an understanding of the ideas actually to hear the music of those ideas. Teachers can usually get more power out of their students by asking them to write stories and descriptions from personal experience than by asking them to write from their thinking. Why should this be?

The answer is that it's not good enough to breathe real, experienced thinking into your expository writing; that thinking must also be *disciplined*. Thoughts are supposed to be coherent, that is, to begin at the beginning and follow along a single track and end up at the end or conclusion. And there aren't supposed to be any mistakes in logic. But that's not a picture of how the mind usually experiences thoughts. Our habitual thinking is seldom strictly logical but rather associational, analogical, metaphorical. We think and we experience our thoughts, but those thoughts are often rambling or even jumpy—and mixed up with feelings and stories and descriptions. To think three or eleven thoughts in a row, follow logic, and come out with the right answer at the end is something our minds can be trained to do, but we seldom do it out of school or work. Seeing and hearing we do all the time.

No wonder it seems harder to give readers an experience with reports and essays than with creative writing. You must *translate* more. There is a longer path you must travel from experienced thinking to acceptable expository writing than you need to travel from experienced sensation to acceptable creative writing. To take this longer path, either you must manipulate and censor your thought-experiences more as you try to write down correct thoughts in the right order; or else you must revise more as you transform your raw, uncensored writing into logical coherence. Either way—whether you practice internal manipulation or external revising—you are likely to lose more of your *experience of thinking* during the writing process. Hence the final piece of expository writing is likely to fail to make the reader hear music.

Expository writing *harder* than creative writing? It is usually assumed that anyone can learn to write acceptable expository prose but that only gifted or special people can learn to write creatively. "Oh, I can't write stories, I'm not a creative person, I'm just a normal person" is the assumed logic here. But this common assumption involves a double standard. More is demanded of creative writing than of expository writing. Creative writing must actually make the reader experience the sights and sounds and feelings it is trying to get across, not just communicate them. Otherwise it's felt as not worth reading, not worth writing. Expository writing on the other hand is called acceptable or even good if it does no more than make its ideas clear—even if the reader doesn't experience or

feel those ideas at all. Try saying this sentence to a creative writer after you have read his story or poem: "I understand *perfectly* just what you were trying to get across." He is liable to be crushed. "Didn't you feel anything? SEE anything?" It's a much worse put-down than if you just said "Huh?" But if you say exactly the same sentence to an expository writer after you read his essay or report, he will take it as praise. For the creative writer to "get something across," he must get the reader to feel it. For the expository writer to "get something across," he need only get the reader to know what it is.

This double standard can be defended, I suppose. After all, we only read creative writing for fun. If it doesn't give us an experience we put it down. It is a reader's market. But when it comes to expository writing it is often a writer's market. No matter how badly written that report or article is, often we may *not* put it down, we must keep on reading it and try to digest its ideas for our jobs or for our own needs. One might also argue that since everyone has to write expository prose for many tasks in life, but not creative writing, it is unfair to insist on talent. Mere adequacy should be called good enough.

But I object to this double standard. Speaking as a reader, I call it tyranny. We don't have to accept all this dead expository writing without fighting back. We can demand that it have experience in it. Of course a change in expectations will not automatically improve all expository writing. People write plenty of dead creative writing now even though they understand that it must have life in it or they have failed. But it would make an enormous difference if we could change people's attitudes and convince expository writers that their job is to make readers experience their thinking, not merely understand it.

I know it sounds crazy to talk of raising standards for expository writing when it is now so terrible in most realms of public and professional life. But look for a moment at what is terrible about it. Not just that it is unclear or full of jargon and formulas. The real problem is writers' refusal to take full and open responsibility for what they are saying. If a writer is willing to say, in effect, "I'm *me*, I'm saying *this*, and I'm saying it to *you*," his words will not just have more life in them, they will also be clearer and more coherent. The worst and most pervasive form of bad writing is some

form of hiding or chickening-out. "The great enemy of clear language is insincerity," writes George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language." Memo and report writers could no longer refuse to take responsibility for their words if they were really trying to get readers to experience what they were saying. Writing in this fashion they would have to invest themselves more in what they write, and as a result they would have more fun and not hate writing so much.

Perhaps I exaggerate. There is, it is true, a certain amount of expository writing that does make us hear the music of the ideas when we read it:

"The question is very simple. I requested the court to appoint me attorney and the court refused." So Gideon had written to the Supreme Court in support of his claim that the Constitution entitled the poor man charged with crime to have a lawyer at his side. Most Americans would probably have agreed with him. To even the best informed person unfamiliar with the law it seemed inconceivable, in the year 1962, that the Constitution would allow a man to be tried without a lawyer because he could not afford one.

But the question was really as far from simple as it could imaginably be. Behind it there was a long history—a history, that until recently had seemed resolutely opposed to Gideon's claim but now had started to turn and move in his direction. The question that Gideon presented could not be resolved without reference to issues that had been fought over by judges and statesmen and political philosophers—issues going to the nature of our constitutional system and to the role played in it by the Supreme Court.

We have come to take it for granted in this country that courts, especially the Supreme Court, have the power to review the actions of governors, legislators, even Presidents, and set them aside as unconstitutional. But this power of judicial review, as it is called, has been given to judges in few other countries—and nowhere, at any time, to the extent that our history has confided it in the Supreme Court. In the guise of legal questions there come to the Supreme Court many of the most fundamental and divisive issues of every era, issues which judges in other lands would never dream of having to decide.

The consequences are great for Court and country. For the justices power means responsibility, a responsibility the more weighty because the Supreme Court so often has the last word. Deciding cases is never easy, but a judge may sleep more soundly after sentencing a

man to death—or invalidating a President's seizure of the nation's steel mills—if he knows there is an appeal to a higher court. Justices of the Supreme Court do not have that luxury.

ANTHONY LEWIS, *Gideon's Trumpet*,
Chapter 6 (New York, 1964)

And our minds are naturally logical too, not just associational. For although Socrates doesn't prove in the *Meno* that the uneducated slave boy already knows the Pythagorean theorem from a previous existence, he does drive home that brute fact about all human minds: we cannot quarrel with correct logic once we understand it. Logic is built into us. Logic may even give deeper excitement than seeing and hearing. Certainly for many people the most intense music is the music of the spheres—the perception of built-in coherence in nature—and that is the music of pure ideas. We all have the capacity to hear it.

But the truth is that we don't hear it much these days as we read our allotment of expository writing. We could blame ourselves: if only we listened harder as Plato asked us to listen. But Plato didn't have to read most of the expository writing that comes into our hands either. (Socrates himself didn't believe in writing words down at all. He didn't think juice could be transmitted to paper.)

In any event my point still stands about the difficulty of giving readers a powerful experience with expository writing, and this difficulty can be restated in simple commonsense terms: for creative writing to be good, it has only to make the reader hear music; for expository writing to be good, it also has to be correctly reasoned and true. When you are writing about sensations in a story, you get to tell them any way you want, so long as you make readers feel them. You get to decide how you perceived them and what it was like and what order to tell them in. But if you are writing your thinking, everyone seems to have automatic permission to tell you whether it is true and what order it should go in. Since expository prose will probably be judged more for its truth and correctness than for its power, it is virtually impossible to write it without paying great attention to whether it is true and correct. How, then, can you possibly give all your energy and attention to experiencing that thought?

So why try? Why take all this energy away from the serious task of making your reasoning true and correct, and squander it on getting your writing to pulse with life, if that only gives readers a

more palpable experience of the muddle in your mind? Why not simply accept the fact that of course conceptual writing requires disciplined thinking; that of course discipline means following more rules than you must follow for creative writing. (That's why people who hate rules prefer to write creatively.) And therefore accept the obvious conclusion: to *experience* disciplined thinking, you have to *do* more of it. It's not enough just to invest yourself in your own muddled thoughts.

But when I look around at people who do a lot of disciplined thinking—people who are especially good at getting correctness and truth into their writing—I see that they are not necessarily better for that reason at breathing life into their essays or reports. Some are good at it, many are not. Philosophers, logicians, and mathematicians are probably the most disciplined of all thinkers, yet they are not better, as a class, than other writers at getting readers to feel their ideas. When, on the other hand, I look at people who are good at getting readers to feel their ideas, I see that they are not necessarily more disciplined as thinkers.

As far as I can see then, the ability to discipline your thinking and the ability to make readers *experience* your thinking do not necessarily correlate with each other. My conclusion is that learning to discipline your thinking is a good thing: it will improve your life in many ways; it will make your writing truer and more vigorous. Most of the suggestions in this book, especially in the revising section, are designed to help you get more disciplined thinking into your prose and will probably do so more effectively than if you took a course in logic. But learning to discipline your thinking won't, in itself, get you any closer to the goal of *this* chapter: making readers *experience* what you tell them.

Look at good popular expository prose in magazines and nonfiction books; even at good academic or professional writing (except for what appears in scholarly journals). Such writing often violates the rules for expository writing that are taught in school. It violates those rules so that the writing will resemble more closely the way people experience thinking. If we list some of the striking characteristics of how people experience thinking we will be describing characteristics found in much good published expository writing:

- We often experience our thinking with lots of "I, I, I" in it. The agent who is having these thoughts is often at the center of awareness. So, too, a good professional writer often explains his

ideas in terms of how he arrived at them or how he understands them.

- Trains of thought as we experience them usually do not start at the beginning, logically speaking, but rather at some perplexing dilemma or some striking fact or example that captured our attention and made us start to wonder about this whole issue. From this arresting detail we must often fight a long way backward to the logical beginning of the matter and forward to the concluding “answer.” That’s just how good writers often structure their essays.

- The mind often takes three or four different approaches to a problem before coming up with one that succeeds. So, too, will some good writers carry you through a few failed attempts before getting to an approach that succeeds. Theoretically this takes longer but sometimes it is the best way to help the reader really understand the problem.

- The mind often works by association, analogy, digression; we get lost and sometimes seem to lose or forget the thread of our quest even though, deep down, we are still working on the problem. A good professional writer sometimes permits digressions during which the reader may even forget the main point or question. Indeed, sometimes you can’t get readers to reconceptualize something till you get them to forget about it for a little while and come upon it unexpectedly from a new direction.

Natural thinking is often characterized by incoherence and error, too, of course, while good writing embodies disciplined thinking. But disciplined thinking need not be so different—in *style* and *structure*—from the way the mind operates naturally. That is, the thinking needs to be correct, but the writing can still seem more like someone puzzling something out or talking to you than like logical syllogisms or mathematical equations.

I don’t mean to say that it is impossible to breathe experience into the most strict, formal expository prose. But it is harder. The strictest, most formal expository prose I know is in academic journals, and writing there is notable for its deadness. The problem is not that these academics don’t understand what they are talking about nor even that they are undisciplined in their thinking. (Plenty are undisciplined, of course, but even the disciplined ones usually fail to get power into their articles.) But as professionals or academics writing in their official journals to their most rigorous colleagues, too often they—or I should say “we” since I also write

these articles—too often we allow ourselves to be too preoccupied as we write with whether we might be found wrong or with what a published, professional, learned essay ought to look like. When people try to conform to the strictest canons of expository writing, they seldom permit themselves to generate words out of a full and wholehearted experience of their thinking. Sometimes you can compare the same train of thought in a journal article and in a book by the same writer. The book version usually has a bit more life in it (whether it was written before or after the article) because the writer felt more as though he was following his *own* rules in the book.

The Dialectic of Attention

But even though the strictest rules for expository prose seem unnecessary to me, and even though you can probably write more informally for many audiences than some of your teachers have led you to believe, that is not my main point in this chapter. My main point is that if you want to breathe experience into your expository writing—to make your readers feel your ideas—you have an extra layer of difficulty that you don't have with creative writing. To breathe experience into your words, you have to pour all your energy into just experiencing the thought, yet in order to make it disciplined thought—however informal—you must also pour enormous energy into getting your thinking straight. These two goals conflict with each other.

Whenever you have to attain two conflicting goals, the best approach is to pay wholehearted attention first to one and then to the other in a dialectical alternation. If you try to reach for both goals at once—in this case experiencing your thinking and getting your thinking straight—you allow yourself to be tugged in opposite directions at the same time and you will just end up doing a mediocre job at both.

When I am writing something difficult for me—and this chapter is an example—I often have to switch my focus of attention back and forth more than once. That is, I start by putting all my energy into trying to experience my thinking as I write fast and uncritically: I try for total immersion in my thinking wherever it goes. But then during the next stage as I am critically revising and shaping my words and trying to make my thinking disciplined, I some-

times seem to lose touch with my ideas. As I try to remove blunders, to add clarifications, to deal with exceptions or counter-arguments, and to construct a logical order for my thoughts, I slowly sag, and the energy seeps out of my words, and the writing gradually gets more complicated or wooden or dead. I become very discouraged where originally I had been excited. And sometimes it's not just the language that begins to feel dead but the ideas, too: "How could I ever have been so excited about these ideas? They are so tiresome or so obvious or so wrong-headed or so merely-intricate," my feelings tell me. It's only after I have brought more discipline to my thinking (though I may hate it more)—and usually I have to retype everything because it has become such a mess—that I finally realize I must go *back* and put all my effort into *feeling* those thoughts. As I do this I find I can gradually remove dead language and put in live language, words that I can feel, words that have breath in them. This process of reinvestment usually involves trying to *speak* the sentences I find on the page, feeling how awful they are, and then trying to *say* the thought in language I believe. Having, in effect, examined this creature for defects, now I can let myself fall in love with it again, become vulnerable to it or feel its power, and thereby invest myself linguistically in it again. Only then can I dare let my real words come out, the words that actually have my breath in them. During that intermediate period of detached critical examination I had, without realizing it, retracted or hidden or fogged over the words that were actually part of me. But since this process of reinvestment gives birth to lots of *new* words—and often brand new trains of thought are sparked off—I usually have to turn my energy back to critical revising once again. And so forth and so on, till I have a set of words that will pass muster with both of my consciousnesses.

I make this story sound a bit neater than what often happens with me. The truth is more ragged: piling up a lot of writing with parts that excite me; trying next to shape and revise it and as I do so gradually getting lost, thrashing around in a swamp, sunk, discouraged; and then by a dogged sweaty process I don't clearly see, finally getting out of my dilemma to a draft I believe in. For I am now just beginning to understand this dialectic of attention—just now beginning to realize consciously that when I get too sagging and discouraged during the revising process, I need to start put-

ting all my effort back again into the process of simply experiencing my words. What this means in practice is that I need to go back and read over the good bits of my raw writing to get in touch with them, perhaps read over some revised sections that I feel pleased with, and perhaps do some more raw writing. When I am reinvested, then I can turn back to revising with critical consciousness.

Sometimes when I am working on something I have already revised and clarified and struggled with, I glance back at something in my original pile of raw writing and I am surprised: "Hey, none of my revised versions has the power and life—even crispness—of this original passage. I didn't know where I was going, I didn't understand the main point, I didn't see it as part of a sustained train of thought, but I stated this particular idea with more *juice* here than I've managed to give it in any later clarification." The point is, I now realize, that it's hard during revising to *enter into* that idea with the wholeheartedness that I had the first time. Some of my attention is dissipated on considerations of where it goes, how it fits, and how to say it best. And also, I'm simply not *trying* as hard—not pouring myself into it—since I feel I already know that idea, I've already stated it, I've already got it in hand. Therefore I don't need to *put out* so much. If you want to play tennis well you have to pour your attention into looking at the ball. You lose that concentration or focus or full participation in the ball when you feel, "Oh yes, I see this ball, I know where it's going, I've got this thing in hand." That's when you are apt to miss the ball or hit it wrong.

Advice

- When you have expository writing to do—essays, memos, reports, or whatever—start by putting all your energy into experiencing your thinking. If you don't *have* much thinking yet—if you don't yet know much of what you want to say—experiencing your thinking turns out to be the best way to get more. That is, let your early writing be raw. Use whatever trains of thought you have as they occur to you, including digressions, frustrations, and doubts. In addition use the words themselves that simply come out of your mouth as you open it and force yourself to write even if they seem wrong or stupid or unsuitable. You will have raw writ-

ing that contains, much of it, the breath of experience. But of course it may have other characteristics of spontaneous thinking: its connections may be associational and analogical more often than logical; it may have mistakes in logic even where you tried to be logical; it may have many false starts and digressions; it may start somewhere in the middle—or rather it will start and restart in different places and tend to go in different directions at once; the language may be unclear or unsuitable. And it may lack any clear conclusion. But if you simply pile up all your thinking as it comes to you, you can produce many good ideas and much writing with life in it. That's exactly what you need for a first draft. Next, as you shape and revise this raw writing, you can give it clarity and coherence. Finally you can end up with writing that is coherent and logical but also makes the reader experience your ideas.

- On some occasions, however, you will already know almost everything you want to say before you sit down to write. You can start then by getting your thinking straight rather than experiencing your thinking. Start, that is, by making an outline (full sentences), since that is the best way to cross-examine, correct and organize your thinking. With the structure and security this outline gives you, you can engage in the writing itself and as you do so pour all your energy into experiencing your ideas. But if you find that sticking to your outline somehow drains life and experience from your writing, then I would advise skipping the outline and following the words where they go and using the outline later for organizing your raw writing.

- You can give yourself pep-talks as you write expository prose: "Feel it! Am I really experiencing it or just settling for describing it from memory? Be someone who cares deeply about this idea!"

- Role playing as you write is one of the best ways to breathe experience into words. If you are writing about someone else's ideas or explaining information you don't care about, pretending to *be* someone else will help you get more involved. For example, if you have to write a report explaining the three policies that your committee must choose from, pretend as you explain each policy that you are the person who invented it. Tell the idea in the first person: "First I realized this, then that . . ." As you revise you can make the few changes needed to put it back into your voice, but the ideas will have life. If you must write about thinking that feels ancient, strange, or tiresome to you—if you feel you can't get

within a hundred miles of what you are writing about—pretend you are the first person who has ever had these thoughts and write an excited letter about your breakthrough. It can also help to be someone who *disagrees* with what you are trying to explain: “Yes, Mr. Darwin, that’s an interesting idea you have there, but I’m very upset by what follows from your irresponsible speculation.”

We are likely to assume that expository writing ought to emulate the kind of communication used by God and the angels: they communicate with each other directly, purely, all in one gulp. Humans, on the other hand, because our reason is clouded with mortality, must use discursive reason which gets at truth only gradually, step by step, imperfectly—often by means of a crooked path. Good expository writing—we feel—should be pure and direct and distilled. Or it should be like mathematics. There should only be the essence, none of the dross. Role-playing helps knock this assumption out of you. It makes you *talk onto paper*. Powerful conceptual writing is usually more like talking than like mathematics or telegrams between angels. It usually has lots of clayey, mortal imperfection about it: the writer is standing there in front of you and he has to explain one point at a time, sometimes back up to repeat something important, not be in a hurry, and sometimes pause and look around. When your expository writing goes particularly well, it is often because you have drifted into actually *speaking* to someone as you write. Later, during the revising process, you can remove some of the speech habits—“Oh yes, there’s something else I suddenly realized is very important to tell you”—that may make a written piece feel too chatty or cute. But you don’t have to hurry to remove them as long as you get them out eventually. The speaking *mode* of writing helps to breathe experience into words. Only speech has breath in it. (The role-playing suggestions in the Loop Writing Process, Chapter 8, though they are exercises for generating *new* thinking, are also ways to get more experience into your words. You cannot have new thoughts without experiencing them.)

- Give yourself as much practice as you can at putting experienced thinking on paper. That means keeping a diary or journal or folder for your thoughts and reactions. Have a place where you talk to yourself on paper and aren’t afraid to explore thoughts as well as feelings.

- But it also means writing down thoughts *when they strike you*.

Even if you are doing something else. If an idea seems important to you or if it relates to an important project, it is especially useful to write it down at the time. Allow yourself to find a scrap of paper now—or within five minutes—and write it down briefly. When a thought first intrudes on you, you can be sure you are experiencing it. Don't settle for saying, "I'll have to sit down and write about this idea when I get home." You may well be out of touch with it by then.

This method is important for me. It means sometimes getting out of bed for five minutes after I have turned out the light, or re-treating to the bathroom if I'm in a public situation where it's inappropriate to write myself a note, or writing on the back of a blank check when no other paper is handy, or tuning out in the middle of a meeting while I write down my own idea which the conversation somehow triggered. (It looks as if I am diligently taking notes on the meeting.) I find that many of my best ideas about X come after I have put it out of my mind and I'm thinking about Y.

Therefore, if there's something you know you have to write, it pays to *start* it as early as you can—that is, to sit down and do four or five pages of free exploration to fertilize your mind. Having done this, you'll find that many extraneous events during the next few days or weeks will trigger new thinking about your topic.

It's not much trouble. You'll be surprised by how quickly you can get down a rich train of thought when you are in the middle of something else or waiting to go back to bed—especially if writing has always been a slow ordeal for you. You aren't trying to write it well or completely, you're just trying to *capture* the experience of your thought. You'll feel enormously grateful when you do sit down later to write a full draft because you will have a little pile of thoughts to start from. Felt thoughts. Even as few as three are a fruitful pile because they were jotted down in different mental contexts so that when you set them to interacting among themselves—when you try, that is, to figure out how they relate to each other or which of them is true—showers of other ideas will come to you.

But don't just jot down key words or phrases, write a short note. Pure or distilled information usually won't carry experience. You need your information in the form of speech or syntax. It needn't be lengthy speech or correct syntax but it needs breath in it. Just

write quickly out of the feeling and drama of your sudden thought instead of translating into "essay language." Here is a note I wrote myself on a little scrap of paper when I was in the middle of something else (think I was listening to a lecture that was difficult to follow):

Do you want your reader to have to struggle to figure out what you are saying? Damn right! I had to work to figure it out. Why shouldn't he? Besides, if it's too easy for him, he won't appreciate it.

- Do as much reading out loud as you can. Of others' writing and of your own. It exercises the putting-experience-into-words muscle.

- Put your body into it as you write. Clench your fist, bang your hand on the desk, stamp your feet, make faces. When you connect wholeheartedly with what you are trying to say you may well find yourself crying or giggling or shaking. Let your body react just as it wants, and keep on writing, even if it feels peculiar. (It's not.) If you try to stop the tears or giggling you just make it harder to stay in contact with your thinking.

- Get a feeling, finally, for this dialectic of attention: since you need to invest singlemindedly in experiencing your thinking but also to invest singlemindedly in disciplining your thinking, the only way of doing so is to alternate between the two. Learn to notice cues that tell you when your attention is divided or when you are distracted or worried or pulled out of focus. Learn to make yourself *do* something about it. Stop, look around, and then pour your attention into experiencing or disciplining.

And even when your attention is focused one way or the other, learn to notice cues that tell you when you need to switch your attention to the other. Switch to disciplining your thinking when you feel a cycle of investment and raw writing is finished, when you are just covering the same ground over and over, circling unproductively back on your old ideas, or when a deadline is approaching. When, on the other hand, you notice you are getting too discouraged and stale as you revise—perhaps even making things worse rather than better, throwing away good bits, making needless changes, taking all the energy out of your language—switch away from disciplining your thinking back to experiencing it. Here are the best ways I know for reinvesting yourself in your thinking:

- Go back to your raw writing and read over the good bits.
- Read over revised sections that work well.
- Do new raw writing.
- Force yourself to *say out loud* your thoughts in words you would use in talking to a friend.

Writing and Magic

I seem to have drifted into a magical view of writing. In the last two chapters about experience I say that you must have a real experience for the words to have power, but it is almost as though I am saying that you must magically devour what you are writing about if you want to put a successful hex on the reader—must enter into the thing or merge your soul with the soul of the thing. In the two voice chapters I say you must be in the right relationship with yourself, but it is almost as though I am saying you must purify yourself in a blameless holy rite or else your words will not have grace. When you have gotten all the steps right in the magic dance, *bang*, your words have life, they “take.” When you miss some step in the dance, you can’t find the right words, or else you find the right *words*, but they lack inner juice and just buzz buzz fog static in the reader’s head. I seem to talk, in short, as though what’s important is not the set of words on the page—the only thing that the reader ever encounters—but rather something *not* on the page, something the reader never encounters, namely the writer’s mental/spiritual/characterological condition or the *way* she wrote down the words. A given set of words can be powerful or weak, can “take” or not take, as with a potion, according to whether the writer did the right dance or performed correctly some other purification ceremony before writing them down.

Could I really believe something this irrational? Surely not.

I guess.

But what if I really let myself take this magical view? What if I persuaded you to abandon your scruples, too, and give way to the

childish or irrational or primitive modes of thought that lie so near the surface in us all? What would we discover? I think we would discover a useful way to regard the writing process and some good practical advice. And some danger.

The magical view of language, in a nutshell, is that the word is a *part* of the thing it stands for—the word *contains* some of the juice or essence or soul of the *thing* it points to. If I write down someone's name on a piece of paper and then stick pins through these written words or burn them up I can thereby visit misfortune on that person. If I pronounce a curse on someone, pronouncing her name in just the right way, I can bring her bad luck. (Words, in this view, are no different from other symbolic objects: we can stick pins in a doll to kill someone; we can eat wolf for ferocity.)

When I let myself enter into this allegedly aberrant way of looking at language, the first thing I notice is how common it is. Few people, perhaps, *act* on the basis of magic or superstition, but most people feel its gentle tug. "Maybe it was sunny *because* I wore my raincoat." Few can prevent the occurrence of such thoughts. Magic is a powerful form of thinking, and few minds can turn off one mode of thinking just because it is discredited. When someone says, "I hope we don't get a flat tire," as everyone piles into the car, it is not so unlikely to hear someone else answer, "Oh don't *say* that, you'll give us one." More people leave off the last phrase and content themselves with "Don't *say* that," but this phrase carries the same implication that words *do* exert a pull on things.

There is something else I notice when I let myself take a magical view of language, and that is how many serious, professional, and otherwise rational writers dally with magic in their writing. They have to get the right pencil or chair or paper. If they get any steps wrong in the ritual dance they use in writing, they feel as though words won't come or that the wrong words will come or that the words won't be effective. In addition writers often have a great fear of *talking about* something they are writing or planning to write. It's as though talking will put a jinx on it. This implies various conscious or unconscious modes of thinking:

- The words will be ruined if they come out of the mouth instead of on paper. Speaking uses up or dissipates one's vital fluids for writing.
- If people hear the ideas, that will somehow suck them away.

- If writers *say* what they are trying to write before it is fully cooked, that will somehow fix it in the wrong language or structure. It mustn't see the light of day in any form till it has gone full term in the womb and been fully born.

- Effective spells must be prepared in secrecy and solitude.

I don't find any of this odd at all. If you invest yourself deeply in something as mysterious as writing, it's hard to avoid magical thinking.

Moderate Magic

But to get the benefit of a magical view of language, we don't have to go overboard. Let's be reasonably magical. I'm admitting, that is, that of course language usually functions just as the rationalists say it does. Of course a word doesn't have any of the thing's juice in it; it's just an arbitrary sign. We could just as well hang the sign D O G around the neck of cats. A dog is no more *like* D O G than a cat is. I am Peter but they could have named me Bill and I'd still be me. It's an irrational fidget to think of me as "Peter-like" and my brother as "Bill-like."

So much for most language. But I insist on exceptions. A few parents on a few occasions manage to name their children *right* so that the name really does make a difference. Some writers on some occasions really do restore magic to language. They somehow put juice into words and thereby cast a long-distance spell over readers. When readers cast their eyes on these rare magical marks they are made happy, they are galvanized into action, they are turned to stone or madness. And so here is the first dividend of adopting my reasonably magical view of language: it lets me state the writer's goal with utter simplicity, namely, the ability to write "flat tire" in such a way that air whooshes out of the left front U. S. Royal and the steering wheel tugs in the driver's hands.

For the magic used to be there. It was there for earlier societies and for each of us as children. Words were once connected in a more primary way with *experience* or *things*. That's why primitive people make mistakes in logic. Even Socrates, smarter than most of us, can make a silly mistake that we wouldn't make and base an argument, for example, on the idea that the shorter man has more shortness in him than the taller man. Logic had to be gradually developed and honed *out of* language. It took a ceaseless using and

overusing of words—words rubbing and rubbing against each other till they gradually get rounded and smoothed and unhooked from *things* and *experience*. That's why numbers and algebraic symbols are better for doing logic than words are. Words have to become less loaded, less magical, mere instruments of pragmatic use before people stop being fooled by them. Magic came first, logic later. Poetry came first, prose was a late development. Metaphor came first, literal language had to be invented.

Scholars and rationalists like to tell the history of language as a story of things we gained that our forebears lacked—in terms of the stupid mistakes the ancients made. But how about what we lack and what they had? They had power in language that's hard to capture now. In Homer and so-called primitive poetry and chants, we see how people in a pre-literature society seemed to have an easier time making good poetry out of simple and straightforward words. It's as though they had the knack of getting more juice into a set of utterly unprepossessing pragmatic words than we can do now even if we utter the same words—or at least only the greatest writer can now do it.

So, too, with children. They make mistakes because they use language magically. They say that dogs are called *dog* because they have dogness in them or look like *dog*, or because *dog* sounds like a dog. But children have more real voice. They talk poetically more easily than adults do. Yet what they make poetical—when you stop and look at it—often seems merely simple and straightforward. I'm not talking about the child's utterance that is clever "considering he's only a child"—which of course is charming in its own way.* I'm thinking about the child's words that are utterly simple. Children have available the gift of wholeheartedness, complete intentionality. That, perhaps, is one definition of innocence: meaning 100 percent what you say, not holding back, not leaking attention off to the side. As a child sitting in your lap will reach up and grab your chin and pull it around to make you pay attention to her when you are trying to talk to someone else, so the child has the gift of uttering words which force you with an equally graphic forcefulness to pay attention, the gift of writing words which force you as you read them to say them with full meaning and attention.

* Shakespeare loved this charm and often put witty clever words into the mouths of little children in his plays. But, interestingly, little children are among the least powerful of his characters in the impact of their language.

Children can command us. (People wouldn't have to resort to beating children if there weren't this awesome power in them.)

For adults in a modern literate sophisticated culture, words are cheap. Images, too. It used to be that a printed word compelled belief and an image gave experience. To be able to show the word or image in a book constituted proof. Words used to be expensive, images precious. Now they are often tiresome noise.

Must we then choose? Power or rational intelligence? Must we give up one or the other? It can seem that way. One thinks about modern academics, especially philosophers and sociologists. Their language is often voiceless and without power because it is so utterly cut off from experience and things. There is no sense of words carrying experiences, only of reflecting relationships between other words or between "concepts." There is no sense of an actual self seeing a thing or having an experience. Of course all language is just categories, strictly speaking, but this magical train of thought helps you realize that some language is more second-hand or thrice-percolated than other language. Sociology—by its very nature?—seems to be an enterprise whose practitioners cut themselves off from experience and things and deal entirely with categories about categories. As a result sociologists, more even than writers in other disciplines, often write language which has utterly died.

But of course there are academics, philosophers—even sociologists—who can write with real power. We can be sophisticated and still get magic into language. But the suspicion lingers that perhaps it is harder, it involves swimming against the tide.

This magical view of language explains an otherwise odd phenomenon in writing. You can tell immediately when a wrong name is used in a story by someone who is not a good writer. "*Harry* stood on one leg trying to get the chewing gum off his shoe." Perhaps everything so far has been skilled and compelling, but when you read "*Harry*" you *know* that the writer stopped and made up a false name. She was too timid to use her own name or whatever the real name was. It wasn't *Harry*. Everything else you believe, but "*Harry*" you don't believe.

Why should this be? It's mysterious. And not just for less common names like *Harry* or out of the way names like *Trevor*. Even if she had used *Bob* instead of the real name, it would still feel wrong—unless she had the truly good writer's trick of somehow in-

vesting *Bob* with juice. But then she could have called him *Egbert*.

The same thing happens with swear words. " 'Damn!' he muttered when a piece of bubble gum got stuck under his fingernail." You know he didn't say "damn." And it's not just because it's too mild a curse. Sometimes the inexperienced writer uses the naughtiest swear he knows but that too fails when it is invented rather than heard. There seems to be a bit of room for error when it comes to everything else in writing. You can get the color of the pond slightly wrong or the angle of the hair on her forehead. But names and swear words have to be just right or they light up and say tilt.

Really good writers, of course, can use made-up names and make them ring true, but unless you are terrific, you better have the courage to use your own name if you are talking about yourself in your story, or get your roommate's or your mother's permission. Or skip their permission. Otherwise, the wrong name will let the air out of your whole story. You can't make magic yet, so you better settle for the truth. Or rather you can get magic only through truth. Eventually, you will be able to get magic into lies.

This is a curious business, but it helps me notice that there are still traces of magic left in language. It gives a glimpse of what it might have been like when there was magic in all language—when we used gold rather than "legal tender." For names and curses are two *cul-de-sacs* of language. While most language has been grinding away for centuries into smooth, round, pragmatic symbols, semiotic chips, like pebbles being worn smooth by the sea, names and curses still have juice—they don't feel like purely arbitrary signs like red and green for stop and go, like ···---··· for SOS. Yes, they might have named me *Bill* instead of *Peter*, but once I'm Peter for a while, hooks seem to sprout between that name and the real me. We see it with national flags: the flag burner demonstrates her faith in juice as much as does the outraged onlooker. What if someone took your name and wrote it on a piece of lovely white paper, spit on it, crumpled it up, put it in the toilet, peed on it, and then flushed it down? Names and curses, then, remind us of what was there and what can be put back if we write well.

It is interesting that among modern theories of language, the one that fits best with this magical view is the most mechanical, scientific, prosaic, and least romantic: the behaviorist or stimulus-response theory of language. It tells us that we learn to talk the

way that Pavlov's dog learned to drool when the bell rang. That is, after Pavlov rang the bell to announce dinner, day after day, the response to dinner gradually began to generalize and become, in addition, the response to the bell. In the end, the bell alone was enough to elicit the saliva.

So, too, this theory says, when it happens enough that the child sees the ball and simultaneously hears people say *ball*, the response to the real ball slops over onto the sound, and gradually the sound *ball*, by itself elicits . . . what? a seeing? a sensing? a thinking about? an impulse to pick up and bounce? For here is where the critics of the theory pounce: "How absurd! Your theory says that I will behave in the presence of that mere sound *ball* just as I behave in the presence of the real red round bouncing thing itself." Which of course no one does.

But the sophisticates of the stimulus-response school have an answer. They reply that the response to the meat or to the ball is not so entirely generalized that we actually mistake the bell or the word *ball* for the real thing. They point out that not even Pavlov's dog *mistakes* a bell for dinner. He doesn't chew and swallow or try to eat the bell, he just drools. It's only a small portion of the response to the thing that slops over onto the sign of the thing. In fact, as we use a word more and more, as we become more knowledgeable ourselves in our use of language, a smaller and smaller trace of the response to the original object gets elicited by the word. Presumably a child just learning language is likely actually to see movies of a ball in her mind's eye when she hears the word *ball* or someone says "Where's your ball?"—and not just movies of any ball but *the* ball that she learned the word from. But as this child uses more words and more balls, the sound of the word *ball* elicits something more like what we would call an idea of balls in general rather than movies of her particular favorite old ball. (What you need to remember as a writer, though, is that there *are* movies of her deeply loved ball stored in her head and ready for screening any time, if only you can say the word *ball* right or say it in the right context.)

There is no lack of scholarly objection to this behavioral view of language. It is not now fashionable. But it does have a charm when you are trying to figure out power in writing. It suggests the very historical and cultural process we have noted: a gradual separation of word from thing. As people use language more they learn to

make fewer of those mistakes that come from confusing the word and the thing, yet they see fewer movies as they listen and read. In addition, the stimulus-response model of language fits nicely with the way people seem to respond to names and curses. In the case of names and curses—the least frequently used words—you see people going some distance toward actually mistaking the word for the thing. Perhaps the most extreme example is with the name of God. The Old Testament Jews were not to write or say His Name: that name itself contained part of God's holiness. And still, it is not uncommon for people to feel that by pronouncing the name of God or Jesus or Christ they make present a piece of God's holiness: an attitude of reverence is called for in the presence of the word, perhaps even a slight bow of the head. Certainly a capital letter in writing. And cursing with the name of God feels to them like an act of serious desecration.

So, too, with excremental and copulatory words. The horror of some people at hearing or reading those words shows that the sign elicits in them a substantial portion of their response to the thing itself. Many people, of course, are not quite so horrified; a much more fractional portion of their response to the thing is elicited by those words, but they are made vaguely uncomfortable, nevertheless. These people are not chewing and swallowing at the sound of the bell, not even drooling, but they are getting a whiff. And finally there are those sophisticates who feel that excremental and copulatory words are no more "loaded" than any other words. But those enlightened souls can probably remember precisely the time and place in their lives—often the army or camp or a boarding school—when those words were used so much—rolled around and bounced against each other and against the rest of language and experience so much—that they came to be "just like any other words." Fond memory: that wonderful first time in the linoleum floored hallway when you were able to say "shit" without the slightest internal quiver—just like the big girls. Here then, we see a reenactment in later life of that progression in children from a fuller response to the word *ball* to a more fractional response.

Names, too. The bit of God's essence in God's name is perhaps more obvious than the bit of me in my name, but we can feel it in certain circumstances. For example, if we are in a group from which one member is absent for some rather loaded reason—perhaps she has been expelled in an unpleasant way or she quit

with great anger, or the group is meeting secretly to plot against her or she recently died—the mere mention of her name is likely to carry enough juice to give those present a tiny shiver. Special circumstances make her absence so pervasive or deep that we can feel a trace of her presence in the sound of her name. We see the same thing when the lovesick girl or boy can't keep from repeating again and again the name of the beloved. I have learned—for another example—that people are more fully present in a group if they have introduced themselves by saying their name out loud. Once they have done so—even though they know their names cannot yet actually be remembered along with all the other new names introduced—they are more likely to feel part of the group and therefore to speak and respond to others or to feel that their absence will be noticed. If you want someone's full presence, it helps to ask for her name. When people only give their first name, as many young people now do, I believe they are really holding back just a little of their essence—just in case.

In our rational and sophisticated culture, then, names and swearing remind us that all language used to be loaded but now juice is in only a few corners. But the phenomenon of good writing—the fact that a good writer can christen her character “Trevelyn,” a huge trucker, and have Trevelyn say “Pshaw!” when he steps in a dog turd, and have it all feel real and give us movies in our head—this reminds us that magic can be restored to words. You can learn to give to readers an experience equivalent to when the little old lady sees “****” in print. You can make your reader react to the *word* as though you had thrown the thing itself right there in her lap.

Escape Route

But seriously now, can words *really* carry some magical essence of the thing? A thought experiment suggests an escape route if the magical view is too unsettling. Imagine a whole pile of bank checks written by different people. Perhaps you hijacked the mail truck and you have them all in your hand. There is no way to know from looking at the checks whether they are any good—whether there is money in the various accounts to cover them. But imagine that as you look at all these checks, suddenly one catches your eye. In some way you can *feel* with certainty that this one particular \$100

check is good, valid, solid. From looking only at the words before you on the paper, you can experience the existence of money somewhere in a bank. The check writer did what we all want to do as writers.

But imagine, now, getting a check for \$100 with a 10-page letter from the person who signed the check, explaining why she is giving you the money. From such a full explanation you might well be able to know with assurance that the writer really meant to give you the money and had made sure that the check would not bounce. After reading such a letter you would, when you turned to look at the check itself, feel the cash behind it. These mere words on paper, "one hundred dollars" would elicit from you much or most of the response you would have to the thing itself, the cash. But, of course, it is not the words on the check itself, alone, that give you this experience of cash in your hand, but rather the words on the check *in the context of* the letter. Maybe it's this kind of thing that happens when we feel words "carrying" some of what's not there. (Our response to real cash illustrates again the fact that "mere words" can carry juice—since real cash is nothing but words on paper, too.)

So maybe that's where the power in writing comes from that I want to call magic: context. For, in fact, it usually takes a longish piece of writing to give us the magic of a real experience—a passage long enough to carry a lot of context. A short passage or excerpt alone usually won't carry the magic you felt in those very same words as you were reading the whole thing. Perhaps it is all a trick of context that makes us know and feel when there is "money in the bank" for a particular story or poem or essay. You can, thus, write the word "ball" and make me see movies of my favorite old childhood toy, but only if you surround it with a bunch of other words that are just right.

We see it in lying. Most people don't lie well. It flusters them and makes some kind of tension in the body. They probably don't look the listener in the eye in the same way, or there are other little telltale movements in the body that somehow manifest discomfort. Thus the context makes a sensitive listener feel something fishy in what she is hearing, a note somehow not to be trusted.

So, too, perhaps with writing. Perhaps when we write something false—perhaps even when we write something slightly out of tune with our "real self" so that it goes against the grain of some

thoughts and feelings in our unconscious—we are just the tiniest bit flustered and uncomfortable and even though the reader is not there to notice a slipperiness in our eye movements or a restlessness in our hands, still there are comparable micro-fidgets in our syntax and diction. Inauthenticity will out.

And then, of course, there is the fact that some people are good liars. They can tell whoppers without any of those telltale signs. Besides writing a handsome \$100 check, they can also write that 10-page letter that makes you feel the cash in your hand. That's the ability that enables people to write great stories, poems, plays, and essays. "The truest poetry is the most feigning," says Shakespeare—and Auden echoes in a good poem about writing. It's the ability that frees the Shakespeares from having to write about what actually happened to them—writers who have "negative capability" and can create for the reader a seemingly limitless range of experiences they never had.

But that's the question. Is it really true that Shakespeare never experienced what it was like to be Miranda—a girl who'd never seen a man other than her father? Somehow he must have created that experience for himself. When someone who has never seen the sea writes powerfully about it, she must somehow or other have experienced it in her head. She could create it for herself even if she'd never lived it in the flesh. Presumably the trick of the good liar is somehow to get yourself to feel in some sense or other the reality of what you are saying. Of course you know it's a lie, but you are better than the rest of us at pushing that awareness off into one convenient insulated pouch at the moment of lying and somehow getting your mind and feelings—or your voice—to enter into these false words in some kind of act of "meaning it."

So if the magical view of language makes us nervous we can see our way clear now to abandoning it. Of course the words don't really carry any of the thing's inner juice, it's just a matter of the naïveté of listeners or the trickiness of speakers. Of course the check doesn't have any of the \$100 in it, it's just the accompanying letter. Of course there is none of me present when they meet without me and say my name. It's just that some people are susceptible to primitive reactions, perhaps because they feel guilty or bothered. It's true that old responses can be reawakened. They are there inside, waiting. We all have it in us to respond like the primitive, like the child, like the little old lady—to have a spell cast over us

by mere marks on paper. It happens when the writer is good enough. But there is no magic. There is just the cleverness of good liars and the eternal susceptibility of humans to respond magically. There is nothing but the effect of tiny, subtle cues in the context.

How disappointing.

But we don't have to abandon the magical view. My hunch is that the writer should keep it. That is, even though we could, like clever carnival swindlers, analyze the susceptibilities of readers (suckers!) and even though we could, like careful, white-coated, empirical scientists, hook readers up to wires and study which cues on the page make for magical responses—just as we could study how to lie well by analyzing the wrong movements that give most of us away and the right ones of the masters, nevertheless we'd be better doing what I'll bet master-swindlers and liars really do: they put their focal attention on their *meaning* rather than on their movements or those of their victims.

It's all analogous to learning to use a cane if you are blind or blindfolded. In truth, the borderline between yourself and the outside world is where your hand touches the cane. The farthest outpost of sensation or awareness is your hand. Yet it is useful—and it turns out to be natural with almost everyone—to permit a more magical view and slide your awareness past your hand down the cane to its lower tip. By putting the focus of attention on the place where the street bumps against the cane, instead of the place where the cane bumps against your hand, you learn to behave as though the stick is part of your body: you can learn to feel not the pressure of the cane on your hand but the pressure of the curb on the cane.* If you make this act of putting-yourself-in and learn to treat the stick as part of yourself rather than part of the outside world, then the stick does become part of you. You will feel that familiar shudder when the cane touches the fresh dog turd, even though strictly speaking you didn't touch it at all.

The writer, then, writes well by putting magic *into* words just as the blind person sees well by putting herself into the cane. If the writer is putting her attention on subtle reactions in readers and subtle telltale syntactic qualities in her writing, she will be as inefficient as the blind person who tries to read the street by restricting her attention to the actual pressures in her hand caused by the

*This example comes from Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge: Toward A Post Critical Philosophy* (Chicago, 1974).

cane. Such an approach requires so much *translation*—"Let's see, if this effect, then that cause, and therefore I should make the following move . . ."—which, in turn, causes a cloud of self-consciousness and fog, in the behavior of the writer or the cane-wielder.

You need to be like the ancient mariner who has the power simply to look the reader in the eye and start talking and thereby paralyze her: prevent her from moving away, compel her to listen, and compel her to experience everything you are saying. This will come quickest by concentrating not on the details of your technique, but on the importance of your tale. If you succeed in *really* believing your tale is deeply important, you already and automatically believe in magic without giving the matter any awareness at all.

All the rituals that writers perform, then—"I've got to have a number 2 pencil with a perfect point. I must work at certain times and places, I must never read over what I've written on the same day I write it, and if I talk to anyone about what I'm writing, it will be ruined"—these rituals and fetishes are testaments to belief. Belief in the magic of getting words to come out of one's guts and a belief in the power of words to hit readers in the gut.

Belief produces that universal injustice proclaimed by Christ: the rich get richer and the poor poorer. Someone who manages to have success in writing tends to write suddenly better. She's finally learned to believe that she *can* wield magic. She half-doubted it before. With her success comes belief and with that comes a sudden infusion of new power. Belief is the source of a child's power. The child *commands* our attention because it doesn't enter her head that we could do anything else but pay full attention. One of the saddest sights of all is that spunkless child who lacks this power to command attention: she's gotten so little trustworthy attention that she's lost her knowledge that of course her words have power.

But most of us somewhere on the way to adulthood also lost our knowledge that of course our words have power. "Naturally," explains the realist. "That's what we mean by being an adult. Tiny children cannot help thinking that their words—even their unspoken wishes—magically cause events. But if children want to grow up they must learn to see cause-and-effect accurately and forsake primitive wishful thinking." Yes, I reply from my moderate magi-

cal view, we must learn enough realism to understand that our every wish and word do not cause action in the world. But we must not go as far in our "learning" as most people go when they end up feeling they cannot put magic into words. If it is childish to believe that our every wish causes action in the world, it is equally childish to sulk at the loss of omnipotence and conclude that individuals are helpless to change the world and that words cannot move mountains. They can. A few people have power all the time; most people have it occasionally (though they tend to forget about it or try to explain it away); and everyone has power available.

The agenda for the writer then is clear: to regain that ability to put magic into words. It takes more, of course, than merely believing in magic. It takes practice and skill. But belief is necessary, and the amazing thing is how far belief can take you toward doing it—especially if you have already worked hard on your writing.

What does this mean, then, in practice? I think it means the kinds of advice I gave in the Voice and Experience chapters. The activities I advised there are activities of really *doing* it: putting your awareness all the way out to the end of the cane, not merely to the end of your fingers. In a sense, you can only send your experience as far as the page, but you need to *think* your experiences all the way through to the inside of your reader's skull.

More advice. Use the truth wherever possible. Real events. Real names. In addition, however, practice lying whenever possible. The entrance into magic is through the truth. By putting real experiences and your real self into words you will get a feeling for what it is like to wield magic, and with this feeling you can begin to practice telling lies—practice "having" experiences you've never had, practice getting your real self or whole self entirely behind words that are false, ironic, ambivalent, or even evasive. (Some people, of course, cannot tell the truth convincingly, but they can tell lies or wishes or dreams with compelling power. To be strictly accurate, then, I should not advise so unqualifiedly to start with truth. The best advice is simply to believe in magic and find where your magic lies readiest to hand. Once you get a feeling for your ability to put magic into words, then you can learn gradually—don't hurry—to expand the range.)

More advice. Magic is catching. It can help enormously to put yourself in the company of people who are succeeding in using their magic. Read their words. Listen to them read their words out

loud. Write in the same room or the same building with them; write when they write; look for chances to go off with them for a day's or a week's work-play of writing and sharing. Read your words out loud to them. (Try to avoid two dangers: don't get negative feedback from them on your writing if you are not genuinely ready for it or if they give it destructively. Just insist that they listen and praise the bits they like. Secondly, don't let yourself be intimidated: "Oh dear, they can do it, I'll never be able to do it." Try to keep these helpless feelings from depriving you of the enormous boost you get from being with people who are using their magic.)

You can catch magic even from yourself. That is, it can help a lot to read over pieces of your own writing that you know are successful and powerful. Read your good words silently; better yet out loud. This gives you the actual psycho-muscular feeling for what it was like to put juice into words. By reawakening this memory/feeling, you can more easily get into that gear again. Reading over your own good work is particularly useful when you are having a hard time getting warmed up—perhaps after a long period of non-writing.

Success is infectious. Don't therefore start by trying to write the Great American Novel and sending it off to the best publishers, or sending poems off to the *New Yorker*. Instead of inviting continual rejection, insist at all costs on being published and read. Find small or informal magazines, presses, publications; if necessary, crank it out yourself on a mimeograph machine and distribute it to readers you know. Write for audiences you can actually reach: people who know you and like you, people who will understand you, people for whom your words will work.

I can't decide whether my reasonably magical view of writing is literally true or not, or whether the stimulus-response account of language is the correct one or not. I don't quite know how one might settle the question once and for all. But the magical view is useful. For teachers, critics, and theorists will always be tempted to try to specify exactly what characterizes good writing. Some talk about certain kinds of syntactic complexity (certain numbers of words per "T-Unit," for example), some talk about sensory specificity or the absence of generalizations, some talk about unity or coherence or ambiguity or tone. It's inevitable. If I had some good ideas about what constituted good writing I would get excited and

try to tell everyone. But the magical view saves us from these precise specifications. And that is a good thing for two reasons. First, I think they are false: whenever I see an abstract description of what makes good writing, I always think of actual cases of good writing that violate it. Secondly, such descriptions take your attention to the wrong place as you write. They make you think about the writing as you write instead of about your meaning or topic—they preoccupy you with making sure your words have the right characteristics instead of whether you can really see the bamboo; they make you look at the glass in the window instead of through to the view. Most of all, the magical view of writing helps you believe what is necessary and true: that your words can have enormous power.

But the magical view has dangers. It can trick many people into believing what is false and destructive: that the *source* of this power is entirely outside you, that power comes from stern-eyed gods or fickle muses or from the state of your soul (which you can't see or judge), or from "it," or from standing out of the way, or from getting all the steps right in some mysterious ritual dance. The magical view can reinforce helplessness and lead to feelings like these:

- I don't know where the power comes from. All I can do is hope and pray. Nothing I *do* makes any difference.
- What I've written is worthless because I've been using the wrong colored 3 by 5 cards or writing at the wrong time of day. There's nothing I can do to improve it now.
- I've talked too much about this piece and frittered away all its vital juices. There's nothing to do but give up on it.
- I can't revise or improve this piece; the words just came to me because I stood out of the way, they're not *my* words. If I make any change the whole thing will come entirely apart and I won't be able to put anything back together again.
- If I ever lose what I've written I can never rewrite or reconstruct it.
- I can't write today; my focus is all wrong and besides I've missed the fruitful time of day.

Thinking in terms of magic can also trip you up by making you *want* magic too badly—make you unwilling to slog along writing mediocre, dead, even terrible words. Everyone has the impulse to put off writing till the mood is right. Mere laziness, perhaps, but

also it reflects a truth—sometimes you have magic and sometimes you haven't—and a falsehood—that when you haven't got it, no amount of effort or shrewdness will do any good.*

But magic isn't everything. Sometimes what you need most is just to get something written, and wanting magic too badly will keep you from doing so. Often you can write something that is true and clear and important—but lacks magic. If you had insisted on magic you would have written nothing at all.

I return here, then, to the main theme of my book. You must learn—and for some reason you often have to relearn—how to churn out words whether or not you feel in tune with what you are writing. The precondition for writing well is being able to write badly and to write when you are not in the mood. Sometimes you cannot get to the magic except through a long valley of fake, dead writing. Though you must believe in magic, then, often you must be willing to do without it.

*“You can create magic by disciplining yourself to write and work and concentrate. Like the medicine man, you can do it on command. (Professional writers do, and have the appropriate accompanying rituals.) It's not just waiting for it to happen to you, on the one hand, or pouring out words on the paper hoping it will come, on the other hand. It's some way, through ritual, concentrating, working very hard, of getting yourself into *that state*. You can force yourself to *see*. The way may be long—lots of dead words or cigarette butts—but if you've once experienced it you'll try for it again.” Margaret Proctor, a good writing teacher, commenting on a draft of this chapter.

A SELECT ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY ON PUBLISHING

Prepared by J. C. Armbruster

Bowker Catalog. R. R. Bowker, 1180 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N. Y. 10036. Free.

This outstanding selection of books on book publishing introduces you to major channels of contemporary publishing, as well as standard references on publishing markets.

Coda: Poets & Writers Newsletter. Poets & Writers, Inc., 201 West 54th Street, New York, N. Y. 10019.

This monthly newsletter is a primary guide to contests, grants, scholarships, and other recently created writing opportunities. It also profiles new magazines, and features short articles on current publishing trends in fiction and poetry writing.

Directory of Little Magazines, Small Presses, and Underground Newspapers. Edited by Len Fulton and James Boyer May. Dustbooks, 5218 Scottwood Road, Paradise, Calif. 94969. 1979.

The acknowledged reference for writers starting into the little magazine or self-publishing markets. These listings are especially useful for the beginning writer seeking reviews of a self-publishing book.

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A cataloged listing of women's presses and other non-sexist publishing groups, this publication provides a good contact list for women breaking into print.

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A monthly magazine full of articles, stories, and advertisements that will interest writers of all sorts.

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One of the important literary agents of our era talks about writing and selling fiction.

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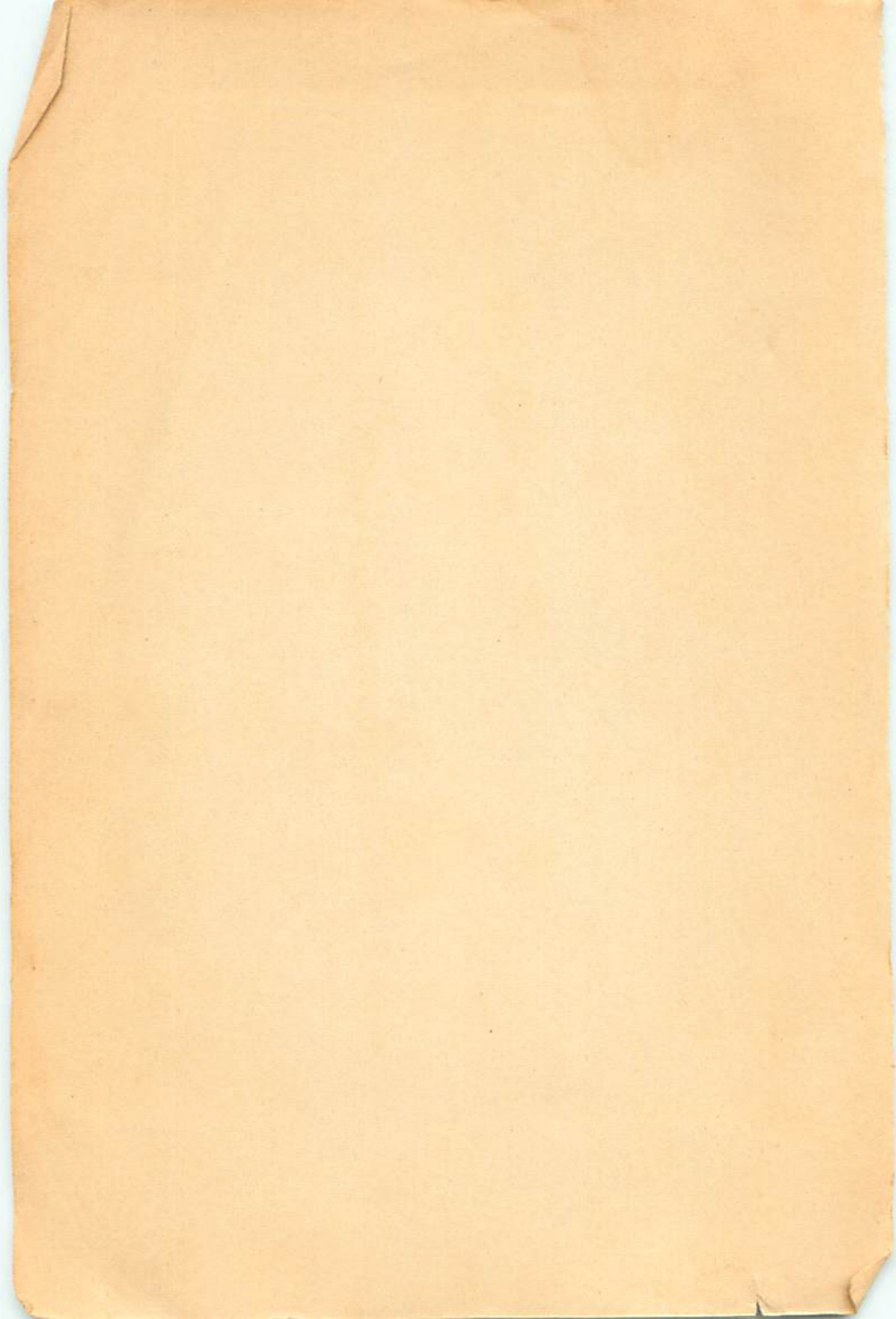
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