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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

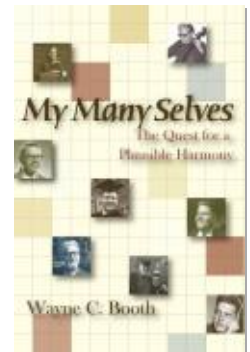
Published by Utah State University Press

Booth, C..

My Many Selves: The Quest for a Plausible Harmony.

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2006.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



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Chapter Thirteen

A Would-be Novelist Mourns behind the Would-be Lover and Would-be Scholar

A systematic, fifteen-year probing of ALL possible sources has revealed, surprisingly, that there are absolutely no quotations about creative writing worthy of insertion as epigraphs for this chapter. Apparently no novelist or poet has ever uttered a quotable opinion about what it means to be creative.

—W. Clayson Booth, director, Humanities Research Institute

I know you're being ironic, but what about Kafka's "I have nothing to say—ever"?

—Brandon Hopkins, graduate editorial assistant

January 15, 2005

This morning, half awake, thinking about turning eighty-four next month, I was suddenly jolted with the thought: I really should call up my novel *Cass* from the old floppy disks, revise it, and *get it published!* Only two or three minutes later, *fully* awake, did I hear a voice shouting, “That would be absurd. You should spend your time showing how that hopeless longing relates to the conflict between the would-be scholar and lover.”¹ The non-novelist surrenders, and here we are.

Once I’d become hooked into reading famous novels and poems in my midteens, I inevitably had dreams of becoming a novelist or poet. I had always enjoyed making up stories, some of them the outright self-serving lies that I’ve reported here, some of them jokey stories intended only to entertain. But the dream of turning that minor gift into true authoring usually felt hopeless. For one thing, I knew that all of the successful writers lived in New York or Chicago or London or Paris. We lived in the sticks, in the boonies, in what we called the “tules,” pronounced toolies; obviously I was simply off the chart.

But the dream persisted. In the ninth grade I managed to win the school prize for the best short story, an adventure story that was pretty much stolen in its basic plot from *Tom Sawyer*. In my junior year, induced by my English teacher Gean Clark to read a good deal of the best current fiction (including the “sexy novels” by Aldous Huxley that my sexy contemporary Zola Grant had also introduced me to), I finally wrote a “powerful” short story about falling in love with an English teacher. Miss Clark judged it a rather poor job—I assume rightly—and gave it only a B+.

She couldn’t have known that the seemingly confident kid she met in class was constantly quarreling with another Wayne C., who was absurdly vulnerable to even the slightest negative criticism. She probably intended her B+ to mean “Not a bad start, but as the best student in the class, you can

1. I hope, dear readers, that when I report these “voices,” you don’t assume they are “real,” like those of *Beautiful Mind* schizophrenics.

surely make it a lot better.” But the hypersensitive boy, trained by a widowed mother to respond with abject despair to any criticism while always trying to get ahead, took the B+ as saying something like “You’ll never be able to write good fiction. Give it up.” Which I did—for a while. I can’t remember attempting another story for about nine years—except in my head.

Anyone whose writing ambitions could be that easily crushed should have recognized that he simply had no real drive to become an “author.” A genuine budding creator would have gone on writing, like Sylvia Plath or Flannery O’Connor or Saul Bellow, producing poems or stories daily no matter what anyone said about them in the rejection slips. The inner drive in such creators turns out to be uncrushable, even when they accumulate piles of rejections. But Wayne C. was always crushable.

I did go on dreaming of writing *something*. Occasionally I would write a poem for my diary—never submitting it anywhere for publication. Out of respect for you, patient reader, I quote only one more example of the crummy stuff. (See the even worse one in chapter 7.)

(1941)

The moon, heartless wanton,
 Glides, still veiled, onto her balcony.
 She slides back her veil a little, and a
 little more
 Until, seeing that her purpose is accomplished,
 Seductively she disappears into her room,
 The cloud-thick sky.

The scarcity of such feeble examples demonstrates the absurdity of my occasional dream of becoming a poet or novelist. I more often thought of becoming a journalist. I did get hired for a while as a “stringer,” sending American Fork news to the *Salt Lake Tribune*. I later wrote a weekly column for the college paper at Brigham Young University, calling it “From This Booth” because the editor, my cousin and lifetime friend “TY,” was also named Booth. The column was full of satire and irony and comic poems—some by me and some falsely claimed as mine.

Sometimes the creative impulse got deflected into political polemic. World War II was heating up, and the nation was failing to see its duty to join up with England. I published several columns and did one radio interview arguing passionately against the “America Firsters.” But, of course, such efforts were totally off the creative writing track.

I actually produced no manuscript pages that I thought publishable until I returned from the war in 1946, married Phyllis, and started graduate school.

I did have fantasies throughout those years, even during the war, about becoming a novelist. Here's how I played with the idea in a letter to Phyllis.

19 April 45

I think of you constantly. What, constantly? Well, almost constantly, ce qui est a peu pres la meme chose. . . . I suppose I shall have to write a novel, a very fine novel, putting in convincing terms your wonder and loveliness, our love at however many thousands of miles away it is; the hedonists, the skeptics, the moderns who have ceased to believe in love like ours, *must* be told of it some way, and a novel is the only way. "But," you say, "Wayne, you never finish anything you start writing. A while ago you told me you were writing for some French journals, and I've never heard anything more about it. And now you talk glibly of a novel. What makes you think you have the talent for writing a novel?" Now is that any way to support me and be my helpmeet? . . . Why not write a novel, in which I could show the thousands of various currents of thought running around me here in France, and inside me away from you? No specific statement about France, or about the soldiers, or about myself, is true, in itself. It would be true only in the context of a large novel.

Undoubtedly I shall always be a writer who never writes anything; but I insist that it is better than being a non-writer who writes carloads.

He then launches in to his decision to become a teacher.

I later joined a "creative writing club" on the Chicago campus, attended regularly, and finally took my turn to read aloud a short story—the manuscript of which I still long to find in my stack of "remains." It was based on a real experience in Paris in early 1945. What follows here is today's crude summary of the story I saw as quite vivid and clever.

At the Red Cross center a handsome man in his thirties spoke to me in French: "We French people feel very grateful to you Americans for what you have done. Would you like to have dinner with my mother and me to let us express our gratitude?" I eagerly accepted; what a relief from the boredom of my daily eight-hour typing in the G2 (Intelligence) office.

He and I spent the afternoon strolling along the Seine, probing book-stalls on the left bank, discussing literature, mainly Proust and Gide. . . . We then went to have dinner with his mother, a quite good dinner considering the rationing at the time, and then he invited me to go with him to his apartment. I went—and of course the point of the story, as in my actual experience, was that the young Mormon/American hadn't taken in a single hint of the gay host's intentions.

When the seducer finally made his approach clear, I was shocked, scared, stupefied. I fled his apartment, with him following, pleading, accusing me of having misled him. “How could you have not understood what I had in mind? How could you not know that, when I brought up Gide and Proust, I meant to lead to love. Did you just ignore those photos of nude boys that fill my apartment walls . . . ?” And so on. He followed me to the Metro station, pleading all the way, and he was still pleading as the train door shut and I escaped, feeling about as stupid as I have ever felt, before or since.

The response to my reading of the story draft was apathetic—not to say pathetic. The faculty member who directed the Club lambasted it, saying something like “All that homosexual stuff just won’t go.” None of the other aspiring writers said, “That was terrific,” or, “You should publish that.” So I simply put it aside and forgot about becoming a “writer,” concentrating instead on succeeding as a “scholar.”

As I think back on my story of the cheated gay, I believe it could have been turned into something not just publishable but a step toward the forefront of gay studies—perhaps as a hated target, perhaps not. I would have had to do a lot of restructuring, including more work on making plausible the naïveté of the narrator. As the Frenchman had insisted, it was simply incredible that any intelligent young soldier would not have understood the host’s intent after the first twenty minutes standing on the Pont looking down the Seine and discussing whether we thought that Gide “went too far” in his open acknowledgments of homosexuality. But how could that experienced French lover, receiving sign after sign that seemed favorable, have suspected that he was dealing with a Mormon boy from Utah, son of 1,000 percent “straight” pioneers (as far as the boy knew), who had never in his life been seriously solicited by a male and who had, in college and as a missionary, “slept with”—that is, shared beds with—dozens of males without the slightest hint of sexual interest?

Anyway, instead of polishing that rescuable story after it was criticized, I put it aside and quit the club. The creative impulse was crushed. I was convinced once again that I did not possess the gifts of a genuine imaginative writer. Was I right? I think so. That is, one Self thinks so; another Self reproaches me almost daily for having been oversensitive to the critique.

The impulse to write did go on rising and falling over the next few years. In 1953 I lament in my journal, “To have fifteen or twenty unfinished stories, novels, books and articles lying around is a very disorganizing experience.” In 1954, late at night, I wrote, “I haven’t, at this sleepy moment, the slightest doubt about being able to write a passable novel; no, really, I haven’t. But it

would be only passable, by which I mean good but not great, and so why not go to bed?"

The most serious effort was based on my dissertation experience. *Tristram Shandy* and *Tom Jones* had turned me on to the joys of complex narrative trickery—playful “meta-narration,” a form of intrusive, meandering “telling” rather than simply “showing.” It was a style that my earlier passion for Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and Dickens had largely overlooked. My probing into millennia of “self-conscious narration” had placed narrative irony at the center of my thinking about all literature, and after publishing a few ironic spoofs—such as a demonstration that Sterne’s book had in fact influenced every author back through the past, including Homer—I decided that the time had come for a narratological breakthrough (of course, that fancy term didn’t exist yet).

My novel, to be called something like “*Farrago: The Last Derivative Novel*, by Polygamy M. Smith, Ph.D.,” was designed partly to mock the creative writing program at the University of Iowa. After an epigraph quoted from *Finnegans Wake*—“Bringem young, Bringem young, Bringem young”—it began with the following fake acknowledgment.

This novel was originally written as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and submitted to the faculty of the Division of the Humanities, Department of English Language and Creative Writing, at Epicoene University (Co-Educational), Epicoene, Wisconsin. The degree was awarded with highest honors.

The hero/narrator, Polygamy Smith, was the son of polygamous Mormons, grappling with how to tell his complex story. He dedicates it to “Venia and Zephania, whose failure to marry my father made this book possible.” This is not the place to quote it at length, but as I now read over the manuscript, my Failed Creative Self curses me for not having pursued it further. It was, for that time, an avant-garde work; if polished and pushed, it might have placed as forerunner of John Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy* and the flood of Philip Roth’s trickeries.

Of course, by now it would strike any up-to-date reader as old hat—and by no means as good as the works of Roth and Barth. Like me, many readers are a bit tired of the excessive Tristram-Shandyism of works like Salman Rushdie’s otherwise brilliant *Midnight’s Children*. But at that time my novel would have been absolutely “before its time.”

So why did I drop it, after months and months of serious labor? Again it was the lack of praise. I was receiving rejection slips right and left (not only for the book drafts), usually accompanied with little encouraging notes about revision but never with “please resubmit.”

August 15, 1951

Funny thing about my many rejection slips. As soon as I get one more, my total summer's output will have been rejected. I should have got a job in a factory somewhere.

Another discouragement was that Phyllis was deeply skeptical about the budding novel. In May of 1950, when I had told her I was thinking of maybe shifting the center from polygamy to polyandry, "She was critical and immediately my enthusiasm turned to gloom. Surely it wasn't worth bothering about." Then the final rejection slip of the summer arrived. I had submitted fifty or so pages to the fiction contest run by *Furioso* magazine and didn't win.

VainB reacted exactly as he had when Gean Clark gave him only a B+ and when the Writing Club Director rejected the short story. "If it doesn't win, I should give it up." So I just filed it away, consoling myself sometimes with the thought "Someday I'll polish it." (Like all my accounts, this one no doubt oversimplifies matters. After all, throughout my writing of that novel, I was apprehensive about its effects on my devout Mormon relatives and friends. For all I can know for sure, fear of hurting others and being hurt in response was an even stronger motive for dropping it than was my sense of inferiority.)

In August I wrote,

I was tempted for a while today to say to myself, "Forget the effort to do anything creative and stick to scholarship, where you can be sure to publish everything you write." But I didn't maintain that idea for long. I have too many ideas left undeveloped to drop them easily or lightly. . . . I cannot hope to be anything more than a small writer of small things, I suppose; I have begun too late—I spent too long in idle-dreaming. But I can do those small things well.

So I rejected all temptation to do anything "large"—any other novel—until about 1975, just after publishing two "uncreative" books in 1974. But in 1975 I got turned on by another idea for a satirical novel. I was then, as I am now, a bit fed up with the almost universal habit, even in first-class writers, of dwelling on despair about the world, about life: *everything* is shit, there's nothing in life but awfulness, there's nothing to do but curse (cleverly).

So I decided to do—well, not quite what one could call a novel; the whole point was to be a satire "passing" as a novel—a mocking of the despairers. I was pursuing the opposite of Voltaire's *Candide*; instead of mocking those who are too optimistic, I would mock those who are too pessimistic. The plot would revolve around a beautiful, cheerful college student named Cass Andor

(spoofing “Cassandra,” the truth-telling, despair-touter in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*); she comes to a secular college as a Mormon, full of optimism, and she is slowly immersed in, mentally seduced by, the clever despairers.

As Cass’s actual life proceeds in utter good cheer, her ways of talking about life grow nastier and nastier, imitating her philosophical idols, especially young Professor Gemmisant (French for “moaning, wailing, creaking”). She does a chapter of sour-witty aphorisms about life. She has just made one entry consisting of what she has decided not to call *profundities* but *neatlies*—efforts to imitate the wit of the despairers. Here’s one of them.

“Love is as tough and inflexible as Hell itself.”

By this point in the draft, I portrayed her as excited about a new project that has occurred to her while reading in the crazy collection of banalities that Flaubert uses as the appendix in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. She has just been sitting there, when suddenly she thinks of a project that would be a lot better than Flaubert’s, one that would open up the abyss, open it up right before your eyes. She hasn’t been planning it; the neatlies just flowed in, the first one like this:

“One way in which I’m weak is that I never seem to compare myself negatively with other people the admirable way you do.”

It wasn’t *very* neat, but if you thought about it for a minute, a hole opened right up in the floor and swallowed you. Didn’t it?

Now she was trying some others:

“One good *mutatis mutandis* deserves another.”

“I don’t think very clearly when I get muddled.”

“I can take people’s emotionalism; but after it’s gone on for a while, I just blow up.”

“Who are *you* to claim the right not to be presumptuous?”

“What I want most in life is to be known as the woman who of all women is least concerned about what other people think of her.”

“In general one can expect a surprising amount of trouble.”

“True confessions of a hypocrite.”

“He was forging a history of forgeries.”

“Let self-sacrifice be its own reward.”

She found that she could make these circular jokes easily enough, though most of them weren’t quite as good as Peter De Vries’s “Nostalgia isn’t what it used to be.”² Or Oscar Wilde’s paradoxes throughout *The*

2. Simone Signoret used the quip as the title for her *LIFE*. Who gets the credit, De Vries or Signoret?

Picture of Dorian Gray. But it was really too easy unless you put in the requirement that they must *wipe out the base*. For example, she had written, when a bit tired, what felt like a clever “Report by the Dean on the Status of Departments”:

Biology is quite lively, but Economics is not valued highly by the students. There seems to be some truth to the claim that Philosophy is in need of analytical self-study. History is forging ahead, while Political Science seems to have lost its power base. Art is in beautiful form, Psychology is developing abnormally, Geometry is tightening its lines, and Algebra is functioning well. Sociology is pulling together, Law seems well regulated, but Medicine is ailing, and the Atomic Physics program is clearly decaying rapidly. Finally, our Geography Department seems to be in good shape; though Geophysics is soaring, and we have mapped out a good program in Cartography. . . .”

But all that was just silliness, she could see now, and she threw it all away.

She had read somewhere about the difference between autological words and heterological words—the first include themselves in their own range of reference, as “English” is an English word and “polysyllabic” is polysyllabic; the second exclude themselves, as “water” is not wet and “German” is not a German word. Polysyllabic is autological; monosyllabic is heterological. She wondered whether the concept couldn’t yield some “Nihilistic Circularities.”

Is “autological” an autological word? Clearly. But is heterological? She had to think awhile about that, and she thought she felt, indeed she truly felt, the Abyss opening beneath her. Vertiginous depths—a fine full phrase for the emptiness—clearly heterological. Void—that seems empty indeed: autologous.

Does “empty” mean something? If so, the word is not empty: heterologous.

Does “nothingness” mean something?

She knew that she did not know.

She found herself writing:

If nothing is nothing, Autology reigns;

But *if* nothing just *is*,

Heterology gains.

Trivial games, she thought with self-contempt. I try to write something serious about the depths and I end up with stuff like that. She crossed it all out and wrote,

“I set out to express the void, but nothing came to me.”

“He found that without ribbon in his typewriter his book defending silence went much faster.”

“Which is worse, a full cesspool or a permanently empty one?”

“In this sewer, the empty world, we only think we smell shit.”

“Ask your friend what she really thinks of you, then flush hard.”

She was troubled with these last two: they didn't seem quite to qualify as circularities—just as neatlies. “I gotta do some sorting,” she thought, “and I still gotta long way to go. But if I can keep up at this rate, by golly, someday I'll have earned my membership in the company of those who have exposed this great slaughterhouse, the world.”

Reading today over my heroine's effort at invention, I go back and forth—sometimes wondering why the three-hundred-page draft (in several versions) is still sitting here in 2005, unrevised, unfinished, unfinishable, and sometimes concluding that it just doesn't work. I don't see it in its present form as publishable, even as I enjoy some parts. But, a voice whines at me, what kept you from polishing and submitting?

Well, I did send it to one agent, whose only comment in the letter of rejection was that I had failed to include enough “physical details” about the beautiful heroine. I did show it to a brilliant friend, who responded negatively, “Well, I think there may be a novel in here, but it sure needs a lot of work.” Which I knew already.

So again, I gave it up; my muse—if she existed—was killed by two negative critiques, one from an agent who soon after died of alcoholism, the other from an admired friend. And now I go on imagining, *sometimes*, that if I had persisted, I could have become an “author.”

Meanwhile, of course, AmbitionB was always responding to the more positive receptions of my “uncreative” work. Like Lionel Trilling, I was seduced away from the imaginative world into the conceptual world—but without more than a pale shadow of Trilling's miserable self-reproach about it.³ Literary and rhetorical criticism, the very concept of which hadn't entered my head until far into graduate study, had begun to rival as a goal my zealous hope to become a good teacher. If a critical essay or book draft could earn praise while my creative efforts earned contempt, what should I do? And besides, ideas about criticism began to exert a genuine appeal of their own.

3. For a moving account of how Trilling lived with his disappointments as a “creator,” see Cynthia Ozick, “Lionel Trilling's Self-Criticism,” *New Yorker* (October 2, 2000), 116–27.

Do I now think that if I had persisted I could have become a top-class novelist? Absolutely not. A pretty good satirist? Maybe. But anyone who studies the lives of the great writers learns that they are obsessed, as I was not, by the imaginative process: they are possessed from childhood on, hour by hour, day by day, with story possibilities, with metaphorical riches, with dreams about fictional worlds. Somehow I lacked that, only meeting it occasionally in my literal dreams at night. Real novelists wake in the morning with ideas about the next dramatic episode or moving metaphor; I have almost always waked with some notion of how to reorganize a messy critical chapter. Only my nighttime dreams have revealed a fully rich imagination.

I suspect that my keeping an almost daily journal account of those dreams, decade by decade, came from my sense that I had, buried in there, a genuinely rich creative imagination. Reading some of the entries now, I often think I may have been right. Please note the admirable humility that explains my resisting VainB's temptation to quote more than one of those journal reports here.

Last night read a bit more about the *ars moriendi*—the art of dying—in Christian authors of the 17th c. All about how the dying are surrounded by demons competing for their souls, against the efforts of the priest who is administering the sacrament. Then I dreamed, not that I was dying, but that I was trying to write an autobiography, and there were about a dozen demons hovering about my head, trying to get their hands on my fingerboard to erase all of the affirmative sections. I scratch at them; they fight back, flashing electrical shocks at my fingers.

Such moments certainly do not make the stuff of first-class fiction, though some of them still seem to me wonderfully imaginative. Nor do they belong in *this* kind of *LIFE*.

THE CONFLICTING STYLES

A closely related conflict of Selves, one that I'd never even thought about until April Fool's Day this year, ThinkerB might describe like this.

You've spent much of your life, both as teacher and as publishing critic, touting *understanding*. You have hectored students about how to achieve "total clarity," about addressing broad audiences intelligibly. You have attacked authors who distance themselves from audiences with hoity-toity polysyllabic inhibitory ideologicalism like this. Yet your own writing, sometimes even as would-be scholar and almost always as satirist and would-be novelist,

has often been aggressively elitist—unintelligible except to the narrowest of audiences. Your ironies are often clear only to a precious few, while you nag students to “make it clear: write with a specific audience in mind, and cut the obfuscations!”⁴

As I think of that contrast, it seems to me sharp, dramatic, mysterious—and a bit hypocritical, with no “upward” qualification. It’s *this* pose vs. *that* pose: Accessible-Booth vs. Booth-as-Smartass. Did the apostle of clarity never nag the fake novelist about his obscurities? Paradoxically, the conflict and obfuscation can’t be explained without either too much complexity or too much clarity. For most of my life, or at least since I read my first Jonathan Swift and Aldous Huxley in high school, one of my Selves has been preoccupied with writing subtle satire addressed to some kind of elite audience. The impulse to attack the ignoramuses, whether fat cats or not, can be found throughout the journals and in spoofy piece after piece, including some unpublished bits written (or at least fantasized about) right up to this morning.⁵

As I reread those elitist satires, what strikes me now is how close they often come to being unintelligible except to an implied audience of “learned” intellectuals. They assume not just close reading but informed, deep reading, sometimes loaded with allusions that even well-read readers will catch only if by accident they have read this or that work I’ve happened to read.

If you looked at the opening paragraphs of that abandoned novel about Polygamy Smith, you’d be totally baffled. Having just completed a dissertation on *Tristram Shandy* and having read, or “read at,” Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* several times, I began the first chapter with parodies of Joyce’s obscurities, concluding with an allusion to the final sentence of *Ulysses*: “i can only answer in the affirmative in the affirmative in the affirmative.”⁶

One result of the split between that obscure satirist and the prophet of clarity was predictable: my “cleverest,” most complex satires were largely ignored, while my best efforts at clear, polished, acceptable prose on critical topics were widely read.⁷ VainB nags me to quote a bit from works nobody has ever discussed, like my somewhat bawdy “Lady Chatterley’s Lover and the Tachistoscope,” hoping that at least one reader might know what a tachistoscope is.

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4. I probably don’t have to point out that this whole section could well be inserted into chapter 12, regarding my egalitarian vs. bourgeois drives.
 5. It was a satire attacking defenders of the “free market” as the “fee market.”
 6. Oh, dear; you don’t remember that final line? OK, I’ll be kind: “his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.”
 7. One early reader has suggested that I include something like “Your academic style is wonderfully accessible, as compared with the usual.” I refuse to.

The split I'm addressing echoes a cultural split that hundreds have discussed, sometimes attacking the elite, sometimes attacking the vulgar. Already in 1938, Somerset Maugham in *The Summing Up* was lamenting how the popular taste of audiences he had to appeal to had degraded the aesthetic quality of his dramas. As audiences have become less well educated, he claims, they have been harder and harder to please without downgrading one's own interests:

In thus yielding to the fashion [of slangy, colloquial speech] it seems to me that dramatists have gravely handicapped themselves. For this slangy, clipped, broken speech they reproduce is only the speech of a class, the speech of the young, ill-educated well-to-do, who are described in the papers as the smart set. They are the persons who figure in the gossip columns and in the pages of illustrated weeklies. (99)

I never escaped the split, pursuing conflicting goals without even noticing the conflict. While hounding students and colleagues about their failures to make everything perfectly clear, I was simultaneously teaching literature courses where they met a Proust whose sentences, in French or translation, often baffled me. While writing as if to please Strunk and White one day, I would next day turn out stuff so dense that I can't understand it when I reread it now.

I'm sure that you've noticed and perhaps even been bored by my relatively "plainspoken" style throughout this book, mostly purged of beautiful metaphors. Would you enjoy all of this *LIFE* more if it had as many metaphors and similes as the opening of Eudora Welty's *Losing Battles*?

When the rooster crowed, the moon had still not left the world but was going down on flushed cheek, one day short of the full. A long thin cloud crossed it slowly, drawing itself out like a name being called. The air changed, as if a mile or so away a wooden door had swung open, and a warm smell, more of warmth than wet, from a river at low stage, moved upward into the clay hills that stood in darkness.

Then a house appeared on its ridge, like an old man's silver watch pulled once more out of its pocket. A dog leaped up from where he'd lain like a stone and began barking for today as if he meant never to stop.

So there we have in every sentence at least one metaphor or a "like" or an "as if." Should I succumb to the temptation to go back through this whole book, changing the first sentence of the preface, for example, from

Every autobiographer faces problems that no novelist faces: as I write, my actual story still runs on.

to

Every autobiographer faces soul-destroying problems that no novelist faces: as I write, my actual story still runs on, like some elderly tail-dragging crocodile that has lost its way home.

Though Welty too often goes over the brink, actually tempting me to threaten her with my revision machete, she reminds me of a memory of how Norman Maclean hyped up *A River Runs Through It*. A former student of his, by then a top cat at Yale, responded to Maclean's trembling request for advice about a stinky draft with, "It's gotta have more metaphors." So Norman went back through the draft, sneaking in metaphors *as if* he were *brightening the river scene by planting flowers along the bank*.

Actually, unlike this monochromatic stuff of mine, he turned it into a *coup de théâtre*. Shouldn't I just crawl along humbly in his path, like a dachshund feeling crushed by his master's curse, and . . .

Suddenly a chorus of voices chant at me:

"Drop that clumsy stuff! You are not, dammit, a novelist. You're a would-be LIFER."

So I obey.