

ZADIE SMITH

## THAT CRAFTY FEELING

A LECTURE GIVEN BY THE ENGLISH AUTHOR, ZADIE SMITH,  
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DISCUSSED: *Fraudulence and Fraudulent Idiots, Kafka, Macro Planners and Micro Managers, Obsessive Perspective Disorder (OPD), Gravity's Rainbow, Derrida, Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, Crap, The Literary Echo Chamber, Apprenticeship, Magical Thinking, Victorian Boilers, Scaffolding, The Bhagavad-Gita, Donald Rumsfeld, Zeno, Roman Palazzos, Character, Odradek, Proofs, Smart Strangers, The Waste Land, Ezra Pound, Nausea*

I've been asked to speak about "some aspect of craft." I dithered over this lecture. I always dither over lectures, never more than when they're about "craft." They cause me an anxiety that the request for a piece of fiction never does and never could. Not that I find writing fiction easy—I don't—but I find it within my remit. When someone asks me to write a story I feel they're giving me a comprehensible block of stone and my job is to carve out whatever shape I think's within it. Even if the result is poor and doesn't work in the space, still it's the shape I honestly thought was in there. I'm not trying to put anything over on anybody.



But a lecture on craft... at once something fraudulent creeps into the enterprise, there's a whiff of snake oil. I speak from experience, having written a few "Art of Fiction" polemics and regretted them all. In my opinion one should run, not walk, from any essay entitled "The Art of Fiction" that is not about the art of a *particular piece* of fiction, or several. I don't believe in craft in the abstract—each individual novel is its own rule book, training ground, factory, and independent republic. The only time I feel I'm writing honestly about craft—either my own or craft in general—is when I have a specific piece of fiction in my sights, when I'm writing about *Middlemarch* or *Take a Girl Like You* or *Libra* or *The Trial*;

when I, as Humbert Humbert put it, have some actual words to play with.

I think there are two different kinds of lectures on craft, the first more useful than the second. The first is solid and practical: it concerns the technical craft of certain novels, and is best given by critics and academics qualified in their field. The second type is given by novelists, with the hope they will draw on their practical knowledge and say something intelligent about the way they write. At this point—in my experience—a disconnect occurs. For though I have a private language for the way I write, as every writer does, as I'm sure all of you do, it's not particularly intelligent—in fact, it's rather banal. It feels strange, airing it in public, inadequate, unfit for a classroom. I think even if I had been crafting away at a novel for ten years, and then, on the final day, an email arrived asking me to give a lecture on "some aspect of craft," I still wouldn't quite feel qualified to give it. Craft is too grand and foreign a word to describe what gets done most days in your pajamas. So naturally the temptation is to gussy it up a bit, to find a garment to dress your private language in, something suitable. You borrow the quantifying language of the critic, maybe, or the conceptual analysis of the academic. And then, with a queasy, fraudulent feeling, you try and pass this off as an accurate representation of what it is to write a novel. The result is convincing and has every rhetorical advantage, except one: it isn't true. For there's an important difference between the way a writer thinks

about craft, and the ways critics and academics think about craft. Critics and academics are dedicated to the analysis of craft *after the fact*. Their accounts are indispensable for anyone who reads fiction and cares for it, but they are not truly concerned with craft as it is practiced. What I mean is: they can't help a writer as she writes.

I felt this with force recently as I read James Wood's *How Fiction Works*.

It's a very brilliant book, particularly astute on what James calls the "intimate third person." Making my way through that chapter, the readerly part of my brain thrilled at the precision and insight with which he goes to work on this neglected aspect of fictional craft. But the writer in me, the one that has written pages of intimate third-person fiction—without ever consciously considering it, without giving it any particular name—wanted to throw the book across the room, and not because he was wrong, but because he was exactly right. It felt like being asked to be attentive to your breathing, to your *in, out, in, out, in, out, . . .* I thought: *if I read one more word about the intimate third person, I'll never be able to write the bloody thing again.*

Reading about craft is like listening to yourself breathe. Writing about craft prompts a self-consciousness so acute one forgets how to exhale altogether. It's clear to me that James, or any good academic or critic, will be able to tell you far more about craft than I can, and do so with more clarity, more utility, not to mention a lot less anxiety. The question *how does fic-*

*tion work?* is an answerable one. The question *how do you write fiction?* isn't really, not without becoming a little fraudulent in the answering of it. I've given my share of fraudulent talks about how I write fiction; today, though, I thought I might try and give a quasi-honest one. But to do this, you'll have to permit me the private language of a fiction writer. The language a writer uses with another writer, when both are in the middle of their novels and they meet downtown for coffee and speak to each other across the table from their separate dreams. I'm not sure how helpful it will be, but at least I won't feel I'm putting anything over on anybody. I should mention also that what I have to say about craft extends no further than my own experience, which is what it is: twelve years and three novels. My lecture is divided into ten short sections meant to mark the various stages in the writing of a novel, by which I mean the writing of mine.

## 1. OPD IN THE FIRST TWENTY PAGES

**T**o begin I want to offer you a pair of somewhat ugly terms for two breeds of novelist: *The Macro Planner* and *The Micro Manager*.

You will recognize a Macro Planner from his Post-its, from those Moleskins he insists on buying. A Macro Planner makes notes, organizes material, configures a plot, and creates a structure—all before he writes the title page. Because of this structural security, he has a great

deal of freedom of movement. It's not uncommon for Macro Planners to start writing their novels in the middle. As they progress, forward or backward, their difficulties multiply with their choices. I know Macro Planners who obsessively exchange possible endings for each other, who take characters out and put them back in, reverse the order of chapters, and perform frequent—for me, unthinkable—radical surgery on their novels: moving the setting of a book from London to Berlin, for example, or changing the title. I can't stand to hear them speak about all this, not because I disapprove, but because other people's methods are always so incomprehensible and horrifying. Personally, I'm a Micro Manager. I start at the first sentence of a novel and I finish at the last. It would never occur to me to choose between three different endings because I haven't the slightest idea what the ending is until I get to it, a fact that will surprise no one who has read my novels. Macro Planners have their houses basically built from day one and so their obsession is internal—they're forever moving the furniture. They'll put a chair in the bedroom, the lounge, the kitchen and then back in the bedroom again. Micro Managers like me build a house floor by floor, discreetly and in its entirety. Each floor needs to be sturdy and fully decorated with all the furniture in place before the next is built on top of it. There's wallpaper in the hall even if the stairs lead nowhere at all.

Because Micro Managers have no grand plan, their novels exist

only in their present moment, in a sensibility, in the novel's tonal frequency line by line. When I begin a novel there is *nothing of that novel* outside of the sentences I am setting down. I feel I have to be very careful: I can change the whole nature of the thing by changing a few words. This induces a special breed of pathology for which I have another ugly name: OPD, or Obsessive Perspective Disorder. It occurs mainly in the first twenty pages. It's a kind of existential drama, a long answer to the short question: *What kind of a novel am I writing?* It manifests itself in a compulsive fixation on perspective and voice. In one day the first twenty pages can go from first-person present tense, to third-person past tense, to third-person present tense, to first-person past tense, and so on. Several times a day I change it. Because I am an English novelist enslaved to an ancient tradition, with each novel I have ended up exactly where I began: third person, past tense. But I spend months switching back and forth. Opening other people's novels, I feel I can recognize fellow Micro Managers. Their first twenty pages are like mine: a pile-up of too careful, obsessively worried-over sentences, a block of stilted verbiage that only loosens and relaxes after the twenty-page mark is passed. In the case of *On Beauty* my OPD spun completely out of control: I reworked those first twenty pages for almost two years. I really felt I was losing my mind. I can hardly stand to look at my novels in general, but the first

twenty pages of each in particular give me heart palpitations. It's like taking a tour of a cell in which I was once incarcerated.

Yet while OPD is happening, somehow the work of the rest of the novel gets done. That's the strange thing. It's as if you're winding the key of a toy car tighter and tighter.... when you finally let it go, it travels at a crazy speed. When I finally settled on a tone, the rest of the book was finished in five months. I think worrying over the first twenty pages is my way of working on the whole novel, my way of finding its structure, its plot, its characters—all of which, for a Micro Manager, are contained in the sensibility of a sentence. Once I get the tone, everything else follows. You hear interior decorators say the same about a shade of paint.

## 2. OTHER PEOPLE'S WORDS, PART ONE

It's such a confidence trick, writing a novel. The main person you have to trick into confidence is yourself. I can't do it alone. I need sentences around me, quotations, the literary equivalent of a cheerleading squad. Except that analogy's screwy—cheerleaders *cheer*. I need young women holding up placards that make me feel bad. I like them to bring the news of how far I have to go. For five years I had this Pynchon quote from *Gravity's Rainbow* stuck to my door:

We have to find meters whose

scales are unknown in the world, draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function... zeroing in on what incalculable plot?

That quote made me feel bad. It represented an ideal, a methodology to which I wanted to try and be equal, although it was impossible. At that time, I apparently believed that it was the duty of the novel to rigorously pursue hidden information: personal, political, historical. I say apparently because I don't recognize that writer anymore, and I find her idea of the novel oppressive, alien, totally useless. I once thought this solely a peculiarity of mine—but in fact many writers feel that way. Not long ago I sat next to a youngish Portuguese novelist at dinner and told him I intended to read his first novel. He grabbed my wrist, genuinely distressed, and said: "Oh please don't! Back then, all I read was Faulkner. I had *no sense of humor*. My god, I was a different person!"

That's how it goes. Other people's words are so important. And then without warning they stop being important, along with all those words of yours that *their* words prompted you to write. For me, the excitement of a new novel lies almost entirely in the repudiation of the one I wrote before. Otherwise I wouldn't have the heart to do it. And other people's words are the bridge you use to cross from where you were to wherever you're going.

Last week I came across a new quote. It's my screensaver now, my little scrap of confidence as I try to write my fourth novel. It's Derrida, and what surprises me is what a different piece of Derrida it is than I would have chosen two novels ago. The quote is very simple:

If a right to a secret is not maintained then we are in a totalitarian space.

Only while writing this lecture did it occur to me that the Derrida is a direct repudiation of the Pynchon. I'm glad: it gives me fresh air to breathe. It's awful to me now, that passion for human dissection I had, always entering the brains of characters, cracking them open, rooting every secret out. No delicacy, no silence. I was so pleased to be able to make noise, I couldn't see the point of silence.

"My god, I was a different person!"—yes, all writers think this, from book to book. I know that this new novel, that I've hardly begun, will be shameful and strange to me soon enough. After each book is done, I look forward to hating it (and I never have to wait long); I get a weird, inverse confidence from feeling destroyed, because being destroyed, having to start again, means I have space in front of me, somewhere to go. Think of that revelation Shakespeare put in the mouth of King John: "*Now my soul has elbow room!*" Fictionally speaking, the nightmare is losing the desire to move.

### 3. OTHER PEOPLE'S WORDS, PART TWO

Some writers won't read a word of any novel while they're writing their own. Not one word. They don't even want to see the cover of a novel. As they write, the world of fiction dies: no one has ever written, no one is writing, no one will ever write again. They stand alone, silent, upon a peak in Darien. Try and recommend a good novel to a writer of this type while he's writing and he'll give you a look like you just stabbed him in the heart with a kitchen knife. It's a matter of temperament. Some writers are the kind of solo violinists who need complete silence to tune their instruments. I want to hear every member of the orchestra—I'll take a cue from a clarinet, from an oboe, even. My writing desk is covered in open novels. I read lines to swim in a certain sensibility, to strike a particular note, to encourage rigor when I'm too sentimental, to bring verbal ease when I'm syntactically uptight. I think of reading like a balanced diet; if my sentences are baggy, too baroque, I cut back on fatty Foster Wallace, say, and pick up Kafka, as roughage. If I'm disappearing up my own aesthete's arse, I stop worrying so much about what Nabokov would say, and pick up Dostoyevsky, the patron saint of substance over style; a reminder to us all that good writing is more than elegant sentences. The only rule is quality. When I'm

writing the first hundred pages of a book, I can eat crap, watch crap, listen to crap, talk crap, and be crap, but I can't *read* crap. I can't read the manuscript of my mum's friend, for example, or the poems my brother's seventeen-year-old mate gave him to give me. Another time, fine, but not now. When I'm writing, I only want to read the best books I can find.

I taught briefly; there I met students who felt that reading while you write is unhealthy. Their idea was it corrupts your voice by influence, and moreover, that reading great literature creates a sense of oppression. For how can you pipe out your little mouse song when Kafka's Josephine the mouse singer pipes so much more loudly and beautifully than you ever could? To this way of thinking, the sovereignty of one's individuality is the vital thing, and it must be protected at any price, even if it means cutting oneself off from that literary echo chamber E. M. Forster described, in which writers speak so helpfully to each other, across time and space. Each to their own, I suppose. Without that echo chamber, I would never have written a word. I was about fourteen when I heard John Keats in there, and in my mind I formed a bond with him, a bond based on class—though how archaic that must sound, here in America. I knew he wasn't working-class, exactly, and of course he wasn't black—but in rough outline his situation felt closer to mine than the other writers I'd come across. He felt none of the entitlement of, say, Virginia Woolf, or

Byron, or Pope, or Evelyn Waugh. That was very important to me—I think you may have to be English to understand how important. To me, Keats offered the possibility of entering writing from a side door, the one marked *Apprentices Welcome Here*. Keats went about his work just like an apprentice; he took a kind of M.F.A. of the mind, albeit alone, and for free, in his little house in Hampstead. A suburban, lower-middle-class boy, a few steps removed from the literary scene, he made his own scene out of the books of his library. He never feared influence—he devoured influences. He wanted to learn from them, even at the risk of their voices swamping his own. And the feeling of apprenticeship never left him: you see it in his early experiments in poetic form, in the letters he wrote to friends expressing his fledgling literary ideas; it's there, famously, in his reading of Chapman's Homer, and the fear that he might cease to be before his pen had gleaned his teeming brain. When I'm writing, especially during those horrible first hundred pages, I often think of Keats. The term "role model" is so odious, but the truth is it's a very strong writer indeed who gets by without a model kept somewhere in mind. So I think of Keats. Keats slogging away, devouring books, plagiarizing, impersonating, adapting, struggling, growing, writing many poems that made him blush, and then a few that made him proud, learning everything he could from whomever he could find, dead or alive, who might have something useful to teach him.

#### 4. MIDDLE-OF-THE-NOVEL MAGICAL THINKING

**I**n the middle of a novel, a kind of magical thinking takes over. To clarify, the middle of the novel may not happen in the actual geographical center of the novel. By middle of the novel I mean whatever page you are on when you stop being part of your household and your family and your partner and children and food shopping and dog feeding and reading the post—I mean when there is nothing in the world except your book, and even as your wife tells you she's sleeping with your brother her face is a gigantic semicolon, her arms are parentheses, and you are wondering whether *rummage* is a better verb than *rifle*. The middle of a novel is a state of mind. Strange things happen in it. Time collapses. I sit down to write at 9 a.m., I blink, the evening news is on and I've written four thousand words, more words than I wrote in three long months, a year ago. Something has changed. And it's not restricted to the house. If you go outside, everything—I mean, *everything*—flows freely into your novel. Someone on the bus says something—it's straight out of your novel. You open the paper—*every single story in the paper is directly relevant to your novel*. If you are fortunate enough to have someone waiting to publish your novel, this is the point at which you phone them in a panic and

try to get your publication date brought forward because you cannot believe *how in tune the world is with your unfinished novel right now* and if it isn't published next Tuesday maybe the moment will pass and you will have to kill yourself.

Magical Thinking makes you crazy—and renders everything possible. Incredibly knotty problems of structure now resolve themselves with inspired ease. See that one paragraph? It only needs to be moved and the whole chapter falls into place! Why didn't you see that before? You randomly pick a poetry book off the shelf and the first line you read ends up being your epigraph—it seems to have been written for no other reason. Every writer has a Magical Thinking tale to tell, or several. I have a strange one I can't explain.

While writing my second novel, I took part in a literary auction. People bid, their money goes to charity, and the winners are put in novels as characters. My winner was called John Baguley. Not a common English surname—I'd never heard it before. In my novel, John Baguley's an autograph man who goes to an auction and pays to have his name in a novel. At the time, I thought that was a cute idea. A little while after I wrote the scene, my heating broke down. It was midwinter, freezing. I called in a plumber. The plumber wanted to see exactly what make of Victorian boiler I had. There was an ancient piece of foam wrapped round the thing, covering the label. He peeled it off. Underneath was written: John Baguley and Sons. Same spelling.

## 5. DISMANTLING THE SCAFFOLDING

I suppose this is a piece of advice. When building a novel you will use a lot of scaffolding. Some of this is necessary to hold the thing up, but a lot isn't. The majority of it is only there to make you feel secure, and in fact the building will stand without it. Each time I've written a long piece of fiction I've felt the need for an enormous amount of scaffolding. With me, scaffolding comes in many forms. I get it into my head, for example, that the only way to write this novel is to divide it into three sections of ten chapters each. Or five sections of seven chapters. Or the answer is to read the Old Testament and model each chapter on the books of the prophets. Or the divisions of the Bhagavad Gita. Or the Psalms. Or *Ulysses*. Or the songs of Public Enemy. Or the films of Grace Kelly. Or the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Or the liner notes to *The White Album*. Or the twenty-seven speeches Donald Rumsfeld gave to the press corps during his tenure.

I use scaffolding to hold up my confidence when I have none, to reduce the despair, and to feel that what I'm doing has a goal, some endpoint that I can see. I use it to divide what seems like an endless, unmarked journey, though by doing this, like Zeno, I infinitely extend the distance I need to go.

Later, when the book is printed and old and dog-eared, it occurs to me that I really didn't need any of that scaffolding. The book would

be far better off without it. But when I was putting it up, it felt vital, and once it was there, I'd worked so hard to get it there I was loath to take it down. So my advice, if you are writing a novel at the moment and putting up scaffolding, well, I hope it helps you, but don't forget to dismantle it later. Or, if you're determined to leave it out there for all to see, at least hang a nice facade over it, as the Romans do when they fix up their palazzos.

## 6. FIRST TWENTY PAGES, REDUX

Late in the novel, in the last quarter, when I am rolling downhill, I turn back to read those first twenty pages. They are insane, packed tighter than tuna in a can. Calmly, I take off the top, let a little air in. What's amusing about the first twenty pages—I can find them funny now, three years later, now I'm no longer locked up in them—is how little confidence you have in your reader when you begin. You spoon-feed them *everything*. You can't let a character walk across the room without giving her backstory as she goes. You don't trust the reader to have a little patience, a little intelligence. This reader who, for all you know, has read Thomas Bernhard, *Finnegans Wake*, Gertrude Stein, Georges Perec—yet *you're* worried that if you don't mention Sarah Malone is a social worker with a dead father in the first three pages this reader might not be able to follow you exactly. It's awful the swing of the lit-

erary fraudulence pendulum: from moment to moment you can't decide whether you're the fraudulent idiot or your reader is the fraudulent idiot. For writers like me, who work with character a good deal, going back to the first twenty pages is also a lesson in how much more delicate a thing character is than you think it is when you're writing it. The idea of forming people out of grammatical clauses seems so fantastical at the start that you hide your terror in a smokescreen of elaborate sentence making, as if character can be drawn forcibly out of the curlicues of certain adjectives, piled ruthlessly on top of each other. In fact, character occurs with the lightest of brushstrokes. Naturally, it can be destroyed lightly, too. I think of a creature called Odradek, who at first glance appears to be a "flat star-shaped spool for thread" but who is not quite this, Odradek who won't stop rolling down the stairs, trailing string behind him, who has a laugh that sounds as if it has no lungs behind it, a laugh like rustling leaves. You can find the inimitable Odradek in a one-page story of Kafka's called "The Cares of a Family Man." Curious Odradek is more memorable to me than characters I spent three years on, and five hundred pages.

## 7. THE LAST DAY

**T**here is one big advantage to being a Micro Manager instead of a Macro Planner: the last day of your novel truly is the last day. Because I edit as I go along,

I don't have first, second, third drafts. I only have one draft, and when it's done, it's done. I have nothing bad to say about the last day of a novel. It's a feeling of happiness that knocks me clean out of adjectives. I think sometimes that the main reason for writing novels is to experience this extraordinary four and a half hours after you write the final word. The last time it happened to me I uncorked a good Sancerre I'd been keeping and drank it standing up with the bottle in my hand and then I lay down in my backyard on the paving stones and stayed there for a long time, crying. It was sunny, late autumn, and there were apples everywhere, over-ripe and stinky.

## 8. STEP AWAY FROM THE VEHICLE

**Y**ou can ignore everything else in this lecture except number eight. It is the only absolutely 24-karat gold-plated piece of advice I have to give you. I've never taken it myself, though I intend to next time round. I met a man who did, and I thought the result so impressive I've decided to take his example as my gospel. The advice is as follows:

When you finish your novel, if money is not a desperate priority, if you do not need to sell it at once or be published that very second—*put it in a drawer*. For as long as you can manage. A year or more is ideal—but even three months will do. *Step away from the vehicle*. The secret to editing your work is simple: you need to become its

reader instead of its writer. I can't tell you how many times I've sat backstage with a line of novelists at some festival, all of us with red pens in hand, frantically editing our published novels into fit form so that we might go on stage and read from them. It's an unfortunate thing, but it turns out that the perfect state of mind to edit your own novel is two years after it's published, ten minutes before you go on stage at a literary festival. At that moment every redundant phrase, each show-off, pointless metaphor, all the pieces of dead wood, stupidity, vanity, and tedium are distressingly obvious to you. Two years earlier, when the proofs came, you looked at the same page and couldn't see a comma out of place. And, by the way, that's true of the professional editors, too; after they've read a manuscript multiple times, they stop being able to see it. You need a certain head on your shoulders to edit a novel, and it's not the head of a writer in the thick of it, nor the head of a professional editor who's read it in twelve different versions. It's the head of a smart stranger who picks it off a bookshelf and begins to read. You need to get the head of that smart stranger somehow. You need to forget you ever wrote that book.

*Step away from the vehicle*. After I read Alan Hollinghurst's magnificent novel *The Line of Beauty*, I met him at a dinner, and drunkenly I think I asked him how he got his novel to be so magnificently. He said: "Oh, I left it for a long while. And then I tinkered with it. Five years, actually."

That's the best piece of writing advice I ever had.

### 9. THE UNBEARABLE CRUELTY OF PROOFS

**P**roofs are so cruel! Breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain. Proofs are the wasteland where the dream of your novel dies and cold reality asserts itself. When I look at loose-leaf proofs, fresh out of the envelope, bound with a thick elastic band, marked up by a conscientious copy editor, I feel quite sure I would have to become a different person entirely to do the work that needs to be done here. To correct what needs correcting, fix what needs to be fixed. The only proper response to an envelope full of marked-up pages is "Give it back to me! Let me start again!" But no one says this because by this point profound exhaustion has set in. It's not the book you hoped for, maybe something might yet be done—but the will is gone. There's simply no more will to be had. That's why proofs are so cruel, so sad: the existence of the proof itself is proof that it is already too late. I've only ever seen one happy proof, in King's College Library, in Cambridge, England, where—if you ask the librarian very nicely—you may be shown the manuscript of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Eliot, upon reaching his own point of exhaustion, had the extreme good fortune to meet Ezra Pound, a very smart stranger, and with his red pen Ezra went to work. And what work! His

pen goes everywhere, trimming, cutting, slicing, a frenzy of editing, the why and wherefore, not especially obvious, at times, indeed, almost ridiculous; almost, at times, indiscriminate... Whole pages struck out with a single line.

Underneath Pound's markings *The Waste Land* is a sad proof like any other—too long, full of lines not worth keeping, badly structured. Lucky Eliot, to have Ezra Pound. Lucky Fitzgerald, to have Maxwell Perkins. Lucky Carver, we now know, to have Gordon Lish. *Hypocrite lecteur!—mon semblable, mon frère!* Where have all the smart strangers gone?

### 10. YEARS LATER: NAUSEA, SURPRISE, AND FEELING OK

**I** find it very hard to read my books after they're published. I've never read *White Teeth*. Five years ago I tried; I got about ten sentences in before I was overwhelmed with nausea. More recently, when people tell me they have just read that book, I do try and feel pleased, but it's a distant, disconnected sensation, like when someone tells you they met your second cousin in a bar in Goa. I suspect *White Teeth* and I may never be reconciled—I think that's simply what happens when you begin writing a book at the age of twenty-one. Then, a year ago, I was in an airport somewhere and I saw a copy of *The Autograph Man*, and on a whim, I bought it. I live in Italy these days, and when I moved I didn't bring any of my

novels with me, so seeing *The Autograph Man* like that, in an airport bookstore, I felt a throb of affection, like seeing a school friend again. I thought: maybe I'll try reading it. In the plane I had to drink two of those mini bottles of wine before I had the stomach to begin. I didn't manage the whole thing, but I read about two thirds, and at that incredible speed with which you can read a book if you happen to have written it. And it was actually not such a bad experience—I laughed a few times, groaned more than I laughed, and gave up when the wine wore off—but for the first time, I felt something other than nausea. I felt surprise. The book was genuinely strange to me; there were whole pages I didn't recognize, didn't remember writing. And because it was so strange I didn't feel any particular animosity towards it. So that was that: between that book and I there now exists a sort of blank truce, neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Finally, while writing this lecture, I picked up *On Beauty*. I read maybe a third of it, not consecutively, but chapters here and there. As usual, the nausea, as usual, the feeling of fraudulence, and the too-late desire to wield the red pen all over the place—but something else, too, something new. Here and there—in very isolated pockets—I had the sense that this line, that paragraph, these were exactly what I meant to write, and the fact was, I'd written them, and I felt OK about it, felt good, even. It's a feeling I recommend to all of you. That feeling feels OK. ★