

Negotiating with the Dead

A Writer on Writing

MARGARET ATWOOD



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Contents

	<i>Introduction: Into the labyrinth</i>	xiii
	Prologue	xxv
1	<i>Orientation: Who do you think you are? What is “a writer,” and how did I become one?</i>	1
2	<i>Duplicity: The jekyll hand, the hyde hand, and the slippery double Why there are always two</i>	29
3	<i>Dedication: The Great God Pen Apollo vs. Mammon: at whose altar should the writer worship?</i>	59
4	<i>Temptation: Prospero, the Wizard of Oz, Mephisto & Co. Who waves the wand, pulls the strings, or signs the Devil’s book?</i>	91

5	<i>Communion: Nobody to Nobody</i> <i>The eternal triangle: the writer, the reader,</i> <i>and the book as go-between</i>	123
6	<i>Descent: Negotiating with the dead</i> <i>Who makes the trip to the Underworld,</i> <i>and why?</i>	153
	Notes	181
	Bibliography	198
	Acknowledgments	208
	Index	212

Introduction: Into the labyrinth

The act of naming is the great and solemn consolation of mankind.

Elias Canetti, *The Agony of Flies*¹

I still do not know what impels anyone sound of mind to leave dry land and spend a lifetime describing people who do not exist. If it is child's play, an extension of make believe – something one is frequently assured by people who write about writing – how to account for the overriding wish to do that, just that, only that, and consider it as rational an occupation as riding a bicycle over the Alps?

Mavis Gallant, Preface, *Selected Stories*²

Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you. To be without the slightest subject for a book, the slightest idea for a book, is to find yourself, once again, before a book. A vast emptiness. A possible book. Before nothing. Before something like living, naked writing, like something terrible, terrible to overcome.

Marguerite Duras, *Writing*³

When I was a student of English literature, in the early 1960s, we all had to read an important critical text called *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). This erudite book, it is astonishing to note, was written by William Empson when he was only twenty-three. It is also astonishing to note that when he was in the full throes of composition he was expelled from the University of Cambridge for being found with contraceptives in his room.

This is a fitting commentary on how we are all stuck in time, less like flies in amber – nothing so hard and clear – but like mice in molasses; because surely nowadays he would be expelled for being found *without* contraceptives in his room. The twenty-three-year-old William Empson sounds like a wise and considerate youth as well as an energetic one, and one who did not give up in the face of discouragement, and so when I was requested to give the Empson Lectures at the University of Cambridge for the year 2000 – a series of six, to be delivered to an audience composed not only of scholars and students, but also of the general public – I was more than delighted.

Or rather, I was more than delighted when first asked – such undertakings always seem so easy and pleasant two

years ahead – but as the time for actually giving the lectures approached, I became less delighted by the day.

The broad subject proposed was, more or less, Writing, or Being a Writer, and since I've done that and been one, you'd think I'd have something to say. I thought so too; what I had in mind was a grand scheme in which I would examine the various self-images – the job descriptions, if you like – that writers have constructed for themselves over the years. I would do this in a way that was not too technical, and would contain no more obscure references than I felt were really necessary; and I would throw in some of my own invaluable experiences and insights along the way, thereby not only striking a “personal note,” as fraudulent journalists in Henry James stories used to say, but also illuminating the entire field in a striking and original way.

However, as time passed, my initial grandiose but cloudy visions dispersed, leaving a kind of daunted blankness. It was like finding yourself in a great library as a young writer, and gazing around at the thousands of books in it, and wondering if you really have anything of value to add.

The more I thought about this the worse it became. Writing itself is always bad enough, but writing about writing is surely worse, in the futility department. You don't even have the usual excuse of fiction – namely, that you are just making things up and therefore can't be held to any hard-and-fast standards of verisimilitude. Perhaps the auditors, and then the readers – you arrogantly assume there will be some – will want literary theories, or abstract plans, or declarations, or manifestos, and then you open the theory-and-manifesto drawer and find it empty. Or at least I did. And then what?

I will pass over the frenzied scribblings that followed, adding only that I found myself as usual behind deadline, and – an even greater obstacle – in Madrid, where some of the books I had confidently expected to find in the English sections of bookstores were not there (including – somewhat witheringly – my own). Despite these obstacles, the lectures were stapled together somehow, and delivered. The parts where profound thought and the results of decades of painstaking scholarship were replaced by sticky tape and string are not supposed to be noticeable.

This book grew out of those lectures. It is about writing, although it isn't about how to write; nor is it about my own writing; nor is it about the writing of any person or age or country in particular. How to describe it? Let's say it's about the position the writer finds himself in; or herself, which is always a little different. It's the sort of book a person who's been laboring in the wordmines for, say, forty years – by coincidence, roughly the time I myself have been doing this – the book such a person might think of beginning, the day after he or she wakes up in the middle of the night and wonders what she's been up to all this time.

What has she been up to, and why, and for whom? And what is this *writing*, anyway, as a human activity or as a vocation, or as a profession, or as a hack job, or perhaps even as an art, and why do so many people feel compelled to do it? In what way is it different from – for instance – painting or composing or singing or dancing or acting? And how have other people who have done this thing viewed their own activity, and themselves in relation to it?

And are their views of any comfort? And has the concept of the writer *qua* writer, as expounded by (of course) writers, changed at all over the years? And what exactly do we mean when we say *a writer*? What sort of creature do we have in mind? Is the writer the unacknowledged legislator of the world,⁴ as Shelley so grandiosely proclaimed, or is he one of Carlyle's blimp-like Great Men, or is he the snivelling neurotic wreck and ineffectual weenie so beloved of his contemporary biographers?

Or perhaps I intended a warning for the unsuspecting young. Perhaps I have written about the subjects in this book not only because they were things about which I was anxious at the outset of my own writing life, but because many people – judging from the questions they ask – continue to be anxious about them today. Perhaps I have reached the age at which those who have been through the wash-and-spin cycle a few times become seized by the notion that their own experience in the suds may be relevant to others. Perhaps I wish to say: *Look behind you. You are not alone. Don't permit yourself to be ambushed. Watch out for the snakes. Watch out for the Zeitgeist – it is not always your friend. Keats was not killed by a bad review. Get back on the horse that threw you.* Advice for the innocent pilgrim, worthy enough, no doubt, but no doubt useless: dangers multiply by the hour, you never step into the same river twice, the vast empty spaces of the blank page appall, and everyone walks into the maze blindfolded.

I'll begin with the standard disclaimer. I am a writer and a reader, and that's about it. I'm not a scholar or a literary

theoretician, and any such notions that have wandered into this book have got there by the usual writerly methods, which resemble the ways of the jackdaw: we steal the shiny bits, and build them into the structures of our own disorderly nests.

In an early short story by poet James Reaney, the narrator watches his sister feeding the hens by spelling out words with the hen-feed, letter by letter. He says, "I often wondered to whom she was writing, up there in the sky."⁵ The primate narrator of Ian McEwan's short story, "Reflections of a Kept Ape," is also watching a writer writing. He ponders, not the potential reader, but the potential motive, though he comes to no very cheering conclusion. "Was art then nothing more than a wish to appear busy?" he muses. "Was it nothing more than a fear of silence, of boredom, which the merely reiterative rattle of the typewriter's keys was enough to allay?"⁶

"I wonder where it all comes from?" asked Reena, a thirty-four-year-old woman who has been writing since the age of six and throwing it all into the waste basket, but who thinks she may now be almost ready to begin.⁷

These are the three questions most often posed to writers, both by readers and by themselves: *Who are you writing for? Why do you do it? Where does it come from?*

While I was writing these pages, I began compiling a list of answers to one of these questions – the question about motive. Some of these answers may appear to you to be more serious than others, but they are all real, and there is nothing to prevent a writer from being propelled by several of them at once, or indeed by all. They are taken

from the words of writers themselves – retrieved from such dubious sources as newspaper interviews and autobiographies, but also recorded live from conversations in the backs of bookstores before the dreaded group signing, or between bites in cut-rate hamburger joints and tapas bars and other such writerly haunts, or in the obscure corners of receptions given to honor other, more prominent writers; but also from the words of fictional writers – all written of course by writers – though these are sometimes disguised in works of fiction as painters or composers or other artistic folk. Here then is the list:

To record the world as it is. To set down the past before it is all forgotten. To excavate the past *because* it has been forgotten. To satisfy my desire for revenge. Because I knew I had to keep writing or else I would die. Because to write is to take risks, and it is only by taking risks that we know we are alive. To produce order out of chaos. To delight and instruct (not often found after the early twentieth century, or not in that form). To please myself. To express myself. To express myself beautifully. To create a perfect work of art. To reward the virtuous and punish the guilty; or – the Marquis de Sade defense, used by ironists – vice versa. To hold a mirror up to Nature. To hold a mirror up to the reader. To paint a portrait of society and its ills. To express the unexpressed life of the masses. To name the hitherto unnamed. To defend the human spirit, and human integrity and honor. To thumb my nose at Death. To make money so my children could have shoes. To make money so I could sneer at those who formerly sneered at me. To show the bastards. Because to create is human. Because to create is Godlike. Because I hated the idea of

having a job. To say a new word. To make a new thing. To create a national consciousness, or a national conscience. To justify my failures in school. To justify my own view of myself and my life, because I couldn't be "a writer" unless I actually did some writing. To make myself appear more interesting than I actually was. To attract the love of a beautiful woman. To attract the love of any woman at all. To attract the love of a beautiful man. To rectify the imperfections of my miserable childhood. To thwart my parents. To spin a fascinating tale. To amuse and please the reader. To amuse and please myself. To pass the time, even though it would have passed anyway. Graphomania. Compulsive logorrhea. Because I was driven to it by some force outside my control. Because I was possessed. Because an angel dictated to me. Because I fell into the embrace of the Muse. Because I got pregnant by the Muse and needed to give birth to a book (an interesting piece of cross-dressing, indulged in by male writers of the seventeenth century). Because I had books instead of children (several twentieth-century women). To serve Art. To serve the Collective Unconscious. To serve History. To justify the ways of God toward man. To act out antisocial behavior for which I would have been punished in real life. To master a craft so I could generate texts (a recent entry). To subvert the establishment. To demonstrate that whatever is, is right. To experiment with new forms of perception. To create a recreational boudoir so the reader could go into it and have fun (translated from a Czech newspaper). Because the story took hold of me and wouldn't let me go (the Ancient Mariner defense). To search for understanding of the reader and myself. To cope with my depression.

For my children. To make a name that would survive death. To defend a minority group or oppressed class. To speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. To expose appalling wrongs or atrocities. To record the times through which I have lived. To bear witness to horrifying events that I have survived. To speak for the dead. To celebrate life in all its complexity. To praise the universe. To allow for the possibility of hope and redemption. To give back something of what has been given to me.

Evidently, any search for a clutch of common motives would prove fruitless: the *sine qua non*, the essential nugget without which writing would not be itself, was not to be found there. Mavis Gallant begins the Preface to her *Selected Stories* with a shorter and more sophisticated list of writers' motives, beginning with Samuel Beckett, who said writing was all he was good for, and ending with the Polish poet Aleksander Wat, who told her that it was like the story of the camel and the Bedouin: in the end, the camel takes over. "So that was the writing life:" she comments, "an insistent camel."⁸

Having failed on the subject of motives, I took a different approach: instead of asking other writers why they did it, I asked them what it felt like. Specifically, I asked novelists, and I asked them what it felt like when they went into a novel.

None of them wanted to know what I meant by *into*. One said it was like walking into a labyrinth, without knowing what monster might be inside; another said it was like groping through a tunnel; another said it was

like being in a cave – she could see daylight through the opening, but she herself was in darkness. Another said it was like being under water, in a lake or ocean. Another said it was like being in a completely dark room, feeling her way: she had to rearrange the furniture in the dark, and then when it was all arranged the light would come on. Another said it was like wading through a deep river, at dawn or twilight; another said it was like being in an empty room which was nevertheless filled with unspoken words, with a sort of whispering; another said it was like grappling with an unseen being or entity; another said it was like sitting in an empty theatre before any play or film had started, waiting for the characters to appear.

Dante begins the *Divine Comedy* – which is both a poem and a record of the composition of that poem – with an account of finding himself in a dark, tangled wood, at night, having lost his way, after which the sun begins to rise. Virginia Woolf said that writing a novel is like walking through a dark room, holding a lantern which lights up what is already in the room anyway. Margaret Laurence and others have said that it is like Jacob wrestling with his angel in the night – an act in which wounding, naming, and blessing all take place at once.

Obstruction, obscurity, emptiness, disorientation, twilight, blackout, often combined with a struggle or path or journey – an inability to see one's way forward, but a feeling that there was a way forward, and that the act of going forward would eventually bring about the conditions for vision – these were the common elements in many descriptions of the process of writing. I was reminded of

something a medical student said to me about the interior of the human body, forty years ago: “It’s dark in there.”

Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or perhaps a compulsion to enter it, and, with luck, to illuminate it, and to bring something back out to the light. This book is about that kind of darkness, and that kind of desire.

Prologue

This book began life as a series of six lectures, intended for a mixed audience: young and not so young, men and women, specialists in literature and students, general readers, and – especially – writers at an earlier stage or dewier age than my own. In converting these pieces from the spoken to the written word I have attempted to retain the colloquial tone, although I admit to having removed some of the cornier jokes. Those who were present will realize that some material has migrated from here to there, and that several passages have been expanded and – I hope – clarified. The grab-bag nature of the citations is, however, a feature of the inside of my head, and despite all efforts to make this locale tidier, nothing much could be done about it. The eccentricities of taste and judgment are my own.

The book has inherited its shape from its progenitors; thus the organization of chapters is not tightly sequential. One chapter does not lead by a direct pathway into the next, though all circle around a set of common themes having to do with the writer, her medium, and his art.

The first chapter is the most autobiographical, and also indicates the range of my references: these two things are

connected, as writers tend to adopt their terms of discourse early in their reading and writing lives. The second chapter deals with the post-Romantic writer's double consciousness: I assume that we are still living in the shadow cast by the Romantic movement, or in the fragments of that shadow. The third chapter treats of the conflict between the gods of art and those of commerce that every writer who considers himself an artist still feels; the fourth considers the writer as illusionist, artificer, and participant in social and political power. The fifth chapter probes that eternal triangle: writer, book, and reader. And the sixth and last is about the narrative journey and its dark and winding ways.

In short, this book struggles with a number of the conflicts that have occupied many writers, both those I have known on this plane of earthly being, as they say in California, and those I have known only through their work. Between a rock and a hard place is where much writing is carried on, and these are some of the rocks, and some of the hard places.

I would like to thank my kind and generous hosts at Clare Hall, Dame Gillian Beer and her husband, Dr. John Beer, who made my stay at Cambridge so pleasant; also Claire Daunton, who was in charge of organizing me there. Dr. Sally Bushell took care of my spatial orientation, and Professor Ian Donaldson of the English Department and his wife Grazia Gunn provided a warm and convivial evening. Dr. Germaine Greer must always be thanked on general principles, and for her courage and good humor; as must Xandra Bingley, ever true.

At Cambridge University Press, Sarah Stanton has been the long-suffering editor, with Margaret Berrill acting as copy-editor and Valerie Elliston as indexer. Andrew Brown is the Press Academic Director.

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Finally, thank you to my family – to my sons Matt and Grae, who have dealt with their wicked stepmother over the years with grace and skill; to my daughter Jess Gibson, avid reader, always ready to plunge fearlessly into a new and perilous text; and to Graeme Gibson, whose love, support, and companionship over the years have sustained me in my precarious and somewhat tatty Palace of Art.

And to my teachers, including the inadvertent ones, as always.

Communion:

Nobody to Nobody

*The eternal triangle: the writer, the reader,
and the book as go-between*

How pleased therefore will the reader be to find that we have, in the following work, adhered closely to one of the highest principles of the best cook which the present age, or perhaps that of Heliogabulus, hath produced . . . By this means, we doubt not but our reader may be rendered desirous to read on for ever, as the great person, just above-mentioned, is supposed to have made some persons eat.

Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*¹

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader . . . In this solitude of his, the reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. He is ready to make it his own, to devour it, as it were.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"²

As Detlev von Liliencron wrote, his rhymes dripping with sarcasm: it is hard for the poet to evade fame. If he cannot secure the favor of the masses in his lifetime, posterity will praise his heroic way of starving to death. In a word, to sell was to sell out.

Peter Gay, *The Pleasure Wars*³

. . . for we are great statements in our days
and on the basis of that we can expect small audiences.

Gwendolyn MacEwen, "The Choice"⁴

The big blundering newspaper had discovered him, and now he was proclaimed and anointed and crowned. His place was assigned to him as publicly as if a fat usher with a wand had pointed to the topmost chair . . . In a flash, somehow, all was different; the tremendous wave I speak of had swept something away. It had knocked down, I suppose, my little customary altar, my twinkling tapers and my flowers, and had reared itself into a temple vast and bare. When Neil Paraday should come out of the house he would come out a contemporary. That was what had happened: the poor man was to be squeezed into his horrible age.

Henry James, "The Death of the Lion"⁵

I rip the envelope and I'm in Bangkok
. . . You pour from these squares, these blue envoys.
And just when I feel I've lost you to the world,
I can't keep up,
Your postcard comes with the words
"wait for me."

Anne Michaels, "Letters from Martha"⁶

I would like to begin by talking about messengers. Messengers always exist in a triangular situation – the one who sends the message, the message-bearer, whether human or inorganic, and the one who receives the message. Picture, therefore, a triangle, but not a complete triangle: something more like an upside-down V. The writer and the reader are at the two lateral corners, but there's no line joining them. Between them – whether above or below – is a third point, which is the written word, or the text, or the book, or the poem, or the letter, or whatever you would like to call it. This third point is the only point of contact between the other two. As I used to say to my writing students in the distant days when I had some, “Respect the page. It's all you've got.”

The writer communicates with the page. The reader also communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate only through the page. This is one of the syllogisms of writing as such. Pay no attention to the facsimiles of the writer that appear on talkshows, in newspaper interviews, and the like – they ought not to have anything to do with what goes on between you, the

reader, and the page you are reading, where an invisible hand has previously left some marks for you to decipher, much as one of John Le Carré's dead spies has left a waterlogged shoe with a small packet in it for George Smiley.⁷ I know this is a far-fetched image, but it is also curiously apt, since the reader is – among other things – a sort of spy. A spy, a trespasser, someone in the habit of reading other people's letters and diaries. As Northrop Frye has implied, the reader does not hear, he overhears.⁸

So far I've spoken primarily about writers. Now it's the turn of readers, more or less. The questions I would like to pose are, first: for whom does the writer write? And, secondly: what is the book's function – or duty, if you like – in its position between writer and reader? What ought it to be doing, in the opinion of its writer? And finally, a third question arising from the other two: where is the writer when the reader is reading?

If you really are in the habit of reading other people's letters and diaries, you'll know the answer to that one straightaway: when you are reading, the writer is *not in the same room*. If he were, either you'd be talking together, or he'd catch you in the act.

For whom does the writer write? The question poses itself most simply in the case of the diary-writer or journal-keeper. Only very occasionally is the answer specifically *no one*, but this is a misdirection, because we couldn't hear it unless a writer had put it in a book and published it for us to read. Here for instance is diary-writer Doctor Glas, from Hjalmar Söderberg's

astonishing 1905 Swedish novel of the same name:

Now I sit at my open window, writing – for whom? Not for any friend or mistress. Scarcely for myself, even. I do not read today what I wrote yesterday; nor shall I read this tomorrow. I write simply so my hand can move, my thoughts move of their own accord. I write to kill a sleepless hour.⁹

A likely story, and it *is* a likely story – we, the readers, believe it easily enough. But the truth – the real truth, the truth behind the illusion – is that the writing is not by Doctor Glas, and it's not addressed to no one. It's by Hjalmar Söderberg, and it's addressed to us.

The fictional writer who writes to no one is rare. More usually, even fictional writers writing fictional journals wish to suppose a reader. Here is a passage from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, a book I read as a young person, shortly after it first came out in 1949. As we know, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* takes place in a grimy totalitarian future ruled by Big Brother. The hero, Winston Smith, has seen in a junk-store window a forbidden object: “a thick, quarto-sized blank book with a red back and a marbled cover” and “smooth creamy paper.”¹⁰ He has been seized by the desire to possess this book, despite the dangers that owning it would entail. Who among writers has not been overcome by a similar desire? And who has not been aware, too, of the dangers – specifically, the dangers of self-revelation? Because if you get hold of a blank book, especially one with creamy pages, you will be driven to write in it. And this is what Winston Smith does, with

a real pen and real ink, because the lovely paper deserves these. But then a question arises:

For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn . . . For the first time the magnitude of what he had undertaken came home to him. How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present, in which case it would not listen to him: or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless.¹¹

A common writerly dilemma: who's going to read what you write, now or ever? Who do you want to read it? Winston Smith's first readership is himself – it gives him satisfaction to write his forbidden thoughts in his diary. When I was a teenager, this account of Winston Smith's blank book was intensely attractive to me. I too attempted to keep such a diary, without result. My failure was my failure to imagine a reader. I didn't want anybody else to read my diary – only I should have access to it. But I myself already knew the sorts of things I might put into it, and mawkish things they were, so why bother writing them down? It seemed a waste of time. But many have not found it so. Countless are the diaries and journals, most obscure, some famous, that have been faithfully kept through the centuries, or the centuries of pen and paper, at least. For whom was Samuel Pepys writing? Or Saint-Simon? Or Anne Frank? There is something magical about such real-life documents. The fact that they have survived, have reached our hands, seems like the delivery of an unexpected treasure; or else like a resurrection.

These days I do manage to keep a journal of sorts, more in self-defense than anything else, because I know who the reader will be: it will be myself, in about three weeks, because I can no longer remember what I might have been doing at any given time. The older one gets, the more relevant Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape* comes to be. In this play, Krapp is keeping a journal on tape, from year to year. His only reader – or auditor – is himself, as he plays back bits of the tapes from his earlier lives. As time goes on, he has a harder and harder time identifying the person he is now with his former selves. It's like that bad stockbrokers' joke about Alzheimer's Disease – at least you keep meeting new people – but in Krapp's case, and increasingly in mine, you yourself are those new people.

The private diary is about as minimalist as you can get, in the writer-to-reader department, because writer and reader are assumed to be the same. It is also about as intimate, as a form. Next comes, I suppose, the private letter: one writer, one reader, and a shared intimacy. "This is my letter to the World / That never wrote to me," said Emily Dickinson.¹² Of course she might have got more replies if she'd mailed it. But she did intend a reader, or more than one, at least in the future: she saved her poems up very carefully, and even sewed them into little booklets. Her faith in the existence, indeed the attentiveness, of the future reader was the opposite of Winston Smith's despair.

Writers have of course made copious use of the letter as a form, inserting letters into the narrative, and in some cases building whole novels out of them, as Richardson did in *Pamela*, *Clarissa Harlowe*, and *Sir Charles Grandison*, and as Laclos did in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. For the reader,

the fictional exchange of letters among several individuals provides the delight of the secret agent listening in on a wire: letters have an immediacy that the past tense cannot provide, and the lies and manipulations of the characters can be caught *in flagrante delicto*. Or this is the idea.

A few words about letter-writing and the anxieties specific to it. When I was a child, there was a game that was popular at little girls' birthday parties. It went like this:

The children stood in a circle. One of them was It, and walked around the outside of the circle holding a handkerchief, while the others sang:

I wrote a letter to my love
 And on the way I dropped it,
 A little doggie picked it up
 And put it in his pocket.

Then there was talk of dog-bites, and a moment when the handkerchief was dropped behind someone, followed by a chase around the outside of the circle. None of this part interested me. I was still worrying about the letter. How terrible that it had been lost, and that the person to whom it was written would never get it! How equally terrible that someone else had found it! My only consolation was that dogs can't read.

Ever since writing was invented, such accidents have been a distinct possibility. Once the words have been set down they form part of a material object, and as such must take their chances. The letter from the king that is exchanged, unknown to the messenger, causing an innocent person to be condemned to death – this is not merely an old folktale motif. Forged letters, letters gone astray

and never received, letters that are destroyed, or that fall into the wrong hands – not only that, forged manuscripts, entire books that are lost and never read, books that are burned, books that fall into the hands of those who don't read them in the spirit in which they are written, or who do, but still resent them deeply – all these confusions and mistakes and acts of misapprehension and malice have taken place many times over, and continue to take place. In the lists of those targeted and imprisoned and killed by any dictatorship, there are always quite a few writers, whose works have reached – self-evidently – the wrong readers. A bullet in the neck is a very bad review.

But for every letter and every book, there is an intended reader, a true reader. How then to deliver the letter or book into the right hands? Winston Smith, writing his diary, finds he cannot be content with himself as his only reader. He chooses an ideal reader – a party official called O'Brien, in whom he believes he detects the signs of a subversiveness equal to his own. O'Brien, he feels, will understand him. He's right about this: his intended reader does understand him. O'Brien has already thought the thoughts that Winston Smith is thinking, but he's thought them in order to be prepared with the counter-moves, because O'Brien is a member of the secret police, and what he understands is that Winston is a traitor to the regime. He proceeds to arrest poor Winston, and then to destroy both his diary and his mind.

O'Brien is a negative or demonic version of Writer-to-Dear Reader, that ideal one-to-one relationship in which the person reading is exactly the person who ought to be reading. A more recent variation of the Demon Reader has

been created by Stephen King, who specializes in extreme paranoia – and since he has a different kind of paranoia for every taste, he has a special one just for writers. The book is *Misery*,¹³ and in it a writer of suffering-heroine romances featuring a hapless maiden called Misery falls into the hands of a deranged nurse who styles herself “your biggest fan.” Veterans of book-signings would know right then to run for the washroom and escape out the window, but our hero can’t do that, because he’s been incapacitated in a car crash. What his “biggest fan” wants is to force him to write a book about Misery, just for her. Then, he realizes, she plans to bump him off so that this book will only ever have one reader – herself. It’s a version of the sultan’s-maze motif – used, among other places, in *The Phantom of the Opera*¹⁴ – in which the patron of a work of art wishes to murder its maker so only he will possess its secrets. The hero of *Misery* escapes with his life after the required amount of guck has messed up the furniture, leaving us to reflect that the one-to-one Writer-to-Dear-Reader relationship can get altogether too close for comfort.

It is altogether too close for comfort as well when the reader confuses the writer with the text: such a reader wants to abolish the middle term, and to get hold of the text by getting hold of the writer, in the flesh. We assume too easily that a text exists to act as a communication between the writer and the reader. But doesn’t it also act as a disguise, even a shield – a protection? The play *Cyrano de Bergerac*¹⁵ features a large-nosed poet who expresses his love for the heroine by pretending to be someone else – but it is he who writes the eloquent letters that win her

heart. Thus the book, as a form, expresses its own emotions and thoughts, while concealing from view the person who has concocted them. The difference between *Cyrano* and the book in general is that *Cyrano* gives vent to his own emotions, but the thoughts and emotions in a book are not necessarily those of the writer of it.

Despite the hazards a reader may pose, a reader must be postulated by a writer, and always is. Postulated, but rarely visualized in any exact, specific form – apart that is from the primary readers, who may be those named on the dedication page – “Mr. W. H.,”¹⁶ or “my wife,” and so forth – or the group of friends and editors thanked in the acknowledgments. But beyond that, the reader is the great unknown. Here is Emily Dickinson on the subject:

I'm Nobody! Who are you?
 Are you – Nobody – Too?
 Then there's a pair of us!
 Don't tell! – they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
 How public – like a Frog –
 To tell one's name – the livelong June –
 To an admiring Bog!¹⁷

“Nobody” is the writer, and the reader is also Nobody. In that sense, all books are anonymous, and so are all readers. Reading and writing – unlike, for instance, acting and theatre-going – are both activities that presuppose a certain amount of solitude, even a certain amount of secrecy. I expect Emily Dickinson is using “Nobody” in both of its senses – in the sense of an insignificant person, a nobody, but also in the sense of the invisible and

never-to-be-known writer, addressing the invisible and never-to-be-known reader.

If the writer is Nobody addressing the reader, who is another Nobody – that hypocrite reader who is his likeness and his brother, as Baudelaire remarked¹⁸ – where do the dreary Somebody and the admiring Bog come into it?

Publication changes everything. “They’d advertise,” warns Emily Dickinson, and how right she was. Once the catalog is out of the bag, the assumed readership cannot consist of just one person – a friend or a lover, or even a single unknown Nobody. With publication, the text replicates itself, and the reader is no longer an intimate, a one to your one. Instead the reader too multiplies, just like the copies of the book, and all those nobodies add up to the reading public. If the writer has a success, he becomes a Somebody, and the mass of readers becomes his admiring Bog. But turning from a nobody into a somebody is not without its traumas. The nobody-writer must throw off the cloak of invisibility and put on the cloak of visibility. As Marilyn Monroe is rumored to have said, “If you’re nobody you can’t be somebody unless you’re somebody else.”¹⁹

And then doubt sets in. The writer-while-writing and the Dear Reader assumed as the eventual recipient of this writing have a relationship that is quite different from that between the mass-produced edition and “the reading public.” Dear Reader is singular – second-person singular. Dear Reader is a You. But once both book and Dear Reader become multiplied by thousands, the book becomes a publishing statistic, and Nobody can be quantified, and thus becomes a market, and turns into the great plural third-person Them, and Them is another thing altogether.

Becoming known to Them results in the condition known as Fame, and the attitudes to fame, and to being famous, changed radically from the end of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth. In the eighteenth century, the readership was assumed to be educated, to have taste; Voltaire, for instance, saw his fame as a tribute to his talents, not as a minus factor. Even the early Romantics had nothing against fame; in fact, they longed for it. "The Trumpet of Fame is as a tower of Strength the ambitious bloweth it and is safe,"²⁰ said John Keats in a letter. But by the end of the century, a bigger slice of the public was literate, the dreaded bourgeoisie – not to mention the even more dreaded masses – now determined how many copies would sell, publishing had become a business, "fame" and "popularity" were equated, and to have a small but discriminating readership now had a definite appeal.

This attitude persisted well into the twentieth century. Here is a Graham Greene character from *The End of the Affair* – a rather grubby novelist called Maurice Bendrix, who knows he is about to commit the art-for-art-influenced blunder of becoming a "vulgar success."²¹ This is what he thinks as he prepares to be interviewed by a critic who wants to write him up for a literary journal:

I knew too well . . . the buried significance he would discover of which I was unaware and the faults I was tired of facing. Patronizingly in the end he would place me – probably a little above Maugham because Maugham is popular and I have not yet committed that crime – not yet, but although I retain a little of the exclusiveness of unsuccess, the little reviews, like wise detectives, can scent it on its way.²²

Greene is being satirical, but the attitude he is satirizing was real enough : popularity – too much of it – was still regarded as a crime if you aspired to being what used to be called a “highbrow” writer. In Cyril Connolly’s *Enemies of Promise*, too much failure and too much success are equally to be feared. Among the other things a young writer has to look out for are his own potential readers, because once you start comforting yourself with the idea that they at least love you no matter what the critics say, you’re finished as a serious writer. “Of all the enemies of literature, success is the most insidious,”²³ says Connolly. He then quotes Trollope: “Success is a poison that should only be taken late in life, then only in small doses.”²⁴ It seems churlish to remark that only successful people ever say things like that; but Connolly expounds. He breaks success down into social success: not too bad, because it can provide material; professional success: the regard of one’s fellow artists, on the whole a good thing; and popular success, a grave danger. This last he also divides into three: a writer may become popular for his entertainment value, for political reasons, or because he has the human touch. Of these, the political factor is the least fatal to art, he thinks, because politics are volatile and complacency is therefore unlikely. An entertainer does not benefit from informed criticism because nobody ever offers any; his fate is simply to “go on and on until he wakes up one day to find himself obscure.”²⁵ But those with the human touch may be ruined as artists: Connolly says, “Neither harsh reviews, the contempt of equals, nor the indifference of superiors can affect those who have once tapped the great heart of suffering humanity and found out what a goldmine it is.”²⁶

Connolly was not alone in his analysis; in fact, by his time – and by mine – this attitude was endemic among those with ambitions as artists. Take, for instance, Isak Dinesen's story, "The Young Man With the Carnation." It begins with a writer called Charlie who has achieved a remarkable success with his first novel, which was about the struggles of the poor. Now he feels like a fraud, because he doesn't know what to write next; he's sick of the poor, he doesn't want to hear another word about them, but his admirers and the public have decided he's noble, and are expecting yet more and better things about the poor from his pen. If he writes about anything else, they will think he's superficial and hollow. No matter what he does, he feels, he will be doomed – doomed to disappoint – to disappoint the public, the great Them. He wouldn't even be able to commit suicide with impunity: "Now he had had the glaring searchlight of renown set on him, a hundred eyes were watching him, and his failure or suicide would be the failure and the suicide of a world-famous author."²⁷

There is no writer who has achieved any success at all who has not confronted this package of doubts. Repeat yourself and satisfy Them, or do something different and disappoint Them. Or worse – repeat yourself to satisfy Them, and then be accused of repetition.

There are certain stories you read – usually quite early in life – that take on an emblematic quality for you. One of these for me is a Ray Bradbury story from *The Martian Chronicles*, the title of which is "The Martian." It goes as follows:

The Americans have colonized Mars, and part of it has been turned into a sort of retirement town. The original

Martians are possibly extinct, or have taken to the hills. A middle-aged American couple, who have lost their young son Tom back on Earth, hear a knock on their door in the middle of the night. A small boy is standing in the yard. He looks like the dead son. The man sneaks down and unlocks the door, and in the morning there is Tom, all fresh and shining. The man guesses it must be a Martian, but the wife accepts Tom unquestioningly, and the man goes along with it because the facsimile is better than nothing.

All goes well until they travel into town. The boy doesn't want to go, and with good reason: shortly after they arrive he disappears, but another family suddenly recovers a daughter believed to be dead. The man guesses the truth – that the Martian is shaped by the desires of others, and by his own need to fulfill them – and goes to fetch Tom back. But the Martian can't change: the wishes of the new family are too strong for him. “You are Tom, you *were* Tom, weren't you?” the man asks plaintively. “I'm not anyone, I'm just myself,”²⁸ says the Martian. A curious statement; this equation of selfhood with nonentity.²⁹ “Wherever I am, I am something . . .” says the Martian. And so it proves. The Martian turns back into Tom, but the new family gives chase, and so do all the people the Martian passes as he runs away, with his mirror-like “face like silver” shining in the lights of the town. Cornered, the Martian screams, face after face flitting across his own. “He was melting wax shaping to their minds,” says Bradbury, “his face dissolving to each demand.” He collapses and dies, a puddle of various features, unrecognizable.

Once I'd begun to publish books, and to see them reviewed – and to find that several people I didn't much

recognize were running around out there with my name on them – this story took on a new significance. “So that’s it. My face is melting,” I thought. “I’m really a Martian.” It does explain a lot. Keats praised negative capability,³⁰ and unless a writer has something of this quality, she will write characters that are mere mouthpieces for her own views. But if she has too much negative capability, doesn’t she risk being turned into melting wax by the strength of her audience’s desires and fears, interacting with her own? How many writers have put on other faces, or had other faces thrust upon them, and then been unable to get them off?

At the beginning of this chapter I raised three questions. The first was about writers and readers – for whom does the writer write? The answers have included Nobody and the admiring Bog. The second question was about books. Considering the book’s position as the intermediate point between writer and reader, what is the book’s function, or its duty?

The use of the word “duty” assumes something with a will of its own, and the book as autonomous creature is a literary notion worth examining. There’s a department of the post office called the Dead Letter Office, for letters that can’t be delivered. This term implies that all the other letters are alive; which is nonsense, of course, but nonetheless an ancient and pervasive way of thinking. For instance, the Bible has often been called the living Word of God. Another *for instance*: it was the fashion a few hundred years ago for male writers to speak of their pregnancy – got with wordchild by the Spirit, or even

by the Muse, if you can wind your head around that kind of gender transposition: such writers would then describe the book's gestation and its eventual birth. Of course a book is nothing like a baby really – some of the reasons are scatological – but the convention of the living words has been persistent. Thus Elizabeth Barrett Browning, among many others: “My letters! All dead paper . . . mute and white! – / And yet they seem alive and quivering . . .”³¹

One of my university professors, who was also a poet, used to say that there was only one real question to be asked about any work, and that was – is it alive, or is it dead? I happen to agree, but in what does this aliveness or deadness consist? The biological definition would be that living things grow and change, and can have offspring, whereas dead things are inert. In what way can a text grow and change and have offspring? Only through its interaction with a reader, no matter how far away that reader may be from the writer in time and in space. “Poems don't belong to those who write them,” says the lowly poem-filching postman to the poet Pablo Neruda in the film *II Postino*.³² “They belong to those who need them.” And so it is.

Everything used by human beings as a symbol has its negative or demonic version, and the most demonic version of the text with a life of its own that I can remember comes again from Kafka. There's a Jewish legend concerning the Golem, an artificial man who could be brought to life by having a scroll with the name of God inscribed on it placed in his mouth. But the Golem could get out of control and run amok, and then you were in trouble.³³

Kafka's story is a sort of Golem story. It's called "In the Penal Colony," and it revolves around a justice machine used by the administration to execute prisoners, who have not been informed beforehand of their crime. To start the machine up, a text with the sentence written on it – a sentence devised by the former commander of the colony, who is now dead – is inserted into the top. The sentence is a sentence in both senses of the word – it's a grammatical sentence, and it's the sentence imposed on the man to be executed. The justice machine then carries out its functions by writing the sentence with an array of pen-like glass needles, in intricate calligraphy and with many flourishes, on the actual body of the condemned man. The criminal is supposed to achieve illumination after six hours, when he comes to understand what is being written on him. "Enlightenment dawns on the dullest," says the officer who worships this machine. "It begins around the eyes. From there it spreads out . . . Nothing further happens, the man simply begins to decipher the script, he purses his lips as if he were listening."³⁴ (This is a novel method of teaching reading, which has yet to be tested by the school system.)

The end of the story comes when the officer, realizing that the old letter of the law is now a dead letter, sacrifices himself to his own machine; but this time it doesn't work properly. Its cogs and wheels break off and roll away, but by now the thing has a life of its own and it just keeps on going, scribbling and jabbing, until the officer is dead.

In this story the writer is inhuman, the page is the reader's body, and the text is indecipherable. Poet Milton Acorn has a line that goes, "as a poem erases and re-writes

its poet,”³⁵ which also makes the text the active partner, but I doubt that Kafka’s variation is quite what he meant.

More usually, the living word is presented in a much more positive light. In the theatre – particularly the Elizabethan theatre – there was often a moment at the end of a play at which the text stepped out of its frame, so to speak, and the play appeared for a moment to be no play at all, but alive in the same sense as its audience. One of the actors would advance out front and address the audience directly. “Hello, I’m not really who you thought I was; actually I’m an actor, and this is a wig. Hope you enjoyed the play, imperfect though it was, and if you did, please treat us actors gently and give us some applause,” was what these speeches in effect were saying. Or there might be a prologue – again, apart from the main action – in which an actor said a few words about the play, and recommended it to the audience, and then stepped back into his frame again and became part of the *dramatis personae*.

These moments of recommendation, or of revelation and conclusion, were recreated by many writers of novels and longer poems in little vignettes, either as a prologue, or as an *envoi*, a sending off. The ancestry of the form is most obvious when a novelist is pretending that his book is some sort of play: Thackeray, for instance, has a section at the beginning of *Vanity Fair* called “Before the Curtain,” in which he says his book is a puppet show within *Vanity Fair* itself – a fair that consists of the readers, among others – and he, the author, is only the Manager of the Performance. And at the end of the book he says, “Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our

play is played out.” But in many prologues or *envois*, the writer reveals himself as the creator of the work, and writes what amounts to a defense of the book’s character, like a letter accompanying a job application or something on a patent-medicine bottle, supposedly from a satisfied client.

Or, at the end of the story, the writer may send off his book as if waving goodbye to it as it sets out on a journey – he or she wishes it well, and sees it on its way; and he may say goodbye also to the reader who has been the silent partner and collaborator thus far on the journey. Prologue and *envoi* have a lot to say about the complex but intimate connection between writer and book, and then between book and reader. Quite frequently the book is little – “Go, little book” – almost as if it is a child, who must now make its own way in the world; but its way – its duty – consists in carrying itself to the reader, and delivering itself as best it can. “You understand,” says Primo Levi in a letter to his German translator, “it is the only book I have written and now . . . I feel like a father whose son has reached the age of consent and leaves, and one can no longer look after him.”³⁶ One of the most disarming *envois* is by François Villon, the rascally and perennially broke fifteenth-century French poet, who instructed his poem to get a very urgent message through to a wealthy prince:

Go my letter, make a dash
Though you haven’t feet or tongue
Explain in your harangue
I’m crushed by lack of cash.³⁷

Other writers are less blunt; instead, they display a friendly concern for the reader. Here is the Russian poet

Pushkin, saying a charming goodbye to the reader at the end of his poem, *Eugene Onegin*:

Reader, I wish that, as we parted –
 whoever you may be, a friend,
 a foe – our mood should be warm-hearted.
 Goodbye, for now we make an end.
 Whatever in this rough confection
 you sought – tumultuous recollection,
 a rest from all its toils and aches,
 or just grammatical mistakes,
 a vivid brush, a witty rattle –
 God grant that from this little book
 for heart's delight, or fun, you took –
 for dreams, or journalistic battle,
 God grant you took at least a grain.
 On this we'll part; goodbye, again.³⁸

Two of the earliest and also the most complete pieces of writing of this sort are by John Bunyan; they come at the front of Parts One and Two of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The Part One prologue, "The Author's Apology for his Book," is more like an advertisement than anything else – these are the many good things this book can do for you, plus a list of the wholesome ingredients – but in the Part Two prologue, called "The Author's Way of Sending Forth his Second Part of the 'Pilgrim,'" the book has become a person:

Go, now my little Book to every place,
 Where my first *Pilgrim* has but shown his Face,
 Call at their door if any say, "Who's there?"
 Then answer thou, "Christiana is here."³⁹

Bunyan then gives his book a list of detailed instructions; but the book becomes frightened of its assignment,

and begins to answer back. Bunyan reassures it, and replies to its objections by telling it what to say in various difficult situations; and finally he tells it, or her, that no matter how wonderful she is, there will be some people that won't like her, because that's just the way it is:

Some love no Cheese, some love no Fish, and some
Love not their Friends, nor their own house or home;
Some start at Pig, slight Chicken, love not Fowl,
More than they love a Cuckoo or an Owl.
Leave such, my Christiana, to their choice,
And seek those who to find thee will rejoice . . .⁴⁰

Useful and bracing advice for any book, I think. The Ancient Mariner has an auditor who cannot choose but hear, but not all narrators have such a glittering eye, or such luck. Bunyan concludes with a very Protestant, fiscally honest, frugal, cheap-for-the-price sort of prayer:

Now may this little Book a blessing be,
To those that love this little Book and me,
And may its Buyer have no cause to say,
His Money is but lost or thrown away . . .⁴¹

Christiana has turned back into a book, a book-as-object, and an object that is for sale.

Such transformations – from book to person, from person to book – are in fact quite common. They can also be quite double-edged. We all know that a book is not really a person. It isn't a human being. But if you are a lover of books as books – as objects, that is – and ignore the human element in them – that is, their voices – you will be committing an error of the soul, because you will be an idolator, or else a fetishist. This is the fate of Peter Kien,

the protagonist of Elias Canetti's novel *Auto da Fé*. *Auto da fé* means "act of faith," and refers to the mass burnings of "heretics" once put on by the Inquisition. Kien is a collector of books, and loves their physical presence, though he detests novels – they have too much feeling in them. He loves these book-objects of his, but in a twisted way: he hoards them; and we know he's in spiritual trouble when he refuses to let a little boy who is hungry for knowledge read any of them, and instead kicks him downstairs.

Early in the book, Kien has a nightmare. The scene is a bonfire, combined with an Aztec-style human sacrifice, but when the victim's chest is cut open, instead of a heart, out comes a book – and then another book, and then another. These books fall into the flames. Kien tells the victim to close up his chest, to save the books, but no: more and more books pour out. Kien rushes into the fire to save them, but whenever he puts out his hand to save a book, he clutches a shrieking human being. "Let me go," Kien shouts. "I don't know you. What do you want with me! How can I rescue the books!"⁴²

But he's missed the point. The human beings in the dream *are* the books – they are the human element in the books. He hears the voice of God, which says, "There are no books here," but he misinterprets it. At the end of the novel, all the books he has collected come to life and turn against him – they are his prisoners, he has locked them up in his private library, and now they want their messages set free; for, as I've said, books must travel from reader to reader in order to stay alive. Finally he sets fire to them, and himself along with them: an *auto da fé*, the fate of a heretic. As the books burn, he can hear

their letters escaping from the Dead Letter Office he has created, out into the world again.

Sometimes the book is allowed to speak on its own behalf, without the writer's intervention. Here is a poem by Jay Macpherson, called simply "Book." Not only is this a talking book, it's a riddle, the answer to which is contained in its title.

Dear Reader, not your fellow flesh and blood
 – I cannot love like you, nor you like me –
 But like yourself launched out upon the flood,
 Poor vessel to endure so fierce a sea.

The water-beetle travelling dry and frail
 On the stream's face is not more slight than I;
 Nor more tremendous is the ancient whale
 Who scans the ocean floor with horny eye.

Although by my creator's will I span
 The air, the fire, the water and the land,
 My volume is no burden to your hand.

I flourish in your sight and for your sake.
 His servant, yet I grapple fast with man:
 Grasped and devoured, I bless him. Reader, take.⁴³

As well as being a boat, a whale, and the angel who wrestled with Jacob and blessed him, the little book is the object of consumption in a communion meal – the food that may be devoured but never destroyed, the feast that renews itself as well as the feast-guests' link with the spiritual. The angel must not only be grappled with, it must be assimilated by the reader, so that it becomes a part of him or her.⁴⁴

This brings me to my last question: where is the writer when the reader is reading? There are two answers to that. First, the writer is nowhere. In his small piece called “Borges and I,” Jorge Luis Borges inserts a parenthetical aside about his own existence. “(If it is true that I am someone)” he says.⁴⁵ By the time we, the readers, come to read those lines, that’s a very big *if*, because by the time the reader is reading, the writer may not even exist. The writer is thus the original invisible man: not there at all but also very solidly there, at one and the same time, because the second answer to the question – *Where is the writer when the reader is reading?* – is, “Right here.” At least we have the impression that he or she is right here, in the same room with us – we can hear the voice. Or we can almost hear the voice. Or we can hear *a* voice. Or so it seems. As the Russian writer Abram Tertz says in his story “The Icicle,” “Look, I’m smiling at you, I’m smiling in you, I’m smiling through you. How can I be dead if I breathe in every quiver of your hand?”⁴⁶

In Carol Shields’s novel *Swann: A Mystery*,⁴⁷ about a murdered woman poet and also about her readers, we find out that the original versions of the dead woman’s poems are no longer fully legible – they were written on scraps of old envelopes and got thrown into the garbage by mistake, which blurred them quite a bit. Not only that, a resentful connoisseur has gone around destroying the few remaining copies of the first edition. But several readers have luckily memorized the poems, or parts of them, and at the end of the book they create – or recreate – one of these poems before our very eyes, by reciting the

fragments. “Isis keeps Osiris alive by remembering him,” says Dudley Young.⁴⁸ “Remembering” as a pun may of course have two senses – it is the act of memory, but it is also the opposite of dismembering. Or this is what the ear hears. Any reader creates by assembling the fragments of a read book – we can read, after all, only in fragments – and making them into an organic whole in her mind.

Perhaps you will remember the end of Ray Bradbury’s futuristic nightmare, *Fahrenheit 451*.⁴⁹ All the books are being burnt, in favor of wraparound TV screens that allow for more complete social control. Our hero, who begins as a fireman helping to destroy the books,⁵⁰ becomes a convert to the secret resistance movement dedicated to preserving books and, along with them, human history and thought. At length he finds himself in a forest where the insurgents are hiding out. Each has *become* a book, by memorizing it. The fireman is introduced to Socrates, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, and many more, all of them reciting the books they have assimilated, or “devoured.” The reader has in effect eliminated the middle point of the triangle – the text in its paper version – and has actually become the book, or vice versa.

With this circuit complete, I will go back to the first question – for whom does the writer write? And I will give two answers. The first is a story about my first real reader.

When I was nine, I was enrolled in a secret society, complete with special handshakes, slogans, rituals, and mottoes. The name of this was the Brownies, and it was quite bizarre. The little girls in it pretended to be fairies,

gnomes, and elves, and the grownup leading it was called Brown Owl. Sadly, she did not wear an owl costume, nor did the little girls wear fairy outfits. This was a disappointment to me, but not a fatal one.

I did not know the real name of Brown Owl, but I thought she was wise and fair, and as I needed someone like that in my life at the time, I adored this Brown Owl. Part of the program involved completing various tasks, for which you might collect badges to sew on to your uniform, and in aid of various badge-collecting projects – needlework stitches, seeds of autumn, and so forth – I made some little books, in the usual way: I folded the pages, and sewed them together with sock-darning wool. I then inserted text and illustrations. I gave these books to Brown Owl, and the fact that she liked them was certainly more important to me than the badges. This was my first real writer–reader relationship. The writer, me; the go-between, my books; the recipient, Brown Owl; the result, pleasure for her, and gratification for me.

Many years later, I put Brown Owl into a book. There she is, still blowing her whistle and supervising the knot tests, in my novel *Cat's Eye*, for the same reason that a lot of things and people are put into books. That was in the 1980s, and I was sure the original Brown Owl must have been long dead by then.

Then a few years ago a friend said to me, “Your Brown Owl is my aunt.” “Is?” I said. “She can’t possibly be alive!” But she was, so off we went to visit her. She was well over ninety, but Brown Owl and I were very pleased to see each other. After we’d had tea, she said, “I think you should have these,” and she took out the little books I had made

fifty years before – which for some reason she'd kept – and gave them back to me. She died three days later.

That's my first answer: the writer writes for Brown Owl, or for whoever the equivalent of Brown Owl may be in his or her life at the time. A real person, then: singular, specific.

Here's my second answer. At the end of Isak Dinesen's "The Young Man With the Carnation," God's voice makes itself heard to the young writer Charlie, who has been so despairing about his work. "'Come,' said the Lord. 'I will make a covenant between Me and you. I, I will not measure you out any more distress than you need to write your books . . . But you are to write the books. For it is I who want them written. Not the public, not by any means the critics, but Me, Me!' 'Can I be certain of that?' asked Charlie. 'Not always,' said the Lord."⁵¹

So that is who the writer writes for: for the reader. For the reader who is not Them, but You. For the Dear Reader. For the ideal reader, who exists on a continuum somewhere between Brown Owl and God. And this ideal reader may prove to be anyone at all – any *one* at all – because the act of reading is just as singular – always – as the act of writing.

