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THE WRITER AS A CHARACTER

It's a particular pleasure to be here, because Ann Arbor has always been a place of legend to me. I am the sister and daughter of University of Michigan alumni, but I have never visited the campus. Over the years I have had several friends who received Hopwood prizes—a few days ago I had lunch with Edmund White, my neighbor in Paris. I don't know when I have read a book as avidly as Nicholas Delbanco's anthology of former Hopwood lectures, Speaking of Writing. Writers in America, dispersed as we are, starve for shop-talk, and this collection is like having a wonderful conversation about literature with an impressive and admired group of predecessors on this podium.

When I was done reading it, I had a lot of "how true's" in the margin, not to mention "but ifs." I might have taken as my text Norman Mailer's observation that "Experience when it cannot be communicated to another must wither within and be worse than lost." How true, though maybe only true for writers? That is, for people who must write, as compared to people who want to lead a writer's life. Creative writing classes are full of both types, often equally talented; but the latter usually don't end up being writers, perhaps because they don't have the writer's sort of character. My subject I could describe as being the writer's character as desired by the reader, and revealed in the old-fashioned elements of the narrative—plot, style, and subject—coincidentally the very narrative elements Saul Bellow said in his Hopwood lecture of 1961 were finished. Bellow especially attacked "the badly faded ideas of motives and drama or love and hate" as being possibly only of interest to clinical psychologists and sociologists. That was very much in the Freud-dominated spirit of the time, and things were to get worse

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for the old-fashioned art of story-telling, which I would like to offer a little defense of today.

By chance, on my way here, something happened that exactly illustrates my theme. I was in the airport bookshop. It might as well have been called the Danielle Steele bookshop, completely lined from floor to ceiling and wall to wall with books by this popular author. A woman wondering at the vast array of alluring titles asked the bookshop lady “but which one?” “Oh, it doesn’t matter,” said the bookstore lady. “They’re all Steeles.” This in turn reminded me of a few years ago, when I was one of several writers on a program, one of whom was Louis L’Amour, the writer of western novels, with an audience of four thousand attentive listeners who to a person lined up afterward to get L’Amour’s signature on their old copies of his books. Yet, I now discover, few readers can mention the titles or any of the characters or recount the plots of L’Amour’s or Steele’s novels, let alone quote a line. The qualities that drew these readers were inherent in the writers, not in the works, some resonance of sensibility.

I wish I could announce that I was here going to reveal the secret of selling millions of copies of novels. Alas. But I do want to say something about the neglected subject of the writer herself, himself, in his pages, carrying over from book to book. The author, not the narrator. I mean the sense we have as we read there are three of us involved—ourselves, the narrator, and the writer. Reading Huckleberry Finn, there are Huck and I, and Mark Twain, and as I read, I address certain thoughts to Twain, no matter how scarce he makes himself, hiding behind Huck. As readers I think we always have a sense of an author’s presence, alive in her text, looking over our shoulder as we read, and we have an affection for one author over another; and there’s the fact that though we will read about characters we don’t like, we don’t read a writer whom we don’t like. The practical implication of this for us as writers is that it is ourselves, finally, that have to stand up to some serious tests of not only talent and industry but character, commitment, and what Henry James called, rather dauntingly, “quality of mind.”

I should say again that I’m talking about the writer as distinct from the narrator. In an allegory painting of narrative fiction, the narrator would be the Madonna or saint in the middle of the picture, and the writer would be the God-like figure behind, up in the sky, with golden rays of force emitting from his forehead or fingers.
There is of course one thing particularly medieval and naive about the painting—the unfashionable figure of God. God is not represented in modern painting, just as the writer is no longer admitted into his narrative except as subject. It is in part the direction all art has gone, from naive allegory to abstract expressionism. Flaubert decreed that the author should be "nowhere apparent." Roland Barthes in 1968 took a harder line; as an "institution the author is dead." The irrelevance of the writer to the literary project, the death of the writer, was announced somewhat after the death of God, but the two demises are not unrelated, I think, and are part of a general modern political dynamic, pushing from the left to devalue or challenge authority of any kind, terrorizing on the right with death threats for authorial transgressions.

Serious critics from Michigan or Yale have by now abandoned speaking of the writer at all. Once he has performed his unwitting creative part, we are told to forget about him and his intentions in the work, his need for money in the winter of 1942, his lifelong obsession for frogs—the text must stand for itself. The worst of this is that writers have tended to accept the death of the writer too. I think as American writers we have shrunk from our readers. This may sound odd in a time when people write about themselves obsessively, with a kind of unstoppable reflex candor—we are so good at "sharing" our feelings. Europeans say American friendliness is our disguise, our candor a mask behind which, because we omit knowable social rites, we are unknowable. The first-person, with its confidential, natural tone and indifference to plot, can mask us and distract us.

I think, and now I speak as a reader, that the reader must have a sense of the writer there, that dialogue is implicit in art. Even Barthes, having dismissed him, later goes on to admit that in the text we "desire the author; [we] need his figure... as he needs [ours]." Just as every writer has an invisible, minatory reader dimly in mind, who says things like "she would never do that," or even, "don't put in so much description, can't you get along with the story faster?" the reader, for his part, has an invisible but tangible writer in mind to whom he says "how true" or "but if." Where there is no author, as in the case of oral literature or anonymous works, we tend either to invent him (never her, e.g., "Homer") or attribute the work to someone who does or did exist. Shakespeare is almost the oddest case, an author of such genius that he cannot have existed—I speak of the
attempts to question his identity or ascribe his works to others. The easy appeal of the too autobiographical first-person narrative, however, can impede dialogue because one cannot challenge narrative elements compelled less by art than by circumstance.

I think a reader sees a writer as vividly as in a painting and we modify our image of him as a part of reading. We might see D. H. Lawrence wearing a lascivious smile until we realize he is kind of a prude whose inclusion of sexually explicit passages is the reflex of his discomfort with the whole subject of sex. Now we put a scowl on his face, rather like the scowl on the face of Carlyle. Dickens is fat. My own image of Twain comes from my childhood game of Authors. However you get it, this image changes according to the information you have, inferred from the attitudes, subject matter, and even mistakes we find in a book, and also what you might know of the author's real life. Our ideas about the writer may have come from that curious genre the literary biography. Why actually would one want to read about Wallace Stevens or Henry Green—the lives of most writers aren't very interesting—except to influence and clarify our malleable and developing image of a writer whose works we cherish, very much as we update the picture we have of our friends. We miss the author photo on the jacket if it isn't there. I have to tell you that when those four thousand people lined up before Louis L'Amour, clutching worn, beloved copies of his books, he refused to sign the paperbacks, only the hardbacks, and I've always wondered if those rejected readers went on reading him with as much affection as before.

I am not saying that the reader thus imposes a responsibility on you the writer in your daily life, to be a moral force or public figure. It may be that he tries, but I'm not talking at all about the writer's material self, his personality in the world, his media side. Let us pass over that. Writers like celebrity as much as the next person, but it never seems to have helped anyone write. Lionizing is not just a malady of the modern world—people have always seized upon writers if they are glamorous. They rarely are. We have all seen those spreads in People, say, the homely, ordinary-looking writer in his study, usually with some touching affectation of dress, say cowboy boots or a big hat, by which he hopes to set himself apart. Byron, or Marlowe, or Hemingway had glamour, but it is not given to most writers, nor to most mortals in any profession, not even for fifteen minutes. And most of us manage to avoid feeling too much regret
about that. I should acknowledge that Louis L’Amour did not disappoint in glamour; he was a white-haired old man like the figure of God, and wore a great array of turquoise jewelry and a fringed buckskin jacket.

The you in your text is not the same as you the living person. I was recently in Saudi Arabia, where women, even western women, are obliged to wear a kind of black choir-robe, called the abbaya, and a black head covering which is pulled across the face, rendering you invisible, though you can see, rather imperfectly, through the semi-transparent fabric. Once invisible, I found myself to change, my personality changed. If I am, as I imagine, usually, reserved and polite, I became assertive and frank as I try to be in print. As I stood with a group of men at the hotel elevator, and they piled in and allowed the doors to close behind them without me, from beneath my veil I heard my own voice loudly and rudely denounce them as a bunch of jerks. Incidentally I should say that I felt that the veil, though symbolically odious, has this same liberating function for women in Islamic societies, in that it gives them license to speak without gender, and this is why they put up with it. About gender, I myself think the writer’s persona has no particular sex in the text. The disadvantages of being a writer who is a woman are all external—the ghettoization of women’s (and black, and gay) writing, the fact that men have to learn that they can read writing by women, something they often resist, the suspicion of female idiom—I mean the idiom of Moby Dick preferred to that of Wuthering Heights, two stories which greatly resemble each other; the unexamined assumption by critics that the great American novel will be written by a man—something which seems only half likely. I’m not sure the sex of the writer makes much difference to women readers because we are trained to read work by both sexes. I know as a reader I feel closer to Hemingway, a hunting, fishing sort of person from my part of Illinois and a fellow expatriot, than to English punk woman Angela Carter, or even, say, an American woman writing about an exotic New York world of shrinks and angst far from my experience.

The situation of a writer is like being veiled in Riyadh, invisible and explicit. As individuals we forget things, fail to think of the snappy response at a dinner table, are struck dumb at times we should strike back and so on. People like to meet writers, but they are mostly disappointed meeting them. It usually turns out that the
drab mortal who gratefully accepts the glass of white wine after the reading or who plainly longs to get back to the hotel, is less than the passionate and clever personages on her pages. Our books are ourselves veiled, assertive and bold.

Another aside: when you begin as a writer you have to learn to accept that many strangers are going to have an opinion of your personal defects and hangups, and that your families — this is almost the hardest thing for writers to get used to when they begin — will come to know that you know things about sex or swear-words they didn’t know you knew. It is amazing but true that the families of writers often don’t read them, finding it too odd or painful. And it’s a curious feature of writer photographs, that in an article containing a review of your book, and a photo, if both are bad, it is the photo you are apt to mind most. There is room for feeling that a reviewer has misunderstood your work, it is a complex work, after all, capable of many interpretations, but there is no mistaking your face.

But just as there is usually a gap between the real and the ideal character of the writer, there is also always a gap between what the writer means to do and how his book turns out. The gap is large. Critics tend to forget this. Any literary work is testimony to our failed intentions. Your book never turns out to be as good as you had hoped, back when you were thinking it up, before you went and spoiled it by writing it down. We know, if critics don’t, that our novel is witness to our lapses of attention, hangover, diminished stamina, boredom, unwise enthusiasms and so on. But the reader reads, I believe, with the implicit assumption that the writer is an authority, worthy of standing behind the work, who somehow gives permission to read and enjoy, perhaps by his very reliability assuaging the guilt we may feel at indulging in fantasy and giving ourselves up to stories — the reasons people are apt to say that fiction is less worthwhile than non-fiction. If, as Simon O. Lesser puts it, in his endearing and still illuminating *Fiction and the Unconscious*, “fiction . . . provides us with images of our emotional problems expressed in an idiom of characters and events,” we need to have confidence in the person who provides these images, just as we need to have confidence in our grocer.

All this is to say that the writer’s character comes under a certain scrutiny as it is revealed in all the main narrative elements of a fiction — style, subject, plot. In a poem too, no doubt. But where do we actually find the writer? How are we aware of his or her distinc-
tive timbre, as Willa Cather called it, in narratives other than first-person ones? Style, to begin with. Take this sentence: "I won't even compare you with something I have a sort of dim stupid sense you might be and are not—for I don't in the least know that you might be it, after all, or whether, if you were, you wouldn't cease to be that something you are that makes me write to you thus." (Henry James to William Dean Howells) We recognize this writer by his style and only eventually by his rather censorious morality masked with urbanity. "Into the dark, smoky restaurant, smelling of the rich raw foods on the buffet, slid Nicole's sky-blue suit like a segment of the weather outside." That is the exuberant Fitzgerald. The narrator in *Howards End* strikes us as being like E. M. Forster, a Cambridge don, when he writes:

> The boy, Leonard Bast', stood at the extreme verge of gentility. . . . He knew that he was poor, and would admit it; he could have died sooner than confess any inferiority to the rich. This may be splendid of him. But he was inferior to most rich people, there is not the least doubt of it. He was not as courteous as the average rich man, nor as intelligent, nor as healthy, nor as lovable.

Here the writer and the narrator are surely one, E. M. Forster snobbish, judgmental, and perceptive. When we respond to the artfulness or peculiarity of a phrase, I think we always attribute it not to the narrator but directly to the writer, mentally congratulating him or complaining. Beside style, choice of subject is obviously an authorial *Rorschach* too—your preoccupations are formed for whatever reason, and you are the product of your experiences, though of course you can transcend them. We all tend to repeat ourselves or be known by our obsessions.

Saul Bellow dismissed plot as "unfit," seconding Gertrude Stein's opinion that it's rather low to just read novels for what happens next—Bellow mentions *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Ulysses* as novels we don't read for the story. I think we do, in fact. I've given some thought to the role of plot in writing fiction, and think it is honorable and essential, a vital activity of the novelist that has been unfairly stigmatized, with all the negative connotations of the word "plot," "plotting" meaning treachery and manipulation. About plot, the dismissive attitude grew up perhaps because, after Freud, we tried to think about all action as stemming from character, and character in turn as stemming from accidents of nurture, all deter-
mined beforehand by the logic or illogic of psychology, so that therefore "plot" with its adventitious surprises came to be seen as a mean property of the lower orders of popular literature, manipulative, not serious, and not art. By plot I mean the telling way a writer rearranges the elements of his or her experience and observation into a meaningful and absorbing ideal form that concentrates life in a way that meandering reality cannot. Bellow meant "narcotic or brain-washing entertainments, at worst breeding strange vices," which seems a little severe.

 Anyone who has written a novel knows that the writer spends quite a bit of time plotting—deciding, say, whether Jeffrey will go to Detroit before or after meeting Nora, a decision with massive implications when it comes to who knows what is in the bank vault, matters wrestled with by the artist which boil down on the page to writing the one word, Thursday, instead of Sunday, and reversing two chapters—in other words in reflecting upon and manipulating a dynamic that is never expressed in words on the page, exactly, but which generates in the reader's understanding, like the synapste of a sparkplug across the empty space between the points, all the energy of the narrative. Plotting, and, more peculiarly, errors in plotting (too obvious coincidence or banal ending) are one of the invisible aspects of narration for which the writer takes responsibility and gets blamed or gets the credit. It is in his plot arrangement that the novelist is most herself, himself, where his attitudes toward life and chance, his optimism, pessimism, his merriness or mysticism speak most directly to the reader. With plot, style, subject, an author communicates the preoccupations and habits of her mind. But style, plot, and authority are the very elements that fiction has somehow been losing.

 Sometimes the writer fails to communicate. To illustrate communication let's say I, the reader, am an animal lover, fond of cats and dogs. In Wuthering Heights, a character drowns some puppies; this may anger me with him, but I also know that Bronte is using this example of brutality to tell us something about his spiritual state. I infer that she knows how this scene will affect me because she and I are operating in the same universe of dog lovers, and thus I can have some confidence in the symbolic meanings that underlie other things that will happen in the novel.

 But sometimes we don't know what a writer means. In Christina Stead's autobiographical I'm Dying Laughing there is a scene where
the heroine and person we judge to be nearest to the writer, is debating the course of her life. This is the scene where the title line is uttered. “I’m dying laughing,” so we know it is an important, portentous moment of political and artistic truth. In the course of it, Emily finds a stray cat in her Hollywood kitchen. “The kitchen was in order and faultlessly clean; but an unwashed baking dish had been put on the floor for the cat to lick at. Emily shouted, with an ugly expression, ‘Who did that?’”

“She took the cat by the scruff of the neck and hauled it to the door. It was a bluish, short-haired animal with a white hourglass on the belly. It had just had kittens. It was almost starved to death. She threw it out on the hillside which rose behind the house.” This passage tells us something about Emily—but what? And is it what Stead intends? We animal lovers might think Emily must be a cruel, selfish person and that Stead means us to think so, but here too are honorific images of cleanliness and aprons. One fears that Stead agrees with Emily that stray cats are a nuisance, but we are not sure. I'm afraid I think of Christina Stead as cruel to cats.

Usually, the writer, careful not to be mistaken for one of his immoral, or criminal, or foolish creations, will insert sly reservations to indicate his own disapproval of someone who mistreats cats. Parenthetically it is worth mentioning that an author will usually be confounded with his creations, and this is especially true for women writers, who are freely assumed to have the morals or tragic lives of their heroines. It is not at all unusual to receive commiserating letters, or else reproaches. How brave of you to put up with living in that slum. How sad that you lost your mother in that theater fire. I think women are unconsciously assumed to have deficient powers of invention—so what you write must be true. Paradoxically women have also always been thought, by men at least, to be great liars.

But the point is, there's a reader-writer dialogue, and if you are the writer, the reader is interested in you. We might finally ask, what are the qualities readers hope to find in you, do find in the greatest writers over the heads of their creations? What do they want from a writer? Obviously it is not personal goodness, since we tend to like writers in propria persona to be a little bad, like Byron, or ill-fated in some way, flawed, drunk like Hammett or Malcolm Lowry—we want them to be a little like ourselves. But not too much. Of course, just as our face is not entirely within our control, the authorial self we reveal in our books is not entirely within our
control, is so much oneself that there isn't much one can do about him or her except by trying to be better or taking Prozac or undergoing religious conversion—there are only a few ways people do change. The reader can see things in us we cannot see ourselves. It's not as simple as looking to the writer for moral guidance, even though he punishes the wicked and rewards the good, or, according to the conventional ironies of our own day, punishes the good and rewards the wicked. What we want is more a sense of observantness and ambivalence, a person of two minds about the impulses of the human heart, questioning of the criteria of conventional morality. Ambivalence—the side of Shakespeare that admired Macbeth's ambition and overreaching, the thing that produced Mozart's fondness for Don Giovanni. If it is true that the greatest fiction is pervaded by a sense of the opposite (it is only inferior fiction that tends to state things too boldly in black and white, as Bellow complained), this sense is likely to issue from the writer's simultaneous grasp, as Fitzgerald put it, of two contradictory ideas. Grasp is not a bad word. We want the sense that the writer has grasped things in all their complexity and has found for them a design whose formal properties and very words release and stir us. The author can't necessarily be "good," as in faithful, sober, generous, moral in conventional terms or saintly around the house; but what he must be is a complex receptacle of virtues all the same, if forgiving and understanding are virtues. He must know something beyond himself. It's this we tend to miss in recent fiction, I think.

I've been living in France. Sometimes it's good to be away because when you re-enter you have a day or two of revealing culture shock before everything begins to seem normal to you—will be struck by how fat Americans are, how all the formerly vigorous TV journalists now seem to be wearing weird toupees, and how the serious fiction now is terse, grisly and self-pitying at the same time, mostly concerning abuse of the author's self or the indignities endured by his/her grandparents. Really, since we are here, most of our grandparents are by definition fortunate. Don't we have something else to talk about? Conceptions of virtue, for example, or the operation of our social institutions? When you come back, you hear everyone saying that our culture is finished, is unlivable, ungovernable, getting dumber. Couldn't we talk about that? I consider myself a novelist of manners, a subgenre so distant from the mainstream that this isn't usually even understood. I guess I am a novelist of manners
because I came from a small Midwestern town where one could still follow the action of society on the individual. But this is old-fashioned. The great nineteenth-century novelists had one subject, which could loosely be called "how to live." We don't have that because, hey, we can't tell anyone else how to live. Victorian writers wrote about their own experience, but did so in order to put a stitch in the great tapestry of literature which tries to present the human condition. Writers today want not just money but sympathy too. I guess I think that personal witness still has value—is finally all a writer can do—but the work of a career in writing should be to refine our skills as witness and use the personal to transcend the personal.

A friend of mine showed me the manuscript of his novel. "At last I've come to understand my mother," he said. Writing a novel may indeed help you to understand your mother. Writing a novel is certainly a way of avoiding the psychoanalyst. Not even Freud wanted to tamper with the artist's mysterious powers. Roland Barthes, who seemed to have an apt observation about everything, said the motto of the writer ought to be "mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I may be," neurosis perhaps too severe a name for a powerful impulse to rearrange a less than ideal world into a better form, if only by revealing its flaws. But is American literature to become the sum of autobiographies vying for attention, like siblings on a stage? Maybe it is part of our collective loss of confidence in ourselves, an American as well as a writerly problem, that we have no larger subjects at the moment, but I think we have come to believe we have no stories to tell except, diffidently or defiantly, our own stories. And I think those are no longer enough, because we have arrived at a point in America where we can no longer understand each others' stories, or don't want to, are too ravished by the vibrancy of our own suffering, enamored of our too-facile way of appealing in all our frailty to the sympathy of others. Pain is the fashionable word. One trouble is that voices in pain tend to sound all alike, loud cries of pain drowning out thought and language. Do we have a duty to something larger? Duty is a word we tend to avoid; I know people always deplore the times they live in, but the lack of impulse to think about the inner life of others says something bad about us, and I think it is also significant, and bad, that in America, just now, no writer is considered dangerous to the state.