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The book has been collected and arranged, for reference or continuous reading, by Walter Allen, himself a novelist as well as a critic. He has also contributed a long Introduction.

writers

ON WRITING

BOOKS BY WALTER ALLEN

NOVELS
Innocence Is Drowned
Blind Man's Ditch
Living Space
Rogue Elephant

CRITICISM
Arnold Bennett

TOPOGRAPHY
The Black Country

CHILDREN'S STORIES
The Festive Baked-Potato-Cart

WRITERS ON WRITING

About writing Tolstoi said:

'If you ask someone: "Can you play the violin?" and he says: "I don't know, I have not tried, perhaps I can", you laugh at him. Whereas about writing, people always say: "I don't know, I have not tried", as though one had only to try and one would become a writer.'

A. B. GOLDENWEIZER: *Talks with Tolstoi*

SELECTED & INTRODUCED BY
WALTER ALLEN



PHOENIX HOUSE LONDON

For Robert Goodyear

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Introduction

This book is not designed primarily as an anthology of representative criticism of poetry and fiction. If it were, its omissions—from Aristotle to Pater and beyond—would render it more or less valueless. Nor is it intended as a source-book of literary theory. For such the reader will turn to solid works of scholarship, key books like Saintsbury's *Loci Critici*, Spingarn's *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century*, and R. P. Cowl's *Theory of Poetry in England*, to all of which my debt, like that of any other literary journalist who respects his calling, is great and gladly acknowledged. What I have set out to do is to collect what T. S. Eliot has called the criticism of practitioners themselves, though in many instances the word criticism is too pretentious. I have sought the writers' notes upon their trades, and sometimes they are indeed merely notes, odd sentences thrown out casually in letters or in the give-and-take of conversation, though they may be none the less valuable for that, since, as more than one author I quote from says, the writer is never more busy than when he appears to be doing nothing and his preoccupation with his art is unceasing. Other extracts, those from Wordsworth, Coleridge, Arnold, James, Proust, and Mauriac, for instance, deal with the fundamentals of poetry and the novel. Others, those from Trollope and Maugham among them, are avowedly more superficial, the reflections of distinguished craftsmen on their art recorded for the benefit of their juniors. And some, such as D. H. Lawrence's letter on his characters to Edward Garnett, are interesting mainly perhaps for the light they throw on their author's work and intentions. I have also included accounts of how specific works came to be conceived and written. But in every case the extract has been chosen because the writer was in the first place an eminent practitioner. I have tried to make the sort of book that would have stimulated me and, I think, have helped me too when I first began to write fifteen years ago. I suspect every young writer

makes for his own guidance and inspiration a commonplace-book in which he records the *obiter dicta* of his most admired elders on their art; and this collection may be taken as an extension of such a working writer's commonplace-book.

I have used the phrase 'eminent practitioners', and my interpretation of what constitutes, for the purpose of this book, an eminent practitioner could, of course, be argued. From the first one was up against an obvious difficulty: very few of the great critics of the past three hundred years have not been to some extent practitioners also. Addison was as famous as a poet and dramatist in his day as Johnson was in the generation that followed, but I have not quoted from Addison whereas I have from Johnson. The reason is that Addison's verse is now so much dead matter, whereas Johnson within his limits remains a fine poet. Similarly, I have not included Lamb, who wrote many charming verses, or Pater, who wrote a novel; not because I dislike their criticism but because they were primarily critics and only secondarily practitioners. Again, to come to our own day, my failure to quote from Percy Lubbock's *The Craft of Fiction* and Edwin Muir's *The Structure of the Novel* must not be construed as evidence that I fail to admire these books. In fact, they seem to me extremely valuable critical works. But though Mr Lubbock and Mr Muir have also written distinguished novels I think that it is as critics that they will be remembered, and I suspect that their fiction has its origin in their criticism, and not vice versa.

And here a distinction between the criticism of the critics proper and that of the critics who are first and foremost poets or novelists does seem valid. From the former, whom we may call the pure critic, we look for a judicial impartiality and objectivity, the ability to survey and assess a whole field, a whole body of work, and the derivation of laws from what they have found most typical and excellent. Aristotle may be taken as the archetype of the pure critic, and the only great practitioner who has also possessed these qualifications to the full seems to me to be Coleridge. At his best, the pure critic is the guardian of tradition and right practice. At his worst he falls into rancorous pedantry, like Dennis and Rhymer, or, as with some modern critics, the American Humanists

of the 'twenties for instance and all but the best of Marxist critics, he is so busy drawing up specifications for a literature that shall illustrate his own theories that his criticism ends by being relevant to no existing practice. The practitioner of an art, on the other hand, comes to criticism from his first-hand experience in the art itself. He is not so much intent on establishing general principles as finding his own laws and justifying his own practice. When he looks at the literature of the past as often as not he is, consciously or otherwise, seeking a precedent for what he is himself doing as an artist. The criticism of the practitioner, then, is essentially an exercise in autobiography, for ultimately, if he is a modern, and even though it conflicts with his own formulated opinions on the function of the artist, he will almost certainly in the practice of his art echo Lawrence's cry 'Art for *my* sake!' For whether he likes it or not, every artist in the West in these days is a romantic artist. He cannot be otherwise.

The criticism of the practitioner is almost inevitably partial, for he generalizes from his own experience and his practice. This is obvious enough. Henry James's prefaces to his novels make up the most important body of fiction criticism we possess. For other novelists nothing written on fiction has been so challenging or so fruitful; but as general criticism it is, quite simply, biased. It sprang entirely out of James's struggle with his medium, a struggle peculiar to himself; and if an intelligent Oriental were to take James's prefaces as his introduction to the theory of modern fiction he would be very surprised when he came to *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, and *The Possessed*. In the same way, though Mr Eliot is often a great critic his criticism gains its especial value from the light it throws on his progress as a poet; his criticism exists as a by-product of his work as a poet and must always be read with his own poetry kept firmly in mind. Even when a practitioner surveys the whole field of his craft, as Mr Forster does in *Aspects of the Novel*, the special preoccupations of the artist are, I think, plainly evident. 'For me', says Mr Forster, 'the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into formulae but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says.' That, it seems to me, is a prac-

titioner's statement; the pure critic could not afford to be so cavalier, he doesn't know enough.

As a critic, the practitioner is almost certain to be a propagandist, a propagandist for his own kind of art. This is as evident in Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* as in James's prefaces. And when the critic is a propagandist on behalf of one kind of art—his own—he is inevitably a propagandist against other kinds of art. In almost every instance, the kind of art he is a propagandist against is that which is approved by and sanctioned by the pure critics, who are as a general rule the High Tories of art. When a great writer indulges in formal criticism, whether he is Dryden, Wordsworth, Shelley, Arnold or Eliot, it is generally because he has discovered that what he himself is after in his art is at odds with the regulations laid down by the abstract criticism of his day. 'Every great and original writer,' wrote Wordsworth, 'in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished.' He does so not only through his own creative work but also through the criticism which is a by-product of it; for the discovery of new modes in poetry brings with it also the re-discovery of the poetry of the past and a re-assessment of it. How thorough-going this may be is seen not only in the revolution in taste Wordsworth wrought in his day but also in the similar revolution Eliot has wrought in the past thirty years. There may be no reason in the nature of things why the pure critic and the practitioner should be enemies; it remains a fact that they generally are. By the same token, the pure critic is apt to prefer the art of any other period to that of his own. The great academic critics in particular tend to betray a singular obtuseness in the presence of the art of their contemporaries; the contemporary work they approve of being that which most nearly resembles the work of the past. The result is that criticism of the literature of the past is mainly the work of scholars, criticism of contemporary writing mainly the work of journalists, in these days journalists who are themselves often practitioners of the arts they criticize. A creator is never really safe till he is dead. Which is why university professors may now concern themselves with Henry James without at the same time disgracing themselves.

In this book, the practitioners for once have the field entirely to themselves; for the time being, the pure critic and the academic critic, who are so often interested in problems that seem quite irrelevant to the practitioner in the midst of creation, do not exist. Rightly; for in creation—and in this book I have tried to show poets and novelists in creation—the practitioner has to find out everything for himself, has to discover on his own pulses, in his own practice, the validity of whatever eternal laws of composition the pure critics may have laid down. For such laws are always generalizations after the event, after a multitude of events, and the practitioner, whenever he sets out to write a new poem or a new novel, is faced with a new problem. 'Every attempt', Mr Eliot tells us in *East Coker*, 'is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure.'

For the reader's convenience I have arranged my quotations under heads, though in point of fact I do not think my classifications have been tremendously successful. In the beginning it seemed natural to group passages under such general headings as the 'nature of poetry', 'poetic diction', 'plot', 'character', and the like; but I very soon found that these and similar broad divisions of the totality that is a poem or novel are abstractions wrested from the whole by the pure critic, and that the practitioner, when considering his art, is rarely so obliging as think departmentally; for, as Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's comments on it show, diction cannot be discussed without reference to metre, subject and the poet's intention. Similarly, in fiction character conditions plot and plot character. To discuss any one aspect without reference to the others is like trying to discuss the egg without reference to the hen that laid it or the chicken that it will become. I have let the broad divisions stand, but I hope they will not be interpreted literally. In many instances, the passages might have as easily gone under one heading as another.

In such a collection of diverse quotations as this book is it would be idle to look for a common thread running through it. But two things may strike the reader. One is that no pre-Renaissance writer is quoted; the other, that there is an essential difference between the passages on poetry and the passages on the novel.

These two things are not unconnected. At the Renaissance, the position of the artist and so art itself underwent a radical change. The modern artist came into existence:

'a special kind of man, distinguished from others, not indeed by his wisdom, but by his sensibility, on account of which sensibility he is allowed a corresponding moral licence. Although the artist expects to be paid, and if possible highly paid for his work, he does not like to be called to account. The patron pays the piper, but may not call the tune. If the patron rejects the product as not being what he wanted, the whole artistic world is outraged; how dare the patron know what he wants? . . . Inasfar as the public is attracted to the modern one-man show, it is not by art as such, but essentially by the self-revelation of a peculiar and generally abnormal personality. . . . He takes the liberty of choosing his own subject matter. . . . He represents on canvas landscapes, nudes, effects of light, or his own soul, either just as they are, or in versions idealized and improved according to his taste; his forte is *genre*—a category almost unknown in the arts of normal periods.'

Professor A. K. Coomaraswamy, whom I am quoting, is describing the practitioner in the plastic arts, but the account is substantially true also of the modern writer. If it appears strange it is because we are seeing him through the eyes of a critic who possesses great knowledge not only of Western art but also of that of the East, and who approaches Western culture from Ceylon, where art, according to Professor Coomaraswamy, is still 'normal', where it never occurs to the artist 'to sign his work, nor to exhibit anywhere but in the place for which it was made'.

'The normal view of art,' to quote Professor Coomaraswamy again, 'at the same time presupposes a normal view of life, with an ascertained hierarchy of values; and our modern system of thought has substituted for this division of labour a spiritual caste system which divides men into species. Those who have lost most by this are the artists, professionally speaking, on the one hand, and the laymen generally on the other. The artist (meaning such as would still be so called) loses by his isolation and corresponding pride, and by the emasculation of his art, no longer conceived as intellectual, but only emotional in motivation and significance; the workman (to whom the name of artist is now denied) loses in that he is not called, but forced to labour unintelligently, goods being valued above men. All alike have lost, in that art being now a luxury, no longer the normal type of all activity, all men are compelled to live in squalor and disorder and have become so inured to this that they are unaware of it. The only surviving artists in the Scholastic, Gothic sense, are scientists, surgeons, and engineers, the only ateliers, laboratories.'

In contrasting the modern with the 'normal' artist Professor Coomaraswamy is criticizing modern Western society as against

the condition of society in the Middle Ages and in antiquity. Those societies were religious societies, in which life was not atomized as in the West to-day and in which art had a known purpose and the artist a strictly defined function. The anonymous Old English poets who composed the 'Beowulf' epic and the 'Maldon' fragment knew none of the problems that face the poet to-day. Their place in society was as normal as that of the blacksmith; their work had direct social utility. They expressed, not an individual personality—their relation to their work was utterly impersonal—but the way of life of a community. Such problems as they had were those of any other craftsman, purely technical. Now it is precisely from such a society, that of the Athens of the great Greek dramatists and of Aristotle, who codified the laws, as it were, of poetry, that the most influential models of poetry were derived. From one point of view, the section of this book that deals with poetry traces the poet's struggle against authority, his fight towards autonomy; and that, from the point of view not only of Professor Coomaraswamy but of many modern critics and practitioners, means that it traces a successive degeneration because since the break-up of the medieval synthesis at the Renaissance the poet has been increasingly uncertain of his function, increasingly uncertain of the use of poetry, if it has a use at all. Over the four hundred years since the Renaissance the poet has become both more and less important, but the criterion must be an individual one; and certainly it is true that poetry and art generally —or what we consider poetry and art—play a much smaller part in the lives of the masses, have far less influence on them, than they have ever done before; they are no longer an integral part of ordinary life, a fact which the poet has long been conscious of, as witness among others the extracts in this book from Shelley, Arnold, Yeats and Eliot.

The Renaissance, which disrupted the medieval order and turned the poet into a specialist, an extraordinary person, also sent the poet and the scholar back to Greek texts, especially to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and much of the literary criticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth century is an attempt to reconcile the literary work of the day with the precepts of Aristotle and the

Greeks. Here belongs, for instance, the whole controversy on the unities of the drama, the rightness and necessity of which Sidney in his *Apology for Poetry* has no doubts at all, though in the generation that followed the publication of his essay the plays of Shakespeare and the great Elizabethans were to confound and flout all classical principles. To this period, too, belong the attempts of Harvey, for a time Spenser, and later Campion, to force English poetry into classical forms and metres. Of the scholar-poets of the sixteenth and early seventeenth century the one who most successfully married a native English genius to a spirit derived from classical sources was Ben Jonson, whose *Timber, or Discoveries* is the great piece of Renaissance English literary criticism; and *Timber* was a commonplace-book, mainly of translations from classical authors, put together for his own use.

From the standpoint of to-day, much of the criticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries seems repetitious, a tedious flogging of dead horses. Even Pope's *Essay of Criticism*, written in 1711, cannot be said to add much to Horace's *Ars Poetica*, written seventeen hundred years before; the Greek and Roman classics are still seen as text-books in which the whole art of writing is summarized. For, by the time of Pope, the authority of the classics had been reinforced in England by the influence of the French, who had assimilated the discipline of the Ancients with much greater success than the English had. The great English critic of this period is Dryden, and his greatness as a critic certainly does not diminish with passing years. His criticism is always related to his own work, indeed springs out of the problems of his art as they confronted him; he is always just; no one has analysed the poetry of his great predecessors more acutely than he, none has praised it more enthusiastically or more shrewdly; and in addition, what makes his criticism so delightful to read now, he possessed the easiest and most supple prose style that any Englishman has ever been blessed with.

Johnson was probably the last great English critic to come to the examination of native writing armed top to toe with the examples of classical literature. Even so, the famous common sense saved him from pedantry.

All the same, when one comes to Coleridge one is conscious of a completely different mental atmosphere. The difference is not one merely of sensitivity or intellectual stature. It is a difference in orientation. Johnson did not believe that any modern writer in any modern language could hope to rival the greatness of the great classical writers—essentially, his position is that expressed by Peacock in *The Four Ages of Poetry*, to which Shelley's *Defence of Poetry* was intended as an answer. But Coleridge, when he is seeking examples of genius, of poetic excellence, of the nature of poetry, goes not to the Greeks but to the native English classics, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Milton. With Wordsworth and Coleridge, poetry and criticism are finally liberated from the authority of the Ancients. The poet is presented with his freedom, which is perhaps—Professor Coomaraswamy would say certainly—merely another name for anarchy and chaos. But about Coleridge there can be no question: there has never been a more profound investigator into the nature of poetry; he out-tops all other critics in English.

Compared with that of poetry, criticism of the novel has been almost disconcertingly casual. For three thousand years a representative selection of the world's subtlest intellects have sharpened their minds in the consideration and analysis of poetry. But the novel as we know it is scarcely two hundred years old—Richardson published *Clarissa Harlowe* in 1748—and is still scarcely respectable; there is even now a lot in Miss Austen's *cri de coeur*: 'While the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the History of England, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the Spectator, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens, there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and under-valuing the labour of the novelist, and slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them.' The novel sprang into the world without classical authority, and the earliest novelists, Defoe and Richardson, were not men of classical scholarship. From the scholar's point of view, the novel is a form that has come up out of the underworld, and, apart from the work of the literary historians, who are not always critics, criticism of the novel has been the

province mainly of novelists themselves. It is significant that Fielding, the first man of respectable intellectual attainments to write a novel, should have equipped his novels as he wrote them with a necessary critical apparatus: and that, writing when he did, he should have done his best, even if half facetiously, to square it to a classical formula: *Joseph Andrews*, he lets us know in his preface, is 'a comic epic in prose', and he is of course right, for it is from the epic that the novel in part derives. But after Fielding there is no considerable criticism of fiction until we come to Walter Scott.

What criticism of the novel has always suffered from is lack of definitions; its critical vocabulary has perforce been borrowed from that of poetry and the drama, and even from that of the cinema. The novel itself is the vaguest possible term, for a very good reason, which Mr Forster puts in his *Aspects of the Novel*: 'Any fictitious prose work over 50,000 words will be a novel for the purposes of these lectures, and if this seems to you unphilosophical will you think of an alternative definition, which will include *The Pilgrim's Progress*, *Marius the Epicurean*, *The Adventures of a Younger Son*, *The Magic Flute*, *The Journal of the Plague*, *Zuleika Dobson*, *Rasselas*, *Ulysses*, and *Green Mansions*?' Part of the trouble lies in the fact that, to parody Mr Orwell's famous sentence, all novels are fictitious, but some novels are more fictitious than others.

But lack of criticism, lack of definitions, has never stopped the English from writing novels. During the nineteenth century the novel in England, at any rate, was still an unselfconscious form; Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope saw themselves very much as public entertainers, and it wasn't until Henry James and George Moore came back from Paris in the later years of the century with the news that the novel was an art-form that fundamental principles began to be discussed. Story. Plot. What could be more fundamental to discussion of the novel than agreement on the meaning of these words? Yet if you read Trollope's remarks on the writing of fiction in his *Autobiography*—and they are first-rate of their kind, the notes of a real craftsman on his trade—you will see that he makes no distinction between them and uses them interchangeably. Even James, in his prefaces, side-steps the issue

by substituting for plot some such phrase as 'the fictive picture'. It is indeed not until one comes to Mr Forster's *Aspects* that definitions are made.

As one would expect, the most serious thinking on the novel, apart from James's, has come from France. It is itself a comment on the Englishman's lack of interest in criticism that Maupassant's preface to *Pierre et Jean* does not appear to have been translated before, though it is one of the classic documents of the case for realism. Certainly no writer has ever discussed the novelist's responsibility to his public as profoundly or as nobly as M. Mauriac. All the same, in the past forty years the English have made up for their deficiencies of the past, and one may instance the latest sample of English criticism of the novel: Miss Elizabeth Bowen's 'Notes on Writing a Novel', the wisest, fullest, most concentrated, as it is the most valuable, piece of work on the subject that I know, a work that only a novelist of Miss Bowen's calibre could have written.

I am conscious that this collection must have many deficiencies and omissions. I shall be surprised if I do not keep on discovering them. Some of them, then, those I am unaware of, are due to simple ignorance, to gaps in my reading. Ideally, the compiler of such an anthology as this should have a much wider learning in the world's literature than I can pretend to and a first-hand knowledge of the half-dozen most important languages. I am very conscious, for instance, that my extracts from modern French and German are quite inadequate, but I have been at pains to avoid claiming knowledge that I do not possess; and in any case it has been difficult enough to prevent my book as it stands from swelling to a positively enormous size.

Some of the omissions are due, of course, to difficulties of copyright. Then there is the vast extent of the field of selection, particularly in recent years. There are many contemporary poets from whom I would have liked to quote: Miss Edith Sitwell, Mr Herbert Read, Mr MacNeice, Mr Auden, Mr Spender, Mr Day Lewis especially. But the choice was so wide and it was so obviously impossible to include them all that I have thought it better to stop at Mr Eliot.

I must finally express my gratitude to Mr. Nathan Field, of Phoenix House, for his kindness in taking on the greater part of the burden of the editorial work in the preparation of the book.

Part I

WRITERS ON WRITING

POETRY

The Impulse to Write

Fame and payment apart, literature, it is generally agreed, is a means of communication, of communication with others. That is certainly one of its main intentions. But is it the most intrinsic of them, the very fountain of desire and delight, the secret incitement, the spell? True, if even the most incorrigible and imaginative of writers were marooned on one of the desert islands to be mentioned later—together with another goose (for the sake of its quills), a hogshead of ink, and reams of hand-made paper—he would probably refrain from authorship. He might even decide to roast the goose gipsy-fashion. But would he not continue, if only by mere force of impulse and habit, to 'make up', to day-dream, to commune, and even communicate, as have other castaways, with himself? And this with no one and nothing remotely in the shape of a public in mind, except the seals and sea-birds and *perhaps* an Ariel—for juvenile lead to his own ageing Prospero.

Indeed, are we not nearly all of us constantly engaged not only in this self-communion, and often at an acute extremity, but also in what might to some frigid and practical Martian seem the most inane of make-believe, fancy, fantasy, and speculation? All of which, while abjectly rudimentary perhaps, is still our own. Writing frees this, explores it, gives it shape and a richer meaning. Unlike Samuel Pepys, sole occupant of *his* privy island, we may refrain from confiding the merest morsel of this tongueless colloquy to pen and ink. We may seldom so much as mention it, let alone discourse on it, to our fellow-creatures. Still, it is there. And although in this inward commerce we too may conceive of unseen witnesses, they are emphatically *not* in the nature of a 'public'.

Examine any anthology of English verse, or scrutinize any piece of fiction which is not solely a copy, sketch, or caricature of life but directly and closely involves its originator, and what is likely to astonish us is the fact that here, challenging the interest or contempt of the world at large, are statements of so private and

personal a character that they could hardly have been deliberately shared with any other fellow-creature. Not that these secrets are necessarily revealed to all who read them. Poetry has a language of its own; wearing one's heart upon one's sleeve is not the same thing as endeavouring to put it into words; and daws are not the only fowls that fly in heaven. Nor is any human being a simple unity. Feelings as well as thoughts may be expressed in symbols; and every 'character' in a story is not only a 'chink', a peep-hole in the dark cottage from which his maker looks out upon the world, but is also in some degree representative of himself, if a self in disguise.

How can so intimate a revelation be explained and justified? Keats has his own answer to this question in his Letters. Is it not because any particular writer so concerned was, as precisely and fully, lucidly and faithfully as his human speech was capable of, talking to himself?—an inky self, no doubt, but to the man also 'that he is when he has not got his pen at work'. Within—far within, perhaps—was *this* self, this 'secret sharer', no more consciously aware of any conceivable public—whether few, of fifty thousand feeding like one—than is a child chattering to himself in bed on the brink of sleep. 'Who's *talking* up there?' inquires a voice from the foot of the stairs. 'Me's talking to I, mother, nobody nelse.' That being so, then it is only to a similar inward self, to a secret sharer in others, that what the poets have written has any hope of going home. Why, however pleasant the venture may otherwise prove, is it notoriously precarious to meet in the flesh the writer of any book really after one's own heart? Not because either the writer himself, or one's own self, is absent from the meeting. But simply because in the usual give and take of life, even when two human beings in complete sympathy are face to face, the spirit within cannot but remain, except perhaps in glimpses, only dimly perceptible, and, in much that most matters, mute.

WALTER DE LA MARE: Introduction, *Stories, Essays, and Poems*

I

DEFINITIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS OF POETRY

ACCORDING TO CHAPMAN Poesie is the flower of the sun, and disdains to open to the eye of a candle.

GEORGE CHAPMAN: Preface to *Iliad*

ACCORDING TO BEN JONSON Poetry and picture are arts of a like nature, and both are busy about imitation. It was excellently said of Plutarch, poetry was a speaking picture, and picture a mute poesy. For they both invent, feign, and devise many things, and accommodate all they invent to the use and service of Nature. Yet of the two the pen is more noble than the pencil; for that can speak to the understanding, the other but to the sense. They both behold pleasure and profit as their common object; but should abstain from all base pleasures, lest they should err from their end, and, while they seek to better men's minds, destroy their manners. They both are born artificers, not made. Nature is more powerful in them than study.

BEN JONSON: *Timber, or Discoveries*

ACCORDING TO SAMUEL JOHNSON Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason.

SAMUEL JOHNSON: *Life of Milton*

ACCORDING TO THOMAS GRAY I remember you insulted me when I saw you last, and affected to call that which delighted my imagination, *nonsense*. Now I insist that sense is nothing in poetry, but according to the dress she wears, and the scene she appears in.

THOMAS GRAY to West

'THE SPONTANEOUS OVERFLOW OF POWERFUL FEELINGS' I have said

that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment. If Nature be thus cautious to preserve in a state of enjoyment a being so employed, the Poet ought to profit by the lesson held forth to him, and ought especially to take care, that, whatever passions he communicates to his Reader, those passions, if his Reader's mind be sound and vigorous, should always be accompanied with an overbalance of pleasure. Now the music of harmonious metrical language, the sense of difficulty overcome, and the blind association of pleasure which has been previously received from works of rhyme or metre of the same or similar construction, an indistinct perception perpetually renewed of language closely resembling that of real life, and yet, in the circumstance of metre, differing from it so widely—all these imperceptibly make up a complex feeling of delight, which is of the most important use in tempering the painful feeling always found intermingled with powerful descriptions of the deeper passions. This effect is always produced in pathetic and impassioned poetry; while, in lighter compositions, the ease and gracefulness with which the Poet manages his numbers are themselves confessedly a principal source of the gratification of the Reader. All that it is *necessary* to say, however, upon this subject, may be effected by affirming, what few people will deny, that, of two descriptions, either of passions, manners, or characters, each of them equally well executed, the one in prose and the other in verse, the verse will be read a hundred times where the prose is read once.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

COLERIDGE'S DEFINITION Poetry, or rather a poem, is a species of composition, opposed to science, as having intellectual pleasure for its object, and as attaining its end by the use of language natural to us in a state of excitement—but distinguished from other species of composition, not excluded by the former criterion, by permitting a pleasure from the whole consistent with a consciousness of pleasure from the component parts—and the perfection of which is, to communicate from each part the greatest immediate pleasure compatible with the largest sum of pleasure on the whole.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Literary Remains*

SHELLEY'S VIEWS A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the Creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal, and contains within itself the germ of a relation to whatever motives or actions have place in the possible varieties of human nature. Time, which destroys the beauty and the use of the story of particular facts, stripped of the poetry which should invest them, augments that of poetry, and for ever develops new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains. Hence epitomes have been called the moths of just history; they eat out the poetry of it. A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.

Poetry is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds. . . . Poetry thus makes immortal all that is best and most beautiful in the world. . . . Poetry redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man.

All things exist as they are perceived: at least in relation to the percipient. 'The mind is its own place, and of itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.' But poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions. And whether it spreads its own figured curtain, or withdraws life's dark veil from before the scene of things, it equally creates for us a being within our being. It makes us the inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos. It reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being. It compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration.

P. B. SHELLEY: *A Defence of Poetry*

AXIOMS OF KEATS In poetry I have a few axioms, and you will see how far I am from their centre.

1st I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.

2nd Its touches of beauty should never be halfway, thereby making the reader breathless, instead of content. The rise, the progress, the setting of Imagery should, like the sun, come natural to him, shine over him, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight. But it is easier to think what poetry should be, than to write it. And this leads me to:

Another axiom—That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.

JOHN KEATS to John Taylor, *Letters*

POE'S DEFINITION I would define, in brief, the Poetry of words as *The Rhythmical Creation of Beauty*. Its sole arbiter is Taste. With the Intellect or with the Conscience, it has only collateral

relations. Unless incidentally, it has no concern whatever either with Duty or with Truth.

EDGAR ALLAN POE: *The Poetic Principle*

A CRITICISM OF LIFE It is important to hold fast to this: that poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life—to the question: How to live.

Poetry is nothing less than the most perfect speech of man, that in which he comes nearest to being able to utter the truth.

MATTHEW ARNOLD: *Essays in Criticism*

HARDY'S VIEW Poetry is emotion put into measure. The emotion must come by nature, but the measure can be acquired by art.

THOMAS HARDY: Diary, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*

POETRY MORE PHYSICAL THAN INTELLECTUAL Poetry is not the thing said but a way of saying it. Can it then be isolated and studied by itself? for the combination of language with its intellectual content, its meaning, is as close a union as can well be imagined. Is there such a thing as pure unmingled poetry, poetry independent of meaning?

Even when poetry has a meaning, as it usually has, it may be inadvisable to draw it out. 'Poetry gives most pleasure', said Coleridge, 'when only generally and not perfectly understood'; and perfect understanding will sometimes almost extinguish pleasure.

Meaning is of the intellect, poetry is not. If it were, the eighteenth century would have been able to write it better. As matters actually stand, who are the English poets of that age in whom preeminently one can hear and recognize the true poetic accent emerging clearly from the contemporary dialect? These four:

Collins, Christopher Smart, Cowper, and Blake. And what other characteristic had these four in common? They were mad.

Poetry indeed seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or two ago, in common with others, I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognized the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us. One of these symptoms was described in connection with another object by Eliphaz the Temanite: 'A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up.' Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keat's last letters, where he says, speaking of Fanny Brawne, 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear'. The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.

A. E. HOUSMAN: *The Name and Nature of Poetry*

THE FIGURE A POEM MAKES The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has dénouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image of the original mood—and indeed from the very mood. It is but a trick poem and no poem at all if the best of it was thought of first and saved for the last. It finds its own name as it goes and discovers the best waiting for it in some final phrase at

once wise and sad—the happy-sad blend of the drinking song.

No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn't know I knew. I am in a place, in a situation, as if I had materialized from cloud or risen out of the ground. There is a glad recognition of the long-lost and the rest follows. Step by step the wonder of unexpected supply keeps growing. The impressions most useful to my purpose seem always those I was unaware of and so made no note of at the time when taken, and the conclusion is come to that like giants we are always hurling experience ahead of us to pave the future with against the day when we may want to strike a line of purpose across it for somewhere.

The figure is the same as for love. Like a piece of ice on a hot stove the poem must ride on its own melting. A poem may be worked over once it is in being, but may not be worried into being. Its most precious quality will remain its having run itself and carried away the poet with it. Read it a hundred times: it will forever keep its freshness as a petal keeps its fragrance. It can never lose its sense of a meaning that once unfolded by surprise as it went.

ROBERT FROST: 'The Figure a Poem Makes', *Collected Poems*

THE ESSENCE OF POETRY ACCORDING TO LAWRENCE The essence of poetry with us in this age of stark and unlovely actualities is stark directness, without a shadow of a lie, or a shadow of deflection anywhere. Everything can go, but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry to-day.

D. H. LAWRENCE to Catherine Carswell, *Letters*

POETRY AS A 'SUPERIOR AMUSEMENT' Poetry is a superior amusement: I do not mean an amusement for superior people. I call it an amusement, an amusement *pour distraire les honnêtes gens*, not because that is a true definition, but because if you call it

anything else you are likely to call it something still more false. If we think of the nature of amusement, then poetry is not amusing; but if we think of anything else that poetry may seem to be, we are led into far greater difficulties. Our definition of the use of one kind of poetry may not exhaust its uses, and will probably not apply to some other kind; or if our definition applies to all poetry, it becomes so general as to be meaningless. It will not do to talk of 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', which is only one poet's account of his recollection of his own methods; or to call it 'a criticism of life', than which no phrase can sound more frigid to anyone who has felt the full surprise and elevation of a new experience of poetry. And certainly poetry is not the inculcation of morals, or the direction of politics; and no more is it religion or an equivalent of religion, except by some monstrous abuse of words. And certainly poetry is something over and above, and something quite different from, a collection of psychological data about the minds of poets, or about the history of an epoch; for we could not take it even as that unless we had already assigned to it a value merely as poetry.

Hence, in criticizing poetry, we are right if we begin, with what sensibility and what knowledge of other poetry we possess, with poetry as excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent metre. That is what is called the technique of verse. But we observe that we cannot define even the technique of verse; we cannot say at what point 'technique' begins or where it ends; and if we add to it a 'technique of feeling', that glib phrase will carry us but little farther. We can only say that a poem, in some sense, has its own life; that its parts form something quite different from a body of neatly ordered biographical data; that the feeling, or emotion, or vision, resulting from the poem is something different from the feeling or emotion or vision in the mind of the poet.

T. S. ELIOT: Preface to *The Sacred Wood*

2

THE ENDS AND USES OF POETRY

POETRY AS A GUIDE TO RIGHT LIVING The study of it (if we trust Aristotle) offers to mankind a certain rule, and pattern of living well, and happily; disposing us to all civil offices of society. If we will believe Tully, it nourisheth, and instructeth, our youth; delights our age; adorns our prosperity; comforts our adversity; entertains us at home; keeps us company abroad, travails with us; watches, divides the time of our earnest, and sports; shares in our country recesses, and recreations; insomuch as the wisest and best learned have thought her the absolute mistress of manners, and nearest of kin to virtue.

BEN JONSON: *Timber, or Discoveries*

THE MODERN VIEW Delight is the chief, if not the only, end of poesy: instruction can be admitted but in the second place; for poesy only instructs as it delights.

JOHN DRYDEN: *Defence of the Essay on Dramatic Poetry*

THE AIM OF COWPER My sole drift is to be useful; a point which, however, I know I should in vain aim at, unless I could be likewise entertaining. I have therefore fixed these two strings upon my bow, and by the help of both have done my best to send my arrow to the mark. My readers will hardly have begun to laugh, before they will be called upon to correct that levity, and peruse me with a more serious air.

WILLIAM COWPER to Mrs Cowper

THE FUNCTIONS OF POETRY The functions of the poetical faculty are twofold: by one it creates new materials of knowledge, and power, and pleasure; by the other it engenders in the mind a desire to reproduce and arrange them according to a certain rhythm and order which may be called the beautiful and the good.

POETRY AND MORALITY The whole objection, however, of the

immorality of poetry rests upon a misconception of the manner in which poetry acts to produce the moral improvement of man. Ethical science arranges the elements which poetry has created, and propounds schemes and proposes examples of civil and domestic life: nor is it for want of admirable doctrines that men hate, and despise, and censure, and deceive, and subjugate one another. But poetry acts in another and diviner manner. It awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. *Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar;* it reproduces all that it represents, and the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it co-exists. *The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own.* A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause. Poetry enlarges the circumference of the imagination by replenishing it with thoughts of ever new delight, which have the power of attracting and assimilating to their own nature all other thoughts, and which form new intervals and interstices whose void for ever craves fresh food. Poetry strengthens the faculty which is the organ of the moral nature of man, in the same manner as exercise strengthens a limb. A poet therefore would do ill to embody his own conceptions of right and wrong, which are usually those of his place and time, in his poetical creations, which participate in neither. By this assumption of the inferior office of interpreting the effect, in which perhaps after all he might acquit himself but imperfectly, he would resign a glory in a participation in the cause. There was little danger that Homer, or any of the eternal poets, should have so far misunderstood themselves as to have abdicated this throne of

their widest dominion. Those in whom the poetical faculty, though great, is less intense, as Euripides, Lucan, Tasso, Spenser, have frequently affected a moral aim, and the effect of their poetry is diminished in exact proportion to the degree in which they compel us to advert to this purpose.

POETRY AND UTILITY But poets have been challenged to resign the civic crown to reasoners and mechanists on another plea. It is admitted that the exercise of the imagination is most delightful, but it is alleged that that of reason is more useful. Let us examine, as the grounds of this distinction, what is here meant by utility. Pleasure or good, in a general sense, is that which the consciousness of a sensitive and intelligent being seeks, and in which, when found, it acquiesces. There are two kinds of pleasure, one durable, universal, and permanent; the other transitory and particular. Utility may either express the means of producing the former or the latter. In the former sense, whatever strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense, is useful. But a narrower meaning may be assigned to the word utility, confining it to express that which banishes the importunity of the wants of our animal nature, the surrounding men with security of life, the dispersing the grosser delusions of superstition, and the conciliating such a degree of mutual forbearance among men as may consist with the motives of personal advantage.

Undoubtedly the promoters of utility, in this limited sense, have their appointed office in society. They follow the footsteps of poets, and copy the sketches of their creations into the book of common life. They make space, and give time. Their exertions are of the highest value, so long as they confine their administration of the concerns of the inferior powers of our nature within the limits due to the superior ones. But whilst the sceptic destroys gross superstitions, let him spare to deface, as some of the French writers have defaced, the eternal truths charactered upon the imaginations of men. Whilst the mechanist abridges, and the political economist combines labour, let them beware that their speculations, for want of correspondence with those first principles which belong to the imagination, do not tend, as they have

in modern England, to exasperate at once the extremes of luxury and want. They have exemplified the saying: 'To him that hath, more shall be given; and from him that hath not, the little that he hath shall be taken away.' The rich have become richer, and the poor have become poorer; and the vessel of the state is driven between the Scylla and Charybdis of anarchy and despotism. Such are the effects which must ever flow from an unmitigated exercise of the calculating faculty.

It is difficult to define pleasure in its highest sense; the definition involving a number of apparent paradoxes. For, from an inexplicable defect of harmony in the constitution of human nature, the pain of the inferior is frequently connected with the pleasures of the superior portions of our being. Sorrow, terror, anguish, despair itself, are often the chosen expressions of an approximation to the highest good. Our sympathy in tragic fiction depends on this principle; tragedy delights by affording a shadow of the pleasure which exists in pain. This is the source also of the melancholy which is inseparable from the sweetest melody. The pleasure that is in sorrow is sweeter than the pleasure of pleasure itself. And hence the saying: 'It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth.' Not that this highest species of pleasure is necessarily linked with pain. The delight of love and friendship, the ecstasy of the admiration of nature, the joy of the perception, and still more of the creation of poetry, is often wholly unalloyed.

The production and assurance of pleasure in this highest sense is true utility. Those who produce and preserve this pleasure are poets or poetical philosophers.

The exertions of Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire, Rousseau, and their disciples, in favour of oppressed and deluded humanity, are entitled to the gratitude of mankind. Yet it is easy to calculate the degree of moral and intellectual improvement which the world would have exhibited had they never lived. A little more nonsense would have been talked for a century or two; and perhaps a few more men, women, and children burnt as heretics. We might not at this moment have been congratulating each other on the abolition of the Inquisition in Spain. But it exceeds all imagination to

conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon, nor Milton had ever existed; if Raphael and Michaelangelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated; if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place; if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us; and if the poetry of the religion of the ancient world had been extinguished together with its belief. The human mind could never, except by the intervention of these excitements, have been awakened to the invention of the grosser sciences, and that application of analytical reasoning to the aberrations of society, which it is now attempted to exalt over the direct expression of the inventive and creative faculty itself.

We have more moral, political, and historical wisdom than we know how to reduce into practice; we have more scientific and economical knowledge than can be accommodated to the just distribution of the produce which it multiplies. The poetry in these system of thought is concealed by the accumulation of facts and calculating processes. There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government, and political economy, or, at least, what is wiser and better than what men now practise and endure. But we let '*I dare not* wait upon *I would*,' like the poor cat in the adage. We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life: our calculations have outrun conception; we have eaten more than we can digest. The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave. To what but a cultivation of the mechanical arts in a degree disproportioned to the presence of the creative faculty, which is the basis of all knowledge, is to be attributed the abuse of all invention for abridging and combining labour, to the exasperation of the inequality of mankind? From what other cause has it arisen that the discoveries which should have lightened have added a weight to the curse imposed on Adam? Poetry, and the

principle of Self, of which money is the visible incarnation, are the God and Mammon of the world.

P. B. SHELLEY: *A Defence of Poetry*

ARNOLD CALLS POETRY TO HIGHER DESTINIES We should conceive of poetry worthily, and more highly than it has been the custom to conceive of it. We should conceive of it as capable of higher uses, and called to higher destinies, than those which in general men have assigned to it hitherto. More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

MATTHEW ARNOLD: *Essays in Criticism*

THE POET AND DIRECT SOCIAL UTILITY Every poet would like, I fancy, to be able to think that he had some direct social utility. By this . . . I do not mean that he should meddle with the tasks of the theologian, the preacher, the economist, the sociologist or anybody else; that he should do anything but write poetry, poetry not defined in terms of something else. He would like to be something of a popular entertainer, and be able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or a comic mask. He would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to larger groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it. There might, one fancies, be some fulfilment in exciting this communal pleasure, to give an immediate compensation for the pains of turning blood into ink. As things are, fundamentally they must always be, poetry is not a career, but a mug's game. No honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing. All the better, then, if he could have at least the satisfaction of having a part to play in society as worthy as that of the music-hall comedian.

T. S. ELIOT: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

POETRY FOR POETRY'S SAKE It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all Poetry is Truth. Every poem, it is said, should inculcate a moral; and by this moral is the poetical merit of the work to be adjudged. We Americans especially have patronized this happy idea; and we Bostonians, very especially, have developed it to the full. We have taken it into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem's sake, and to acknowledge such as to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true Poetic dignity and force—but the simple fact is, that, would we but permit ourselves to look into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor *can* exist any work more thoroughly dignified—more supremely noble than this very poem—this poem *per se*—this poem which is a poem and nothing more—this poem written solely for the poem's sake.

EDGAR ALLAN POE: *The Poetic Principle*

BAUDELAIRE Poetry, little as one wishes to penetrate one's self, to question one's soul, to recall the memories of past enthusiasms, has no other end than itself; it cannot have any other, and no poem will be so great, so noble, so truly worthy of the name of poem, as that which is written purely from the pleasure of writing.

I do not say that poetry does not ennoble tastes—be it well understood—that its final result is not to raise men above vulgar interests. This would be an absurdity. I say that if the poet has followed a moral aim, he has diminished his poetical power, and it would not be imprudent to lay a wager that his work will be bad. Poetry is unable, under pain of death or decay, to assimilate itself to morals or science.

It has not Truth as an object; it has Itself. The demonstration of truth is elsewhere.

Truth has only to do with songs; all that gives charm and grace to a song will give to Truth its authority and power. Coldness, calmness, impassivity, drive back the diamonds and flowers of the Muse; they are absolutely in opposition to poetical humour.

The Pure Intellect aspires to Truth. Taste informs us of

Beauty, and Moral Sense teaches us Duty. It is true that the middle sense is ultimately connected with the other two, and is only separated from the Moral Sense by very slight divergences, so that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Alas, that which especially exasperates the man of Taste in the sight of Vice is its deformity and disproportion. Vice outrages justice and truth, revolts the Intellect and Conscience; but like an outrage in harmony—a dissonance—it wounds more particularly certain poetical natures, and I do not believe it would be scandalous to consider all infraction of moral, the beautiful moral, as a fault against rhythm and universal prosody.

It is this admirable, this immortal instinct of Beauty which makes us consider the earth and all its manifold forms, sounds, odours, sentiments, as a hint of, and correspondence to, Heaven. The insatiable thirst for that which is beyond and which veils life, is the most lively proof of our immortality. It is at once by and through poetry, by and through music, that the soul gets a glimpse of the splendours beyond the tomb. And, when an exquisite poem brings tears to the eyes, these tears are not the proof of our excess of joy, they are the witness rather of an excited melancholy, an intercession of the nerves, of a nature excited in imperfection wishing to possess itself, even in this earth, of a revealed paradise.

Thus, the principle of poetry is, strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration towards Supreme Beauty; and the manifestation of this principle is in the enthusiasm, the awakening of the soul, enthusiasm quite independent of that passion, which is the intoxication of the heart, and of that Truth, which is the Food of Reason. For passion is a *natural* thing, too natural even not to introduce a wounding note, discordant in the domain of unsullied Beauty; too familiar and too violent not to degrade pure Desires, gracious Melancholies and noble Despairs, which inhabit the supernatural regions of poetry.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

3

THE POET'S NATURE

IMAGINATION ALL COMPACT

The poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

SHAKESPEARE: *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*

THE FOUR ESSENTIALS OF THE POET First, we require in our poet or maker (for that title our language affords him elegantly with the Greek) a goodness of natural wit, *ingenium*. For whereas all other arts consist of doctrine and precepts, the poet must be able by nature and instinct to pour out the treasure of his mind, and as Seneca saith, *Aliquando secundum Anacreontem insanire jucundum esse;* by which he understands the poetical rapture. . . . Then it rises higher, as by a divine instinct, when it contemns common and known conceptions. It utters somewhat above a mortal mouth. Then it gets aloft and flies away with its rider, whither before it was doubtful to ascend. This the poets understand by their Helicon, Pegasus, or Parnassus. . . .

To this perfection of nature in our poet we require exercise of these parts, *excercitatio*, and frequent. If his wit will not arrive suddenly at the dignity of the ancients, let him not yet fall out with it, quarrel, or be over hastily angry, offer to turn it away from study in a humour; but come to it again upon better cogitation, try another time with labour. If then it succeed not, cast not away the quills yet, nor scratch the wainscot, beat not the poor desk, but bring all to the forge and file again; turn it anew. There is no statute law of the kingdom bids you be a poet against your will on the first quarter; if it comes in a year or two, it is well. The common rimers pour forth verse, such as they are, *ex*

tempore; but there never come from them one sense worth the life of a day. A rimer and a poet are two things. It is said of the incomparable Virgil that he brought forth his verses like a bear, and after formed them with licking. . . .

The third requisite in our poet or maker is imitation, *imitatio*, to be able to convert the substance or riches of another poet to his own use. To make choice of one excellent man above the rest, and so to follow him till he grow very he, or so like him as the copy may be mistaken for the principal. Not as a creature that swallows what it takes in, crude, raw, or undigested; but that feeds with an appetite, and hath a stomach to concoct, divide, and turn all into nourishment. Not to imitate serviley, as Horace saith, and catch at vices for virtue, but to draw forth out of the best and choicest flowers, with the bee, and turn all into honey, work it into one relish and savour; make our imitation sweet; observe how the best writers have imitated, and follow them: how Virgil and Statius have imitated Homer; how Horace, Archilocus; how Alcaeus, and the other lyrics; and so of the rest.

But that we especially require in him is an exactness of study and multiplicity of reading, *lectio*, which maketh a full man, not alone enabling him to know the history or argument of a poem and to report it, but so to master the matter and style, as to show he knows how to handle, place, or dispose of either with elegancy when need shall be. And not think he can leap forth suddenly a poet by dreaming he hath been in Parnassus, or having washed his lips, as they say, in Helicon. There goes more to his making than so; for to nature, exercise, imitation, and study art must be added to make all these perfect. . . . And though these challenge to themselves much in the making up of our maker, it is art only can lead him to perfection, and leave him there in possession as planted by her hand. It is the assertion of Tully, if to an excellent nature there happen an accession or confirmation of learning and discipline, there will then remain somewhat noble and singular. . . . Without art nature can never be perfect; and without nature art can claim no being. But our poet must beware that his study be not only to learn of himself; for he that shall affect to do that confesseth his ever having a fool to his master. He must read many.

but ever the best and choicest; those that can teach him anything he must ever account his masters, and reverence. Among whom Horace, and he that taught him, Aristotle, deserved to be the first in estimation. . . .

BEN JONSON: *Timber, or Discoveries*

HIMSELF A POEM . . . I was confirm'd in this opinion, that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought him selfe to bee a true Poem; that is, a composition and patterne of the best and honourablest things, not presuming to sing high praises of heroick men or famous Cities, unlesse he have in himselfe the experience and practice of all that which is praise-worthy. . . .

JOHN MILTON: *Smectymnuus*

THE POET'S IMAGINATION The first happiness of the poet's imagination is properly invention, or the finding of the thought; the second is fancy, or the variation, deriving, or moulding of that thought, as the judgment represents it proper to the subject; the third is elocution, or the art of clothing and adorning that thought, as found and varied, in apt, significant, and sounding words; the quickness of the imagination is seen in the invention, the fertility in the fancy, and the accuracy in the expression.

JOHN DRYDEN: Preface to *Annus Mirabilis*

GOETHE'S VIEW OF THE POET 'If a person learns to sing,' continued Goethe, 'all the notes which are within his natural compass are easy to him, while those which lie beyond the compass are at first extremely difficult. But to be a vocalist, he must conquer them, for he must have them all at command. Just so with the poet;—he deserves not the name while he onlys peaks out his few subjective feelings; but as soon as he can appropriate to himself, and express the world, he is a poet. Then he is inexhaustible, and can be always new, while a subjective nature has soon talked out his little internal material, and is at last ruined by mannerism.

People always talk of the study of the ancients; but what does that mean, except that it says, turn your attention to the real world, and try to express it, for that is what the ancients did when they were alive.'

GOETHE: *Conversations with Eckermann*

THE POET ACCORDING TO CRABBE We observe that the poet is one who, in the excursions of his fancy between heaven and earth, lights upon a kind of fairyland, in which he places a creation of his own, where he embodies shape, and gives action and adventure to his ideal offspring; taking captive the imagination of his readers, he elevates them above the grossness of actual being, into the soothing and pleasant atmosphere of supra-mundane existence: thus he obtains for his visionary inhabitants the interest that engages a reader's attention without ruffling his feelings, and excites that moderate kind of sympathy which the realities of nature often-times fail to produce, either because they are so familiar and insignificant that they excite no determinate emotion, or are so harsh and powerful that the feelings excited are grating and distasteful.

GEORGE CRABBE: Preface to *Tales*

THE DIVINE VISION One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision.

I cannot think that Real Poets have any competition. None are greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven; it is so in Poetry.

WILLIAM BLAKE: Annotations to Wordsworth's Poems

A MAN SPEAKING TO MEN Let me ask, what is meant by the word Poet? What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself? And what language is to be expected from him?—He is a man speaking to men: A man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his

own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. To these qualities he has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel in themselves—whence, and from practice, he has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

But whatever portion of this faculty we may suppose even the greatest Poet to possess, there cannot be a doubt that the language which it will suggest to him, must often, in liveliness and truth, fall short of that which is uttered by men in real life, under the actual pressure of those passions, certain shadows of which the Poet thus produces, or feels to be produced, in himself.

However exalted a notion we would wish to cherish of the character of a Poet, it is obvious, that while he describes and imitates passions, his employment is in some degree mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering. So that it will be the wish of the Poet to bring his feelings near to those of the persons whose feelings he describes, nay, for short spaces of time, perhaps, to let himself slip into an entire delusion, and even confound and identify his own feelings with theirs; modifying only the language which is thus suggested to him by a consideration that he describes for a particular purpose, that of giving pleasure. Here, then, he will apply the principle of selection which has been already insisted upon. He will depend upon this for removing what would otherwise be painful or disgusting in the passion; he will feel that there is no necessity

to trick out or to elevate nature: and, the more industriously he applies himself to this principle, the deeper will be his faith that no words, which *his* fancy or imagination can suggest, will be to be compared with those which are the emanations of reality and truth.

The Man of Science seeks truth as a remote and unknown benefactor; he cherishes and loves it in his solitude: the Poet, singing a song in which all human beings join with him, rejoices in the presence of truth as our visible friend and hourly companion. Poetry is the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge; it is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science. Emphatically may it be said of the Poet, as Shakespeare hath said of man, 'that he looks before and after'. He is the rock of defence for human nature; an upholder and preserver, carrying everywhere with him relationship and love. In spite of difference of soil and climate, of language and manners, of laws and customs: in spite of things silently gone out of mind, and things violently destroyed; the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time. The objects of the Poet's thoughts are everywhere; though the eyes and sense of man are, it is true, his favourite guides, yet he will follow wheresoever he can find an atmosphere of sensation in which to move his wings. Poetry is the first and last of all knowledge—it is as immortal as the heart of man.

The sum of what was said is, that the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner. But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men. And with what are they connected? Undoubtedly with our moral sentiments and animal sensations, and with the causes which excite these; with the operations of the elements, and the appearances of the visible universe; with storm and sunshine, with the revolu-

tions of the seasons, with cold and heat, with loss of friends and kindred, with injuries and resentment, gratitude and hope, with fear and sorrow. These, and the like, are the sensations and objects which the Poet describes, as they are the sensations of other men, and the objects which interest them. The Poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions. How, then, can his language differ in any material degree from that of all other men who feel vividly and see clearly? It might be *proved* that it is impossible. But supposing that this were not the case, the Poet might then be allowed to use a peculiar language when expressing his feelings for his own gratification, or that of men like himself. But Poets do not write for Poets alone, but for men. Unless therefore we are advocates for that admiration which subsists upon ignorance, and that pleasure which arises from hearing what we do not understand, the Poet must descend from this supposed height; and, in order to excite rational sympathy, he must express himself as other men express themselves. To this it may be added, that while he is only selecting from the real language of men, or, which amounts to the same thing, composing accurately in the spirit of such selection, he is treading upon safe ground, and we know what we are to expect from him.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

COLERIDGE'S ACCOUNT OF THE POET What is poetry?—is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet?—that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) *fuses*, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which I would exclusively appropriate the name of Imagination. This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed,

control, *laxis effertur habenis*, reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general with the concrete; the idea with the image; the individual with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order; judgment ever awake and steady self-possession with enthusiasm and feeling profound or vehement; and while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry. . . .

. . . Finally, Good Sense is the Body of poetic genius, Fancy its Drapery, Motion its Life, and Imagination the Soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Biographia Literaria*

FOUR SIGNS OF GENIUS IN THE YOUNG POET 1. The delight in richness and sweetness of sound, even to a faulty excess, if it be evidently original, and not the result of an easily imitable mechanism, I regard as a highly favourable promise in the compositions of a young man. 'The man that hath not music in soul' can indeed never be a genuine poet. Imagery (even taken from nature, much more when transplanted from books, as travels, voyages, and works of natural history); affecting incidents; just thoughts; interesting personal or domestic feelings; and these with the art of their combination of intertexture in the form of a poem; may all by incessant effort be acquired as a trade, by a man of talents and much reading, who, as I once before observed, has mistaken an intense desire for poetic reputation for a natural poetic genius; the love of the arbitrary end for a possession of the peculiar means. But the sense of musical delight, with the power of producing it, is a gift of imagination; and this together with the power of reducing multitude into unity of effect, and modifying a series of thoughts by some one predominant thought or feeling, may be cultivated and improved, but can never be learned. It is in these that *poeta nascitur non fit.*

2. A second promise of genius is the choice of subjects very remote from the private interests and circumstances of the writer himself. At least I have found, that where the subject is taken immediately from the author's personal sensations and experiences, the excellence of a particular poem is but an equivocal mark, and may often be a fallacious pledge, of genuine poetic power. We may perhaps remember the tale of the statuary, who had acquired a considerable reputation for the legs of his goddesses, though the rest of the statue accorded but indifferently with ideal beauty; till his wife, elated by her husband's praises, modestly acknowledged that she herself had been his constant model. . . .

3. It has been before observed that images, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effects of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit,

'which shoots its being through earth, sea, and air. . . .'

4. The last character I shall mention, which would prove indeed but little, except as taken conjointly with the former; yet without which the former could scarce exist in a high degree, and (even if this were possible) would give promises only of transitory flashes and a meteoric power; is DEPTH and ENERGY of THOUGHT. No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions, emotions, language.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Biographia Literaria*

SHELLEY'S CLAIMS FOR THE POET In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in their actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order. And, although

all men observe a similar, they observe not the same order, in the motions of the dance, in the melody of the song, in the combinations of language, in the series of their imitations of natural objects. For there is a certain order or rhythm belonging to each of these classes of mimetic representation, from which the hearer and the spectator receive an intenser and purer pleasure than from any other: the sense of an approximation to this order has been called taste by modern writers. Every man in the infancy of art observes an order which approximates more or less closely to that from which this highest delight results; but the diversity is not sufficiently marked, as that its gradations should be sensible, except in those instances where the predominance of this faculty of approximation to the beautiful (for so we may be permitted to name the relation between this highest pleasure and its cause) is very great. Those in whom it exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be 'the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world'—and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry; and to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful; in a word, the good which exists in the relation subsisting, first between existence and perception, and secondly between perception and expression. Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem: the copiousness of lexicography and the distinctions of grammar are

the works of a later age, and are merely the catalogue and the form of the creations of poetry.

But poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting: they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers, who draw into a certain propinquity with the beautiful and the true, that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion. Hence all original religions are allegorical, or susceptible of allegory, and, like Janus, have a double face of false and true. Poets, according to the circumstances of the age and nation in which they appeared, were called, in the earlier epochs of the world, legislators, or prophets: a poet essentially comprises and unites both these characters. For he not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time. Not that I assert poets to be prophets in the gross sense of the word, or that they can foretell the form as surely as they foreknow the spirit of events: such is the pretence of superstition, which would make poetry an attribute of prophecy rather than prophecy an attribute of poetry. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions, time and place and number are not.

Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

P. B. SHELLEY: *A Defence of Poetry*

THE POET THE MOST UNPOETICAL OF MEN As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am

a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian, or egotistical Sublime; which is a thing *per se*, and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no Identity—he is continually in for and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women, who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute; the poet has none, no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of Saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but it is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical Nature—how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then, not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me, so that I am in a very little time annihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children.

JOHN KEATS to Richard Woodhouse, *Letters*

THREE NOTES BY HARDY The Poet takes note of nothing that he cannot feel emotionally.

My opinion is that a poet should express the emotion of all the ages and the thought of his own.

To find beauty in ugliness is the province of the poet.

THOMAS HARDY: Diary, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*

THE EARLY YEATS We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry. Unlike the rhetoricians, who get a confident voice from remembering the crowd they have won or may win, we sing amid our uncertainty; and, smitten even in the presence of the most high beauty by the knowledge of our solitude, our rhythm shudders. I think, too, that no fine poet, no matter how disordered his life, has ever, even in his mere life, had pleasure for his end. Johnson and Dowson, friends of my youth, were dissipated men, the one a drunkard, the other a drunkard and mad about women, and yet they had the gravity of men who had found life out and were awakening from the dream; and both, one in life and art and one in art and less in life, had a continual preoccupation with religion. Nor has any poet I have read of or heard of or met with been a sentimentalist. The other self, the anti-self or the antithetical self, as one may choose to name it, comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality. The sentimentalists are practical men who believe in money, in position, in a marriage bell, and whose understanding of happiness is to be so busy whether at work or at play, that all is forgotten but the momentary aim. They find their pleasure in a cup that is filled from Lethe's wharf, and for the awakening, for the vision, for the revelation of reality, tradition offers us a different word—ecstasy. An old artist wrote to me of his wanderings by the quays of New York, and how he found there a woman nursing a sick child, and drew her story from her. She spoke, too, of other children who had died: a long tragic story. 'I wanted to paint her,' he wrote, 'if I denied myself any of the pain I could not believe in my own ecstasy.' We must not make a false faith by hiding from our thoughts the causes of doubt, for faith is the highest achievement of the human intellect, the only gift man can make to God, and therefore it must be offered in sincerity. Neither must we create, by hiding ugliness, a false beauty as our offering to the world. He only can create the greatest imaginable beauty who has endured all imaginable pangs, for only when we have seen and foreseen what we dread shall we be rewarded by that dazzling unforeseen wing-footed wanderer. We could not find him if he were not in some sense of our being

and yet of our being but as water with fire, as noise with silence. He is of all things not impossible the most difficult, for that only which comes easily can never be a portion of our being, 'Soon got, soon gone,' as the proverb says. I shall find the dark grow luminous, the void fruitful when I understand I have nothing, that the ringers in the tower have appointed for the hymen of the soul a passing bell.

The last knowledge has often come most quickly to turbulent men, and for a season brought new turbulence. When life puts away her conjuring tricks one by one, those that deceive us longest may well be the wine-cup and the sensual kiss, for our Chambers of Commerce and of Commons have not the divine architecture of the body, nor has their frenzy been ripened by the sun. The poet, because he may not stand within the sacred house but lives amid the whirl-winds that beset its threshold, may find his pardon.

W. B. YEATS: *Anima Hominis*

THE LATER YEATS I wrote to-day to Laura Riding, with whom I carry on a slight correspondence, that her school was too thoughtful, reasonable and truthful, that poets were good liars who never forgot that the Muses were women who liked the embrace of gay warty lads.

W. B. YEATS to Lady Wellesley

T. S. ELIOT Anyone who has ever been visited by the Muse is thenceforth haunted.

THE POET'S MIND . . . I should say that the mind of any poet would be magnetized in its own way, to select automatically, in his reading (from picture papers and cheap novels, indeed, as well as serious books, and least likely from works of an abstract nature, though even these are aliment for some poetic minds) the material—an image, a phrase, a word—which may be of use to him later. And this selection probably runs through the whole of his sensitive life. There might be the experience of a child of ten,

a small boy peering through sea-water in a rock-pool, and finding a sea-anemone for the first time: the simple experience (not so simple, for an exceptional child, as it looks) might lie dormant in his mind for twenty years, and re-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure.

T. S. ELIOT: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

ORIGINALITY AND THE POET Never forget what, I believe, was observed to you by Coleridge, that every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great or original, must himself create the taste by which he is to be relished; he must teach the art by which he is to be seen; this, in a certain degree, even to all persons, however wise and pure may be their lives, and however unvitiated their taste.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH to Lady Beaumont

It is not permitted to a man, who takes up pen or chisel, to seek originality, for passion is his only business, and he cannot but mould or sing after a new fashion because no disaster is like another.

W. B. YEATS: *Anima Hominis*

'TRADITION AND THE INDIVIDUAL TALENT' Yet if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes, 'tradition' should positively be discouraged. We have seen many such simple currents soon lost in the sand; and novelty is better than repetition. Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but

with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his own contemporaneity.

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not one-sided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art towards the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order, of the form of European of English literature will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.

The poet must be very conscious of the main current, which does not at all flow invariably through the most distinguished reputations. He must be quite aware of the obvious fact that art never improves, but that the material of art is never quite the same. He must be aware that the mind of Europe—the mind of his own country—a mind which he learns in time to be much more important than his own private mind—is a mind which

changes, and that this change is a development which abandons nothing *en route*, which does not superannuate either Shakespeare, or Homer, or the rock drawing of the Magdalenian draughtsmen. That this development, refinement perhaps, complication certainly, is not, from the point of view of the artist, any improvement. Perhaps not even an improvement from the point of view of the psychologist or not to the extent which we imagine; perhaps only in the end based upon a complication in economics and machinery. But the difference between the present and the past is that the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past's awareness of itself cannot show.

Someone said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we *know* so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we know.

It is not in his personal emotions, the emotions provoked by particular events in his life, that the poet is in any way remarkable or interesting. His particular emotions may be simple, or crude, or flat. The emotion in his poetry will be a very complex thing, but not with the complexity of the emotions of people who have very complex or unusual emotions in life. One error, in fact, of eccentricity in poetry is to seek for new human emotions to express; and in this search for novelty in the wrong place it discovers the perverse. The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not 'recollected', and they finally unite in an atmosphere

which is 'tranquil' only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. Of course this is not quite the whole story. There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him 'personal'. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.

T. S. ELIOT: *The Sacred Wood*

THE GREAT AMERICAN POET The American poets are to enclose old and new, for America is the race of races. The expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new. It is to be indirect, and not direct or descriptive or epic. Its quality goes through these to much more. Let the age and wars of other nations be chanted, and their ears and characters be illustrated, and that finish the verse. Not so the great psalm of the republic. Here the theme is creative, and has vista. Whatever stagnates in the flat of custom or obedience or legislation, the great poet never stagnates. Obedience does not master him, he masters it. High up out of reach he stands, turning a concentrated light—he turns the pivot with his finger—he baffles the swiftest runners as he stands, and easily overtakes and envelopes them. The time straying toward infidelity and confections and persiflage he withholds by steady faith. Faith is the antiseptic of the soul—it pervades the common people and preserves them—they never give up believing and expecting and trusting. There is that indescribable freshness and unconsciousness about an illiterate person, that humbles and mocks the power of the noblest expressive genius. He sees for a certainty how one not a great artist may be just as sacred and perfect as the greatest artist.

The power to destroy or remould is freely used by the greatest poet, but seldom the power of attack. What is past is past. If he does not expose superior models, and prove himself by every step

he takes, he is not what is wanted. The presence of the great poet conquers—not parleying, or struggling, or any prepared attempts. Now he has passed that way, see after him! There is not left any vestige of despair, or misanthropy, or cunning or exclusiveness, or the ignominy of a nativity or colour, or delusion of hell or the necessity of hell—and no man thenceforward shall be degraded for ignorance or weakness or sin. The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into anything that was before thought small, it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer—he is individual—he is complete in himself—the others are as good as he, only he sees it, and they do not. He is not one of the chorus—he does not stop for any regulation—he is the president of regulation. What the eyesight does to the rest, he does to the rest. Who knows the curious mystery of the eyesight? The other senses corroborate themselves, but this is removed from any proof but its own and foreruns the identities of the spiritual world. A single glance of it mocks all the investigations of man, and all the instruments and books of the earth, and all reasoning. What is marvellous? What is unlikely? What is impossible or baseless or vague—after you have once just open'd the space of a peach-pit, and given the audience to far and near, and to the sunset, and had all things enter with electric swiftness, softly and duly, without confusion or jostling or jam?

The land and sea, the animals, fishes and birds, the sky of heaven and the orbs, the forests, mountains and rivers, are not small themes—but folks expect of the poet to indicate more than the beauty and dignity which always attach to dumb real objects —they expect him to indicate the path between reality and their souls. Men and women perceive the beauty well enough—probably as well as he. The passionate tenacity of hunters, woodmen, early risers, cultivators of gardens and orchards and fields, the love of healthy women for the manly form, seafaring persons, drivers of horses, the passion for light and the open air, all is an old varied sign of the unfailing perception of beauty, and of a residence of the poetic in out-door people. They can never be assisted by poets to perceive—some may, but they never can. The poetic quality is not marshal'd in rhyme or uniformity, or abstract

addresses to things, nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else, and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws, and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs and roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges, and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. The fluency and ornaments of the finest poems or music or orations or recitations, are not independent but dependent. All beauty comes from beautiful blood and a beautiful brain. If the greatnesses are in conjunction in a man or woman, it is enough—the fact will prevail through the universe; but the gaggery and gilt of a million years will not prevail. Who troubles himself about his ornaments or fluency is lost. This is what you shall do: Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labour to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown, or to any man or number of men—go freely with powerful uneducated persons, and with the young, and with the mothers of families—re-examine all you have been told in school or church or in any book, and dismiss whatever insults your own soul; and your very flesh shall be a great poem, and have the richest fluency, not only in its words, but in the silent lines of its lips and face, and between the lashes of your eyes, and in every motion and joint of your body. The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work. He shall know that the ground is already plough'd and manured; others may not know it, but he shall. He shall go directly to the creation. His trust shall master the trust of everything he touches—and shall master all attachment.

The known universe has one complete lover, and that is the greatest poet. He consumes an eternal passion, and is indifferent which chance happens, and which possible contingency of fortune or misfortune, and persuades daily and hourly his delicious

pay. What balks or breaks others is fuel for his burning progress to contact and amorous joy. Other proportions of the reception of pleasure dwindle to nothing to his proportions. All expected from heaven or from the highest, he is rapport with in the sight of the daybreak, or the scenes of the winter woods, or the presence of children playing, or with his arm round the neck of a man or woman. His love above all love has leisure and expanse—he leaves room ahead of himself. He is no irresolute or suspicious lover—he is sure—he scorns intervals. His experience and the showers and thrills are not for nothing. Nothing can jar him—suffering and darkness cannot—death and fear cannot. To him complaint and jealousy and envy are corpses buried and rotten in the earth—he saw them buried. The sea is not surer of the shore, or the shore of the sea, than he is of the fruition of his love, and of all perfection and beauty.

Without effort, and without exposing in the least how it is done, the greatest poet brings the spirit of any or all events and passions and scenes and persons, some more and some less, to bear on your individual character as you hear or read. To do this well is to compete with the laws that pursue and follow Time. What is the purpose must surely be there, and the clue of it must be there—and the faintest indication is the indication of the best, and then becomes the clearest indication. Past and present and future are not disjoin'd but join'd. The greatest poet forms the consistence of what is to be, from what has been and is. He drags the dead out of their coffins and stands them again on their feet. He says to the past, Rise and walk before me that I may realize you. He learns the lesson—he places himself where the future becomes present. The greatest poet does not only dazzle his rays over character and scenes and passions—he finally ascends, and finishes all—he exhibits the pinnacles that no man can tell what they are for, or what is beyond—he glows a moment on the extremest verge. He is most wonderful in his last half-hidden smile or frown; by that flash of the moment of parting the one that sees it shall be encouraged or terrified afterwards for many years. The greatest poet does not moralize or make applications

of morals—he knows the soul. The soul has that measureless pride which consists in never acknowledging any lessons or deductions but its own. But it has sympathy as measureless as its pride, and the one balances the other, and neither can stretch too far while it stretches in company with the other. The inmost secrets of art sleep with the twain. The greatest poet has lain betwixt both, and they are vital in his style and thoughts.

WALT WHITMAN: Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

4

INSPIRATION AND CALCULATION

UNNATURAL RAGE Poetry is a divine instinct and unnatural rage passing the reach of common reason.

SPENSER: Gloss. to *The Shepheardes Calender*

DIVINE INFUSION To the glory of God, and the singing of his glories, no man dares deny, man was chiefly made. And what art performs this chief end of man with so much excitation and expression as Poesie? . . . And since the excellence of it cannot be obtained by the labour and art of man, as all easily confess it, it must needs be acknowledged a divine infusion.

GEORGE CHAPMAN: Preface to *Iliad*

THE EXPERIENCE OF GOETHE 'The Bride of Corinth' induced Goethe to speak of the rest of his ballads. 'I owe them, in a great measure, to Schiller,' said he, 'who impelled me to them, because he always wanted something new for his 'Horen'. I had already carried them in my head for many years; they occupied my mind as pleasant images, as beautiful dreams, which came and went, and by playing with which my fancy made me happy. I willingly resolved to bid farewell to these brilliant visions, which had so long been my solace, by embodying them in poor, inadequate words. When I saw them on paper, I regarded them with a mixture of sadness. I felt as if I were about to be separated for ever from a beloved friend.

'At other times', continued Goethe, 'it has been totally different with my poems. They have been preceded by no impressions or forebodings, but have come suddenly upon me, and have insisted on being composed immediately, so that I have felt an instinctive and dreamy impulse to write them down on the spot. In such a somnambulistic condition, it has often happened that I have had a sheet of paper lying before me all on one side, and I have not discovered it till all has been written, or I have found no

room to write any more. I have possessed many such sheets written crossways, but they have been lost one after another, and I regret that I can no longer show any proofs of such poetic abstraction.'

GOETHE: *Conversations with Eckermann*

THE AUTHORS ARE IN ETERNITY . . . I have in these three years composed an immense number of verses on One Grand Theme, similar to Homer's *Iliad* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Persons & Machinery entirely new to the Inhabitants of Earth (some of the Persons Excepted). I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation, twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will; the Time it has taken in writing was thus render'd Non-Existent, & an immense Poem Exists which seems to be the Labour of a long Life, all produc'd without Labour or Study.

I may praise it, since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary; the Authors are in Eternity. I consider it as the Grandest Poem that this World Contains. Allegory addressed to the Intellectual powers, while it is altogether hidden from the Corporeal Understanding, is My Definition of the Most Sublime Poetry. . . . This Poem shall, by Divine Assistance, be progressively Printed & Ornamented with Prints & given to the Public. . . . I do not wish to irritate by seeming too obstinate in Poetic pursuits. But if all the World should set their faces against This, I have Orders to set my face like a flint (*Ezekiel* IIIc, 9v.) against their faces & my forehead against their foreheads.

WILLIAM BLAKE to Thomas Butts

THE MIND IN CREATION Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say: 'I will compose poetry.' The greatest poet cannot even say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the colour of a

flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labour and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connection of the spaces between their suggestions by the intermixture of conventional expressions; a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself: for Milton conceived the *Paradise Lost* as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the muse having 'dictated' to him the 'unpremeditated song'.

P. B. SHELLEY: *A Defence of Poetry*

KEATS ON THE GENIUS OF POETRY The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: it cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself. In 'Endymion', I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.

JOHN KEATS: *Letters*

HOUSMAN'S EXPERIENCE Having drunk a pint of beer at luncheon —beer is a sedative to the brain, and my afternoons are the least intellectual portion of my life—I would go out for a walk of two or three hours. As I went along, thinking of nothing in particular, only looking at things around me and following the progress of the seasons, there would flow into my mind, with sudden and

unaccountable emotion, sometimes a line or two of verse, sometimes a whole stanza at once, accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of. Then there would usually be a lull of an hour or so, then perhaps the spring would bubble up again. I say bubble up, because, so far as I could make out, the source of the suggestions thus proffered to the brain was an abyss which I have had occasion to mention, the pit of the stomach. When I got home I wrote them down, leaving gaps, and hoping that further inspiration might be forthcoming another day. Sometimes it was, if I took my walks in a receptive and expectant frame of mind; but sometimes the poem had to be taken in hand and completed by the brain, which was apt to be a matter of trouble and anxiety, involving trial and disappointment, and sometimes ending in failure. I happen to remember distinctly the genesis of the piece which stands last in my first volume. Two of the stanzas, I do not say which, came into my head, just as they are printed, while I was crossing the corner of Hampstead Heath between the Spaniard's Inn and the footpath to Temple Fortune. A third stanza came with a little coaxing after tea. One more was needed, but it did not come: I had to turn to and compose it myself, and that was a laborious business. I wrote it thirteen times, and it was more than a twelvemonth before I got it right.

A. E. HOUSMAN: *The Name and Nature of Poetry*

POETRY AND POOR HEALTH I know, for instance, that some forms of ill health, debility or anaemia, may (if other circumstances are favourable) produce an efflux of poetry in a way approaching the condition of automatic writing—though, in contrast to the claims sometimes made for the latter, the material has obviously been incubating within the poet, and cannot be suspected of being a present from a friendly or impertinent demon. What one writes in this way may succeed in standing the examination of a more normal state of mind; it gives me the impression, as I have just said, of having undergone a long incubation, though we do not know until the shell breaks what kind of egg we have been sitting

on. To me it seems that at these moments, which are characterized by the sudden lifting of the burden of anxiety and fear which presses upon our daily life so steadily that we are unaware of it, what happens is something *negative*: that is to say, not 'inspiration' as we commonly think of it, but the breaking down of strong habitual barriers—which tend to re-form very quickly. Some obstruction is momentarily whisked away. The accompanying feeling is less like what we know as positive pleasure, than as a sudden relief from an intolerable burden. . . .

But I should add one reservation. I should hesitate to say that the experience of which I have hinted is responsible for the creation of all the most profound poetry written, or even always of the best of a single poet's work. For all I know, it may have much more significance for the psychologist's understanding of a particular poet, or of one poet in a certain phase, than it has for anyone's understanding of poetry. Some finer minds, indeed, may operate very differently; I cannot think of Shakespeare or Dante as having been dependent upon such capricious releases. Perhaps this throws no light on poetry at all. I am not even sure that the poetry which I have written in this way is the best that I have written; and so far as I know, no critic has ever identified the passages I have in mind.

T. S. ELIOT: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

HIS MUSE'S ADVICE TO SIDNEY

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;
Studying inventions fine, her wits to entertain,
Oft turning other's leaves, to see if thence would flow
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sun-burn'd brain.
But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay;
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;
And others' feet still seemed but strangers in my way.

Thus, great with child to speak, and helpless in my throes,
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite;
'Fool, said my Muse to me, look in thy heart, and write.

SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: *Astrophel and Stella*

MUST THE POET BE IN A GOOD HUMOUR? A warlike, various, and a tragical age is best to write of, but worst to write in. . . . The truth is, for a man to write well it is necessary to be in a good humour; neither wit is less eclipsed with the unquietness of mind than beauty with the indisposition of body. So 'tis almost as hard a thing to be a poet in despite of fortune as it is in despite of nature.

ABRAHAM COWLEY: Preface to *Poems*

Strange as it may seem, the most ludicrous lines I ever wrote have been written in the saddest mood, and, but for that saddest mood, perhaps had never been written at all. To say truth, it would be but a shocking vagary, should the mariners on board a ship buffeted by a terrible storm, employ themselves in fiddling and dancing: yet sometimes much such a part act I.

WILLIAM COWPER to William Unwin

CORRECTING POETRY Poetry, like schoolboys, by too frequent and severe correction, may be cowed into dullness!

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Anima Poetae*

The correction of prose, because it has no fixed laws, is endless, a poem comes right with a click like a closing box.

W. B. YEATS to Lady Wellesley

VERLAINE REBUKES TENNYSON We artists have taken overmuch to heart that old commandment about seeking after the Kingdom of Heaven. Verlaine told me that he had tried to translate *In*

Memoriam, but could not because Tennyson was 'too noble, too Anglais, and, when he should been broken-hearted, had many reminiscences'.

W. B. YEATS: *The Cutting of an Agate*

FROM A POET'S NOTEBOOK In my father's notebook are written as below the following Verse-Memoranda of tours in Cornwall, Isle of Wight and Ireland.

Babbacombe] Like serpent-coils upon the deep.

Torquay] As the little thrift
Trembles in perilous places o'er the deep.

From the Old Red Sandstone] As a stony spring
Blocks its own issue (tho' it makes a fresh one of course).

Fowey] A cow drinking from a trough on the hill-side. The netted beams of light played on the wrinkles of her throat.

Cornwall] The wildflower, called lady's finger, of a golden yellow when open'd, is, unopen'd, of a rich orange red, frequently at least in Cornwall when I observed it.

The open sea] Two great ships
That draw together in a calm.

Bonchurch] A little salt pool fluttering round a stone upon the shore.

I. of Wight] As those that lie on happy shores and see
Thro' the near blossom slip the distant sail.

Park House] Before the leaf,
When all the trees stand in a mist of green.

After his tour in Ireland he had written on the same page:

Valencia] Claps of thunder on the cliffs
Amid the solid roar.

Bray Head] O friend, the great deeps of Eternity
Roar only round the wasting cliffs of Time.

The River Shannon, on the rapids] Ledges of battling water.

But when you say that this passage or that was suggested by Wordsworth or Shelley or another, I demur; and more, I wholly disagree. There was a period in my life when, as an artist, Turner for instance, takes rough sketches of landskip, etc., in order to work them eventually into some great picture, so I was in the habit of chronicling, in four or five words or more, whatever might strike me as picturesque in Nature. I never put these down, and many and many a line has gone away on the north wind, but some remain, e.g.:

A full sea glazed with muffled moonlight.

Suggestion: The sea one night at Torquay, when Torquay was the most lovely sea-village in England, tho' now a smoky town. The sky was covered with thin vapour, and the moon behind it.

A great black cloud
Drags inward from the deep.

Suggestion: A coming storm seen from the top of Snowdon. In the 'Idylls of the King'.

With all
Its stormy crests that smote against the skies.

Suggestion: A storm which came upon us in the middle of the North Sea.

As the water-lily starts and slides.

Suggestion: Water-lilies in my own pond, seen on a gusty day with my own eyes. They did start and slide in the sudden puffs of wind till caught and stayed by the tether of their own stalks, quite as true as Wordsworth's simile and more in detail.

A wild wind shook—
Follow, follow, thou shalt win.

Suggestion: I was walking in the New Forest. A wind did arise and

> Shake the songs, the whispers and the shrieks
> Of the wild wood together.

The wind I believe was a west wind, but because I wished the Prince to go south, I turned the wind to the south, and naturally the wind said 'follow'. I believe the resemblance which you note is just a chance one. Shelley's lines are not familiar to me tho' of course, if they occur in the *Prometheus*, I must have read them. I could multiply instances, but I will not bore you, and far indeed am I from asserting that books as well as Nature are not, and ought not to be, suggestive to the poet. I am sure that I myself, and many others, find a peculiar charm in those passages of such great masters as Virgil or Milton where they adopt the creation of a bygone poet, and reclothe it, more or less, according to their own fancy. But there is, I fear, a prosaic set growing up among us, editors of booklets, book-worms, index-hunters, or men of great memories and no imagination, who *impute themselves* to the poet, and so believe that *he*, too, has no imagination, but is for ever poking his nose between the pages of some old volume in order to see what he can appropriate. They will not allow one to say 'Ring the bell' without finding that we have taken it from Sir P. Sidney, or even use such a simple expression as the ocean 'roars', without finding out the precise verse in Homer or Horace from which we have plagiarized it (fact!).

I have known an old fish-wife, who had lost two sons at sea, clench her fist at the advancing tide on a stormy day, and cry out: 'Ay! Roar, do! How I hates to see thee show thy white teeth.' Now if I had adopted her exclamation and put it into the mouth of some old woman in one of my poems, I dare say the critics would have thought it original enough, but would most likely have advised me to go to Nature for my old women and not to my own imagination; and indeed it is a strong figure.

Here is another anecdote about suggestion. When I was about twenty or twenty-one I went on a tour to the Pyrenees. Lying

among these mountains before a waterfall that comes down one thousand or twelve hundred feet I sketched it (according to my custom then) in these words:

Slow-dropping veils of thinnest lawn.

When I printed this, a critic informed me that 'lawn' was the material used in theatres to imitate a waterfall, and graciously added: 'Mr T. should not go to the boards of a theatre but to Nature herself for his suggestions.' And I *had* gone to Nature herself.

ALFRED LORD TENNYSON: *Life of Tennyson*

HOW POE WROTE 'THE RAVEN' Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before anything be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensible air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention.

There is a radical error, I think, in the usual mode of constructing a story. Either history affords a thesis—or one is suggested by an incident of the day—or, at best, the author sets himself to work in the combination of striking events to form merely the basis of his narrative—designing, generally, to fill in with description, dialogue, or authorial comment, whatever crevices of fact, or action, may, from page to page, render themselves apparent.

I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. Keeping originality *always* in view—for he is false to himself who ventures to dispense with so obvious and so easily attainable a source of interest—I say to myself, in the first place: 'Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?' Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can be best wrought by incident or tone—afterwards looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of the effect.

I have often thought how interesting a magazine paper might be written by any author who would—that is to say, who could—detail, step by step, the processes by which any one of his compositions attained its ultimate point of completion. Why such a paper has never been given to the world, I am much at a loss to say—but, perhaps, the authorial vanity has had more to do with the omission than any one other cause. Most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought—at the true purposes seized only at the last moment—at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view—at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable—at the cautious selections and rejections—at the painful erasures and interpolations—in a word, at the wheels and pinions—the tackle for scene-shifting—the step-ladders and demon-traps, the cock's feathers, the red paint and the black patches, which in ninety-nine cases out of the hundred, constitute the properties of the literary *histrio*. . . .

For my own part, I have neither sympathy with the repugnance alluded to, nor, at any time, the least difficulty in recalling to mind the progressive steps of any of my compositions; and, since the interest of an analysis, or reconstruction, such as I have considered a *desideratum*, is quite independent of any real or fancied interest in the thing analysed, it will not be regarded as a breach of decorum on my part to show the *modus operandi* by which some one of my own works was put together. I select 'The Raven' as most generally known. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition—that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.

Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem *per se*, the circumstance—or say the necessity—which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste.

We commence, then, with this intention.

The initial consideration was that of extent. . . . What we term a long poem is, in fact, merely a succession of brief ones—that is to say, of brief poetical effects. It is needless to demonstrate that a poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating, the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a physical necessity, brief. . . .

Holding in view these considerations, as well as that degree of excitement which I deemed not above the popular, while not below the critical, taste, I reached at once what I conceived the proper *length* for my intended poem, a length of about one hundred lines. It is, in fact, a hundred and eight.

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed; and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable. I should be carried too far out of my immediate topic were I to demonstrate a point upon which I have repeatedly insisted, and which, with the poetical, stands not in the slightest need of demonstration—the point, I mean, that Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem. . . . Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the *tone* of its highest manifestation—and all experience has shown that this tone is one of *sadness*. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of the poetical tones.

The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to ordinary induction, with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve me as a keynote in the construction of the poem—some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects—or more properly *points*, in the theatrical sense—I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the *refrain*. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement,

and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the *refrain*, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends, for its impression upon the force of monotone—both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity—of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation *of the application* of the *refrain*—the *refrain* itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.

These points being settled, I next bethought me of the *nature* of my *refrain*. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied, it was clear that the *refrain* itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence, would of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best *refrain*.

The question now arose as to the *character* of the word. Having made up my mind to a refrain, the division of the poem into stanzas was, of course, a corollary: the *refrain* forming the close to each stanza. That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt; and these considerations inevitably led me to the long *o* as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with *r* as the most producible consonant.

The sound of the *refrain* being thus determined, it became necessary to select a word embodying this sound, and at the same time in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the key to the poem. In such a search it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word 'Nevermore'. In fact, it was the very first which presented itself.

The next *desideratum* was a pretext for the continuous use of the word 'Nevermore'. In observing the difficulty which I at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-assumption that the words was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by *a human being*—I did not fail to per-

ceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately, arose the idea of a *non*-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended *tone*.

I had now gone so far as the conception of a Raven—the bird of ill omen—monotonously repeating the one word, 'Nevermore', at the conclusion of each stanza, in a poem of melancholy tone, and in length about one hundred lines. Now, never losing sight of the object *supremeness*, or perfection, at all points, I asked myself: 'Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?' Death—was the obvious reply. 'And when', I said, 'is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?' From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious: 'When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.'

I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word 'Nevermore'. I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at every turn, the *application* of the word repeated; but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imaging the Raven employing the word in answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending—that is to say, the effect of the *variation of application*. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover—the first query to which the Raven should reply 'Nevermore'—that I could make this first query a commonplace one—the second less so—the third still less, and so on—until at length the lover, startled from his original *nonchalance* by the melancholy character of the word itself—by its frequent repetition—and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it—is at length

excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a far different character—queries whose solution he has passionately at heart—propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture—propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote), but because he experiences a frenzied pleasure in so modelling his questions as to receive from the *expected* 'Nevermore' the most delicious, because the most intolerable, of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me—or more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction—I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query—that query to which 'Nevermore' should be in the last place an answer—that query in reply to which this word 'Nevermore' should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

Here, then, the poem may be said to have its beginning—at the end, where all works of art should begin—for it was here, at this point of my preconsiderations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

> 'Prophet,' said I, 'thing of evil! prophet still if bird or devil!
> By that heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore,
> Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if within the distant Aidenn,
> It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
> Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.'
> Quoth the raven 'Nevermore'.

I composed this stanza, at this point, first that, by establishing the climax, I might the better vary and graduate, as regards seriousness and importance, the preceding queries of the lover—and, secondly, that I might definitely settle the rhythm, the metre, and the length and general arrangement of the stanza—as well as graduate the stanzas which were to precede, so that none of them might surpass this in rhythmical effect. Had I been able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I should, without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect. . . .

The next point to be considered was the mode of bringing to-

gether the lover and the Raven—and the first branch of this consideration was the *locale*. For this the most natural suggestion might seem to be a forest, or the fields—but it has always appeared to me that a close *circumscription of space* is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place.

I determined, then, to place the lover in his chamber—in a chamber rendered sacred to him by memories of her who had frequented it. The room is represented as richly furnished—this in mere pursuance of the ideas I have already explained on the subject of Beauty, as the sole true poetical thesis.

The *locale* being thus determined, I had now to introduce the bird—and the thought of introducing him through the window, was inevitable. The idea of making the lover suppose, in the first instance, that the flapping of the wings of the bird against the shutter, is a 'tapping' at the door, originated in the wish to increase, by prolonging, the reader's curiosity, and in a desire to admit the incidental effect arising from the lover's throwing open the door, finding all dark, and thence adopting the half-fancy that it was the spirit of his mistress that knocked.

I made the night tempestuous, first, to account for the Raven's seeking admission, and secondly, for the effect of contrast with the (physical) serenity within the chamber.

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage—it being understood that the bust was absolutely *suggested* by the bird—the bust of *Pallas* being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself.

About the middle of the poem, also, I have availed myself of the force of contrast, with a view of deepening the ultimate impression. For example, an air of the fantastic—approaching as nearly to the ludicrous as was admissible—is given in the Raven's entrance. He comes in 'with many a flirt and flutter'.... In the two stanzas which follow, the design is more obviously carried out....

The effect of the dénouement being thus provided for, I immediately drop the fantastic for a tone of the most profound seriousness—this tone commencing in the stanzas directly following, with the line,

But the Raven, sitting lonely on that placid bust, spoke only, etc.

From this epoch the lover no longer jests—no longer sees any thing even of the fantastic in the Raven's demeanour. He speaks of him as a 'grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore', and feels the 'fiery eyes' burning into his 'bosom's core'. This revolution of thought, or fancy, on the lover's part, is intended to induce a similar one on the part of the reader—to bring the mind into a proper frame for the dénouement which is now brought about as rapidly and as *directly* as possible.

With the dénouement proper—with the Raven's reply, 'Nevermore', to the lover's final demand if he shall meet his mistress in another world—the poem, in its obvious phase, that of a simple narrative, may be said to have its completion. So far, every thing is within the limits of the accountable—of the real. A raven, having learned by rote the single word 'Nevermore', and having escaped from the custody of its owner, is driven at midnight, through the violence of a storm, to seek admission at a window from which a light still gleams—the chamber-window of a student, occupied half in poring over a volume, half in dreaming of a beloved mistress deceased. The casement being thrown open at the fluttering of a bird's wings, the bird itself perches on the most convenient seat out of the immediate reach of the student, who, amused by the incident and the oddity of the visitor's demeanour, demands of it, in jest and without looking for a reply, its name. The raven, addressed, answers with its customary word, 'Nevermore'—a word which finds immediate echo in the melancholy heart of the student, who, giving utterance aloud to certain thoughts suggested by the occasion, is again startled by the fowl's repetition of 'Nevermore'. The student now guesses the state of the case, but is impelled, as I have before explained, by the human thirst for self-torture, and in part by superstition, to propound such queries to the bird as will bring him, the lover, the most of

the luxury of sorrow, through the anticipated answer 'Nevermore'. With the indulgence, to the extreme, of this self-torture, the narration, in what I have termed its first or obvious phase, has a natural termination, and so far there has been no overstepping of the limits of the real.

But in subjects so handled, however skilfully, or with however vivid an array of incident, there is always a certain hardness or nakedness, which repels the artistic eye. Two things are invariably required—first, some amount of complexity, or more properly, adaptation; and, secondly, some amount of suggestiveness—some undercurrent, however indefinite, of meaning. It is this latter, in especial, which imparts to a work of art so much of that *richness* (to borrow from colloquy a forcible term) which we are too fond of confounding with the *ideal*. It is the *excess* of the suggested meaning—it is the rendering this the upper instead of the undercurrent of the theme—which turns into prose (and that of the very flattest kind) the so-called poetry of the so-called transcendentalists.

Holding these opinions, I added the two concluding stanzas of the poem—their suggestiveness being thus made to pervade all the narrative which has preceded them. The undercurrent of meaning is rendered first apparent in the lines:

> 'Take thy beak from out *my heart*, and take thy form from off my door!'
> Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore!'

It will be observed that the words, 'from out my heart', involve the first metaphorical expression in the poem. They, with answer 'Nevermore', dispose the mind to seek a moral in all that had been previously narrated. The reader begins now to regard the Raven as emblematical—but it is not until the very last line of the very last stanza, that the intention of making him emblematical of *Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance* is permitted distinctly to be seen.

EDGAR ALLAN POE: *The Philosophy of Composition*

5
THE POET'S SUBJECT

A PLEA FOR THE CHRISTIAN SUBJECT What can we imagine more proper for the ornaments of wit or learning in the story of Deucalion than in that of Noah? Why will not the actions of Sampson afford as plentiful matter as the Labours of Hercules? Why is not Jeptha's daughter as good a woman as Iphigenia, and the friendship of David and Jonathan more worthy celebration than that of Theseus and Perithous? Does not the passage of Moses and the Israelites into the Holy Land yield incomparably more poetical variety than the voyages of Ulysses or Aneas? Are the obsolete threadbare tales of Thebes and Troy half so stored with great, heroical, and supernatural actions (since verse will needs find or make such) as the wars of Joshua, of the Judges, of David, and divers others? Can all the transformations of the Gods give such copious hints to flourish and expatiate on as the true miracles of Christ, or of his prophets and Apostles? What do I instance in these few particulars? All the books of the Bible are either already most admirable and exalted pieces of poesy, or are the best materials in the world for it. Yet, though they be in themselves so proper to be made use of for this purpose, none but a good artist will know how to do it; neither must we think to cut and polish diamonds with so little pains and skill as we do marble. For if any man design to compose a sacred poem by only turning a story of the Scripture, like Mr Quarles's, or some other godly matter, like Mr Heywood of Angels, into rhyme, he is so far from elevating of poesy that he only abases divinity. In brief, he who can write a profane poem well may write a divine one better; but he who can do that but ill will do this much worse. The same fertility of invention, the same wisdom of disposition, the same judgment in observance of decencies, the same lustre and vigour of elocution, the same modesty and majesty of number, briefly, the same kind of habit, is required to both: only this latter allows better stuff, and therefore would look more deformedly, if ill dressed in it. I am far from assuming to myself to have fulfilled the duty of this weighty undertaking: but sure I am that there is nothing yet in

our language (nor perhaps in any) that is in any degree answerable to the idea that I conceive of it. And I shall be ambitious of no other fruit from this weak and imperfect attempt of mine but the opening of a way to the courage and industry of some other persons, who may be better able to perform it thoroughly and successfully.

ABRAHAM COWLEY: Preface to *Poems*

THE GENERAL, NOT THE PARTICULAR 'The business of a poet', said Imlac, 'is to examine, not the individual but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances. He does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest; he is to exhibit in his portraits of nature, such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked, and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and to carelessness.'

SAMUEL JOHNSON: *Rasselas*

POETRY AND METAPHYSICS Poems and metaphysics (say you, with your spectacles on) are inconsistent things. A metaphysical poem is a contradiction in terms.

THOMAS GRAY to Richard West

SCIENCE AND POETRY If the labours of Men of science should ever create any material revolution, direct or indirect, in our condition, and in the impressions which we habitually receive, the Poet will sleep then no more than at present; he will be ready to follow the steps of the Man of science, not only in those general indirect effects, but he will be at his side, carrying sensation into the midst of the objects of the science itself. The remotest discoveries of the Chemist, the Botanist, or Minerologist, will be as proper objects of the Poet's art as any upon which it can be employed, if the time should ever come when these things shall be familiar to us, and the relations under which they are contem-

plated by the followers of these respective sciences shall be manifestly and palpably material to us as enjoying and suffering beings. If the time should ever come when what is now called science, thus familiarized to men, shall be ready to put on, as it were, a form of flesh and blood, the Poet will lend his divine spirit to aid the transfiguration, and will welcome the Being thus produced, as a dear and genuine inmate of the household of man.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

PASSIVE SUFFERING NOT A THEME FOR POETRY I have, in the present collection, omitted the Poem from which the volume published in 1852 took its title. I have done so, not because the subject of it was a Sicilian Greek born between two and three thousand years ago, although many persons would think this a sufficient reason. Neither have I done so because I had, in my own opinion, failed in the delineation which I intended to effect. I intended to delineate the feelings of one of the last of the Greek religious philosophers, one of the family of Orpheus and Musaeus, having survived his fellows, living on into a time when the habits of Greek thought and feeling had begun fast to change, character to dwindle, the influence of the Sophists to prevail. Into the feelings of a man so situated there entered much that we are accustomed to consider as exclusively modern; how much, the fragments of Empedocles himself which remain to us are sufficient at least to indicate. What those who are familiar only with the great monuments of early Greek genius suppose to be its exclusive characteristics, have disappeared; the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity have disappeared: the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced; modern problems have presented themselves; we hear already the doubts, we witness the discouragement of Hamlet and Faust.

The representation of such a man's feelings must be interesting, if consistently drawn. We all naturally take pleasure, says Aristotle, in any imitation or representation whatever: this is the basis of our love of Poetry: and we take pleasure in them he adds, because all knowledge is naturally agreeable to us; not to the

philosopher only, but to mankind at large. Every representation therefore which is consistently drawn may be supposed to be interesting, inasmuch as it gratified this natural interest in knowledge of all kinds. What is *not* interesting is that which does not add to our knowledge of any kind; that which is vaguely conceived and loosely drawn; a representation which is general, indeterminate, and faint, instead of being particular, precise, and firm.

Any accurate representation may therefore be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspirit and rejoice the reader: that is shall convey a charm, and infuse delight. For the Muses, as Hesiod says, were born that they might be 'a forgetfulness of evils, and a truce from cares': and it is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. 'All Art', says Schiller, 'is dedicated to Joy, and there is no higher and no more serious problem, than how to make men happy. The right Art is that alone, which creates the highest enjoyment.'

A poetical work, therefore, is not yet justified when it has been shown to be an accurate, and therefore interesting representation; it has to be shown also that it is a representation from which men can derive enjoyment. In presence of the most tragic circumstances, represented in a work of Art, the feeling of enjoyment, as is well known, may still subsist: the representation of the most utter calamity, of the liveliest anguish, is not sufficient to destroy it: the more tragic the situation, the deeper becomes the enjoyment; and the situation is more tragic in proportion as it becomes more terrible.

What then are the situations, from the representation of which, though accurate, no poetical enjoyment can be derived? They are those in which the suffering finds no vent in action; in which a continuous state of mental distress is prolonged, unrelieved by incident, hope, or resistance; in which there is everything to be endured, nothing to be done. In such situations there is inevitably something morbid, in the description of them something mono-

tonous. When they occur in actual life, they are painful, not tragic; the representation of them in poetry is painful also.

To this class of situations, poetically faulty as it appears to me, that of Empedocles, as I have endeavoured to represent him, belongs; and I have therefore excluded the Poem from the present collection.

MATTHEW ARNOLD: Preface to *Poems*, 1853

GREAT ACTIONS What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations, and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the poet. Vainly will the latter imagine that he has everything in his own power; that he can make an intrinsically inferior action equally delightful with a more excellent one by his treatment of it: he may indeed compel us to admire his skill, but his work will possess, within itself, an incurable defect.

The Poet, then, has in the first place to select an excellent action; and what actions are the most excellent? Those, certainly, which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time. These feelings are permanent and the same; that which interests them is permanent and the same also. The modernness or antiquity of an action, therefore, has nothing to do with its fitness for poetical representation; this depends upon its inherent qualities. To the elementary part of our nature, to our passions, that which is great and passionate is eternally interesting; and interesting solely in proportion to its greatness and to its passion. A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting to it than a smaller human action of to-day, even though upon the representation of this last the most consummate skill may have been expended, and though it has the advantage of appealing by its modern language, familiar manners, and contemporary allusions, to all our transient feelings and interests. These, however, have no right to demand of a poetical work that it shall satisfy them; their claims are to be directed elsewhere. Poetical works belong

to the domain of our permanent passions: let them interest these, and the voice of all subordinate claims upon them is at once silenced.

MATTHEW ARNOLD: Preface to *Poems*, 1853

MEDIUM FOR DANGEROUS THOUGHTS Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. To cry out in a passionate poem that (for instance) the Supreme Mover or Movers, the Prime Force or Forces, must be either limited in power, unknowing, or cruel—which is obvious enough, and has been for centuries—will cause them merely a shake of the head; but to put it in argumentative prose will make them sneer, or foam, and set all the literary contortionists jumping upon me, a harmless agnostic, as if I were a clamorous atheist, which in their crass illiteracy they seem to think is the same thing. . . . If Galileo had said in verse that the world moved, the Inquisition might have let him alone.

THOMAS HARDY: Diary, *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*

THE SUBJECT FOR WHITMAN Men and women, and the earth and all upon it, are to be taken as they are, and the investigation of their past and present and future shall be uninterrupted, and shall be done with perfect candor. Upon this basis philosophy speculates, ever looking towards the poet, ever regarding the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness, never inconsistent with what is clear to the senses and to the soul. For the eternal tendencies of all toward happiness make the only point of sane philosophy. Whatever comprehends less than that—whatever is less than the laws of light and of astronomical motion—or less than the laws that follow the thief, the liar, the glutton and the drunkard, through this life and doubtless afterward—or less than vast stretches of time, or the slow formation of density, or the patient upheaving of strata—is of no account. Whatever would put God in a poem or system of philosophy as contending against some being or influence, is also of no account. Sanity and en-

semble characterize the great master—spoilt in one principle, all is spoilt. The great master has nothing to do with miracles. He sees health for himself in being one of the mass—he sees the hiatus in singular eminence. To the perfect shape comes common ground. To be under the general law is great, for that is to correspond with it. The master knows that he is unspeakably great, and that all are unspeakably great—that nothing, for instance, is greater than to conceive children, and bring them up well—that to *be* is just as great as to perceive or tell.

In the make of the great masters the idea of political liberty is indispensable. Liberty takes the adherence of heroes wherever man and woman exist—but never takes any adherence or welcome from the rest more than from poets. They are the voice and exposition of liberty. They out of ages are worthy the grand idea—to them it is confided, and they must sustain it. Nothing has precedence of it, and nothing can warp or degrade it.

WALT WHITMAN: Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

'POETIC' MATERIAL I have often thought that at the side of poetic diction, which everyone condemns, modern verse uses a great deal of poetic material, using poetic in the same special sense. The poetry of exaltation will always be the highest, but when men lose their poetic feeling for ordinary life, and cannot write poetry of ordinary things, their exalted poetry is likely to lose its strength of exaltation, in the way men cease to build beautiful churches when they have lost happiness in building shops.

Many of the older poets, such as Villon and Herrick and Burns, used the whole of this personal life as their material, and the verse written in this way was read by strong men, and thieves, and deacons, not by little cliques alone. Then, in the town writing of the eighteenth century, ordinary life was put into verse that was not poetry, and when poetry came back with Coleridge and Shelley, it went into verse that was not always human.

In these days poetry is usually a flower of evil or good, but it is the timber of poetry that wears most surely, and there is no

timber that has not strong roots among the clay and worms. Even if we grant that exalted poetry can be kept successful by itself, the strong things of life are needed in poetry also, to show that what is exalted, or tender is not made by feebler blood. It may almost be said that before verse can be human again it must learn to be brutal.

J. M. SYNGE: Preface to *Poems*

6

THE POET'S STYLE

OBSCURITY IN POETRY Obscurity in affection of words and indigested conceits, is pedantical and childish; but where it shroudeth itself in the heart of his subject, uttered with fitness of figure and expressive epithets, with that darkness will I still labour to be shadowed.

GEORGE CHAPMAN: Epistle Dedicatory to Ovid's *Banquet of Sense*

THREE ESSENTIALS OF GOOD WRITING For a man to write well, there are required three necessaries—to read the best authors, observe the best speakers, and much exercise of his own style. In style, to consider what ought to be written, and after what manner, he must first think and excogitate his matter, then choose his words, and examine the weight of either. Then take care, in placing and ranking both matter and words, that the composition be comely; and to do this with diligence and often. No matter how slow the style be at first, so it be laboured and accurate; seek the best, and be not glad of the forward conceits, or first words, that offer themselves to us; but judge of what we invent, and order what we approve. Repeat often what we have formerly written; which besides that it helps the consequence, and makes the juncture better, it quickens the heat of imagination, that often cools in the time of setting down, and gives it new strength, as if it grew lustier by the going back. As we see in the contention of leaping, they jump farthest that fetch their race longest; or, as in throwing a dart or javelin, we force back our arms to make our loose the stronger. Yet if we have a fair gale of wind, I forbid not the steering out of our sail, so the favour of the gale deceive us not. For all that we invent doth please us in the conception of birth, else we would never set it down. But the safest is to return to our judgment, and handle over again those things the easiness of which might make them justly suspected. So did the best writers in their beginnings; they imposed upon themselves care and industry; they did nothing rashly; they obtained first to write

well, and then custom made it easy and a habit. By little and little their matter showed itself to them more plentifully; their words answered, their composition followed; and all, as in a well-ordered family, presented itself in the place. So that the sum of all is, ready writing makes not good writing, but good writing brings on ready writing.

BEN JONSON: *Timber, or Discoveries*

THE SOUND AN ECHO TO THE SENSE

True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance.
'Tis not enough no harshness gives offence,
The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow:
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the plain,
Flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.
Hear how Timotheus' varied lays surprise,
And bid alternate passions fall and rise!
While, at each change, the son of Libyan Jove,
Now burns with glory, and now melts with love;
Now his fierce eyes with sparkling fury glow,
Now sighs steal out, and tears begin to flow:
Persians and Greeks like turns of Nature found,
And the world's victor stood subdued by sound!
The power of music all our hearts allow,
And what Timotheus was, is Dryden now.

ALEXANDER POPE: *An Essay on Criticism*

GOETHE ON STYLE 'Altogether, the style of a writer is a faithful representative of his mind; therefore, if any man wish to write a clear style, let him be first clear in his thoughts; and if any

would write in a noble style, let him first possess a noble soul.'

GOETHE: *Conversations with Eckermann*

LOADING EVERY RIFT WITH ORE I received a copy of *The Cenci*, as from yourself, from Hunt. There is only one part of it I am judge of—the poetry and dramatic effect, which by many spirits nowadays is considered the Mammon. A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be the God. An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration'—selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together.

JOHN KEATS to Shelley, *Letters*

STYLE AS A CURTAIN The great poet has less a mark'd style, and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution, and is the free channel of himself. He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome, I will not have in my writings any elegance, or effect, or originality, to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or soothe, I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has, and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me.

WALT WHITMAN: Preface to *Leaves of Grass*

STYLE AN ASPECT OF LOVE It has been said that he alone who has no style has true style. It would be better to say that he who has no manner has the first condition of style. As theologians affirm that all a man can of himself do towards obtaining positive sanc-

tity is a negative avoidance of the hindrances of sin, so style, the sanctity of art, can only appear in the artist whose ways are purged, in the hour at least of effective production, from all mannerisms, eccentricities, and selfish obfuscation by the external life. These evils are so strong and the individuality of nearly all men so weak, that there is about as much chance of any particular child turning out to be capable of style in art as there is of his being able to fight the battles of Napoleon or to lead the life of St Francis. There have been whole nations—of which the American is most notable—which have never attained to the production of a single work of art marked by true style.

Now a man's true character or individuality lies, not in his intellect but in his love, not in what he thinks, but what he is. The 'light that lighteth every man' is, in every man, the same in kind, though not in degree; he is essentially differentiated from other men by his love. Old writers bore this in mind when they used the words 'spirit' and 'genius'; what they called spirit we now call wit or talent. '*L'esprit est le Dieu des instans, le genie est le Dieu des ages*,' says Fr Lebrun. So far are these from being the same that a man may, like Herrick or Blake, be little better than a blank in intellect, yet be full of the dainty perfume of his peculiar love, whilst a colossus of wit and understanding may be as empty as a tulip of the odour of that sanctity; for a sort of sanctity it really is, always containing as it does some manifest relic of that infantine innocence which nearly all men have trodden under foot, or laughed to death, or otherwise lost touch of, before they were out of their teens. This peculiar faculty, or rather virtue, which alone confers true style upon the poet, is as often as not, nay, more often than not, the grace of those whom even ordinarily clever men look down upon, and justly from their point of view, as 'little ones'. Little ones they mostly are, but their angels behold the face of their Father, and the words of the least of them is a song of individual love which was never heard before and never will be heard again.

COVENTRY PATMORE: *Religio Poetae*

7
RHYTHM, RHYME, AND DICTION

GOETHE'S VIEW We then talked of rhythm in general, and came to the conclusion that no certain rules can be laid down for such matters.

'The measure', said Goethe, 'flows, as it were, unconsciously from the mood of the poet. If he thought about it while writing the poem he would go mad, and produce nothing of value.'

GOETHE: *Conversations with Eckermann*

WHAT METRE IS The difference between the rhythms of prose and verse is this, that poetry selects certain rhythms and makes systems of them, and these repeat themselves: and this is metre.

ROBERT BRIDGES

ORIGIN OF METRE This I would trace to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion. It might be easily explained likewise in what manner this salutary antagonism is assisted by the very state, which it counteracts; and how this balance of antagonists became organized into metre (in the usual acceptation of that term), by a supervening act of the will and judgment, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure. Assuming these principles, as the *data* of our argument, we deduce from them two legitimate conditions, which the critic is entitled to expect in every metrical work. First, that, as the elements of metre owe their existence to a state of increased excitement, so the metre itself should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement. Secondly, that as these elements are formed into metre artificially, by a voluntary act, with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion, so the traces of present volition should throughout the metrical language be proportionately discernible. Now these two conditions must be reconciled and copresent. There must be not only a partnership, but a union; an

interpenetration of passion and of will, of spontaneous impulse and of voluntary purpose. Again, this union can be manifested only in a frequency of forms and figures of speech (originally the offspring of passion, but now the adopted children of power), greater than would be desired or endured, where the emotion is not voluntarily encouraged and kept up for the sake of that pleasure, which such emotion, so tempered and mastered by the will, is found capable of communicating. It not only dictates, but of itself tends to produce a more frequent employment of picturesque and vivifying language, than would be natural in any other case, in which there did not exist, as there does in the present, a previous and well-understood, though tacit, compact between the poet and his reader, that the latter is entitled to expect, and the former bound to supply this species and degree of pleasurable excitement.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Biographia Literaria*

EFFECTS OF METRE As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation, they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. Where, therefore, correspondent food and appropriate matter are not provided for the attention and feelings thus roused there must needs be a disappointment felt; like that of leaping in the dark from the last step of a staircase, when we had prepared our muscles for a leap of three or four.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Biographia Literaria*

CASE AGAINST METRE We who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves; every thing is conducted by Spirits, no less than Digestion or Sleep. . . . When this verse was first dictated to me, I consider'd a Monotonous Cadence, like that used by Milton

and Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming, to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences and number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place; the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts, the mild & gentle for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic for inferior parts; all are necessary for each other. Poetry Fetter'd Fetters the Human Race. Nations are Destroy'd or Flourish in proportion as Their Poetry, Painting and Music are Destroy'd or Flourish! The Primeval State of Man was Wisdom, Art, and Science.

WILLIAM BLAKE: *Jerusalem*

Rhyme and Metre are artificial and external additions to poetry, and that as the various changes that can be rung upon them were worked out, they grew more and more insipid until they have become contemptible and encumbering.

F. S. FLINT: *Other World Cadences*

CASE AGAINST FREE VERSE I will describe as briefly as I can a few of the adverse conditions which must result from rejecting the metrical systems, and for the sake of clearness will name four of them thus:

1. Loss of carrying power.
2. Self-consciousness.
3. Sameness of line structure.
4. Indetermination of subsidiary 'accent'.

First, loss of carrying power. Almost all the power that great poets like Homer and Dante have of poeticizing whatever they may handle is due to their fixed prosodies. If this should be doubted; suppose the experiment of rewriting their poems so that they did not scan. It would of course be mere destruction, and observe, destruction not only of the great immortal lines where the

magical occurrence of high diction with metrical form stands out in a clear configuration of beauty that makes them unforgettable and has enshrined them along the treasures of every cultured mind, but the mortar also between the stones, which is now hardly distinguishable from them, would perish and rot away, and would no longer serve to hold the fabric together. A single example will be sufficient: Dante, who was careful to open his cantos effectively, does not scruple to begin the third canto of the Purgatory with a piece of narrative business that Cary, who had no metric skill, represents in his translation by this flat and awkward line:

> Them sudden flight had scatter'd o'er the plain,

but the Italian is

> Avvegnachè la subitana fuga
> Dispergesse color per la campagna:

and one might almost say that the *Commedia* does not contain lines of greater dignity. The diction, rhythm and sonority are carried by the versification without a trace of pomposity or affectation; and deprived of that resource, free verse must be full of disconsolate patches, for it has no corresponding machinery to carry the subordinate matter.

Second, self-consciousness. It seems very clear to me that free verse as defined cannot be written without the appearance of self-consciousness. The conditions are these: Each line or phrase has (*ex hypothesi*) to show convincing propriety of diction and rhythm, together with other proprieties of relative length, sonority and poetic value. Now this is frankly impossible; what may conceivably be done in Gaelic, Hindustani or the languages of the Pacific Islanders, I do not know; but English was not made for it and cannot do it. The writer of free verse confronted by a thousand obstacles will, in a poem of any length, whenever his matter lacks poetic content, be at his wit's end to devise something passable; and his readers or hearers, if they be intelligent, will observe him with amusement, and he himself, being presumably intelligent, will be uncomfortably aware of the situation; for while pretending honest aesthetic rightness, he will know that he is only providing ingenious makeshifts which he would have been glad to avoid.

The happy and not too rare gift of believing that whatever you choose to say must be worth saying, can indeed save a man from self-consciousness, and set his work beneath criticism.

Now this situation is created by free verse; the old metrical system was designed to obviate it, for therein the poet did not choose his own form to suit every special turn and item of his matter, but adapted his matter to the exigencies of a prescribed form; and in doing this he found a further reward, because the changes of his matter provoked and justified all the varieties of rhythm that his metre allowed, so that their desirable irregularities came spontaneously, and his metrical form, harmonizing whatever he had to deal with, offered him endless opportunities for unexpected beauties. The metre was like a rich state uniform, robed in which any man will feel equally at ease whether walking in the gaze of a vulgar crowd, or sustaining the delicate dignity of a court ceremony.

Third, sameness of grammatical line. The identification of the line unit with the grammatical unit must limit the variety of line-structure. This feature of the free verse is not unlike the common-sense attempt of many modern song-writers to identify their musical phrase with the speech-rhythm of the words. I have made no examination of the practice of writers in this respect, and shall only be theorizing in the following remarks.

The grammatical forms of sentences in English are few, and must repeat themselves again and again; and each form has its proper and natural inflection of voice which, however overlaid, will impose its typical intonation on the sentence. Now if the grammatical forms are made coincident with the lines of the verse, they must impose the recurrence of their similar intonations upon the lines.

It would be easy to quote some passage of free verse which exhibited this kind of monotony, but it would be unfair because it could be matched by similar examples from metrical poems.... One of the difficulties in writing good verse of any kind is to escape from the tyranny of these recurrent speech-forms, and the restriction imposed by the rules of free verse must make that difficulty immeasurably greater.

Since the aim and boast of free verse is that it will attain spontaneity and variety, I wonder at myself finding it in danger of self-consciousness and monotony of form.

Fourth, indetermination of subsidiary accent. Metrical verse has the power of determining and relating the subordinate or ambiguous accentuations in a rhythmical phrase; and the essential value of this resource seems to have been disregarded by the advocates of free verse.

A poem in metre has a predetermined organic normal scheme for its lines, and whatever their varieties of rhythm no lines can be constructed without reference to its form; hence the same syllabic rhythms acquire different values according to their place in the line. The indefinable delicacy of this power over the hidden possibilities of speech is what most invites and rewards the artist in his technique, as ignorance, neglect or abuse of it makes the chief badness of bad work. Its subtleties mock illustration, but demonstration can be simple and even commonplace. The second book of *Paradise Lost* opens thus:

> High on a Throne of Royal State, which far
> Outshon the wealth of Ormus and of Ind.

These are two lines of blank verse, but they can be written as two lines of free verse thus:

> High on a Throne of Royal State,
> Which far outshon the wealth of Ormus and of Ind.

Now in writing and reading them thus, the value of the word *far* is lost: it is seen that the word cannot in itself determine for itself any special value; in the free verse it is flat and dull, and one does not know what to do with it, for if it be unaccented it is useless, and if it accented it is foolish. Indeed, no accentuation can restore to it what it has lost.

This one example is enough to show what is intended in this section, but another will lead further, and the passage which I quoted in my *Milton's Prosody*, to exhibit how he broke up his lines, will serve well: in *Paradise Lost*, III, 37:

> Then feed on thoughts, that voluntarie move
> Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful Bird

Sings darkling, and in shadiest Covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal Note. Thus with the Year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn.

These lines are greatly admired; a critic would hardly accuse them of prosaic or dull diction. But now set them out as free verse:

Then feed on thoughts,
That voluntarie move harmonious numbers;
As the wakeling Bird sings darkling,
And in shadiest Covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal Note.
Thus with the Year seasons return,
But not to me returns Day,
Or the sweet approach of Ev'n or Morn.

The very diction of the verses has suffered terribly. I doubt if I should have seen any merit in them had I read them thus in the free verse of a contemporary poet. If this be, it follows that diction in verse will needs be far more exacting than the diction of metrical verse. It must be more beautiful in itself, because it has relinquished the technique of one of the main sources of its beauty.

A free versifier may welcome this situation, and say that his poetry will be the better for excluding phrases that are in themselves so little beautiful that they must borrow adventitious beauty from mechanical devices. Well and good—if he can justify himself: but language is refractory, and all technique in art consists in devices for the mastering of obstinate material.

ROBERT BRIDGES: *Collected Essays*

RHYME AND BLANK VERSE The Measure is *English* Heroic Verse without Rime, as that of *Homer* in *Greek*, and of *Virgil* in *Latin*—Rime being no necessary Adjunct or true Ornament of Poem or good Verse, in longer Works especially, but the Invention of a barbarous Age, to set off wretched matter and lame Meeter; grac'd indeed since by the use of some famous modern Poets, carried away by Custom, but much to their own vexation, hindrance, and constraint to express many things otherwise, and for

the most part worse, than else they would have exprest them. Not without cause therefore some both *Italian* and *Spanish* Poets of prime note have rejected Rime both in longer and shorter Works, as have also long since our best English Tragedies, as a thing of itself, to all judicious eares, triveal and of no true musical delight; which consists only in apt Numbers, fit quantity of Syllables, and the sense variously drawn out from Verse into another, not in the jingling sound of like endings, a fault avoyded by the learned Ancients both in Poetry and all good Oratory. This neglect then of Rime so little is to be taken for a defect, though it may seem so perhaps to vulgar Readers, that it rather is to be esteem'd an example set, the first in *English*, of ancient liberty recover'd to Heroic Poem from the troublesom and modern bondage of Rimeing.

MILTON: Preface to *Paradise Lost*

The advantages which rhyme has over blank verse are so many, that it were lost time to name them. Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Defence of Poesy*, gives us one, which, in my opinion, is not the least considerable; I mean the help it brings to memory, which rhyme so knits up, by the affinity of sounds, that remembering the last word in one line, we often call to mind both the verses. Then, in the quickness of repartees (which in discoursive scenes fall very often), it has so particular a grace, and is so aptly suited to them, that the sudden smartness of the answer, and the sweetness of the rhyme, set off the beauty of each other. But that benefit which I consider most in it, because I have not seldom found it, is, that it bounds and circumscribes the fancy. For imagination in a poet is a faculty so wild and lawless, that, like an high-ranging spaniel, it must have clogs tied to it, lest it outrun the judgment. The great easiness of blank verse renders the poet too luxuriant; he is tempted to say many things, which might better be omitted, or at least shut up in fewer words; but when the difficulty of artful rhyming is interposed, where the poet commonly confines his sense to his couplet, and must contrive that sense into such words, that the rhyme shall naturally follow them, not they the rhyme; the fancy then gives leisure to the judgment to come in, which,

seeing so heavy a tax imposed, is ready to cut off all unnecessary expenses. This last consideration has already answered an objection which some have made, that rhyme is only an embroidery of sense, to make that, which is ordinary in itself, pass for excellent with less examination. But certainly, that which most regulates the fancy, and gives the judgment its busiest employment, is like to bring forth the richest and clearest thoughts. The poet examines that most, which he produceth with the greatest leisure, and which he knows, must pass the severest test of the audience, because they are aptest to have it ever in their memory; as the stomach makes the best concoction, when it strictly embraces the nourishment, and takes account of every little particle as it passes through.

JOHN DRYDEN: Epistle Dedicatory, *The Rival Ladies*

I do not mean to write blank verse again. Not having the music of rhyme, it requires so close an attention to the pause and the cadence, and such a peculiar mode of expression, as render it, to me at least, the most difficult species of poetry that I have ever meddled with.

COWPER to Newton

THE WORDS OF PROSE AND THE WORDS OF POETRY The definition of good prose is—proper words in their proper places; of good verse—the most proper words in their proper places. The propriety is in either case relative. The words in prose ought to express the intended meaning, and no more; if they attract attention to themselves, it is, in general, a fault. In the very best styles, as Southey's, you read page after page, understanding the author perfectly, without once taking notice of the medium of communication; it is as if he had been speaking to you all the time. But in verse you must do more: there the words, the *media*, must be beautiful, and ought to attract your notice—yet not so much and so perpetually as to destroy the unity which ought to result from the whole poem. . . . But the great thing in poetry is, *quocunque modo*, to effect a unity of impression upon the whole.

S. T. COLERIDGE: *Table Talk*

THE REAL LANGUAGE OF MEN The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature; chiefly as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because, in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and, consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings, and, from the necessary character of rural occupations, are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and, lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the influence of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions. Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression,

in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation. . . .

My purpose was to imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men. . . . I have wished to keep the reader in the company of flesh and blood, persuaded that by so doing I shall interest him. . . . There will also be found in these volumes little of what is usually called poetic diction; as much pains has been taken to avoid it as is ordinarily taken to produce it; this has been done for the reason already alleged, to bring my language near to the language of men; and, further, because the pleasure which I have proposed to myself to impart, is of a kind very different from that which is supposed by many persons to be the proper object of poetry. Without being culpably particular, I do not know how to give my Reader a more exact notion of the style in which it was my wish and intention to write, than by informing him that I have at all times endeavoured to look steadily at my subject; consequently, there is I hope in these Poems little falsehood of description, and my ideas are expressed in language fitted to their respective importance. Something must have been gained by this practice, as it is friendly to one property of all good poetry, namely, good sense: but it has necessarily cut me off from a large portion of phrases and figures of speech which from father to son have long been regarded as the common inheritance of Poets. I have also thought it expedient to restrict myself still further, having abstained from the use of many expressions, in themselves proper and beautiful, but which have been foolishly repeated by bad Poets, till such feelings of disgust are connected with them as it is scarcely possible by any art of association to overpower.

If in a poem there should be found a series of lines, or even a single line, in which the language, though naturally arranged, and according to the strict laws of metre, does not differ from that of prose, there is a numerous class of critics, who, when they stumble upon these prosaisms, as they call them, imagine that they have made a notable discovery, and exult over the Poet as over a man ignorant of his own profession. Now these men would have established a canon of criticism which the Reader will conclude

he must utterly reject, if he wishes to be pleased with these volumes. And it would be a most easy task to prove to him, that not only the language of a large portion of every good poem, even of the most elevated character, must necessarily, except with reference to the metre, in no respect differ from that of good prose, but likewise that some of the most interesting parts of the best poems will be found to be strictly the language of prose when prose is well written. . . . We will go further. It may be safely assumed, that there neither is, nor can be, any *essential* difference between the language of prose and metrical composition. We are fond of tracing the resemblance between Poetry and Painting, and, accordingly, we call them Sisters: but where shall we find bonds of connection sufficiently strict to typify the affinity betwixt metrical and prose composition? They both speak by and to the same organs; the bodies in which both of them are clothed may be said to be of the same substance, their affections are kindred, and almost identical, not necessarily differing even in degree; Poetry sheds no tears 'such as Angels weep', but natural and human tears; she can boast of no celestial Ichor that distinguishes her vital juices from those of prose; the same human blood circulates through the veins of them both.

If it be affirmed that rhyme and metrical arrangement of themselves constitute a distinction which overturns what has just been said on the strict affinity of metrical language with that of prose, and paves the way for other artificial distinctions which the mind voluntarily admits, I answer that the language of such poetry as is here recommended is, as far as possible, a selection of the language really spoken by men; that this selection, wherever it is made with true taste and feeling, will of itself form a distinction far greater than would at first be imagined, and will entirely separate the composition from the vulgarity and meanness of ordinary life; and, if metre be superadded thereto, I believe that a dissimilitude will be produced altogether sufficient for the gratification of a rational mind. What other distinction would we have? Whence is it to come? And where is it to exist? Not, surely, where the Poet speaks through the mouths of his characters; it cannot be necessary here, either for elevation of style, or any of its sup-

posed ornaments: for, if the Poet's subject be judiciously chosen, will naturally, and upon fit occasion, lead him to passions the language of which, if selected truly and judiciously, must necessarily be dignified and variegated, and alive with metaphors and figures. I forbear to speak of an incongruity which would shock the intelligent Reader, should the Poet interweave any foreign splendour of his own with that which the passion naturally suggests: it is sufficient to say that such addition is unnecessary. And, surely, it is more probable that those passages, which with propriety abound with metaphors and figures, will have their due effect, if, upon other occasions where the passions are of a milder character, the style also be subdued and temperate.

WILLIAM WORDSWORTH: Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*

COLERIDGE CRITICIZES WORDSWORTH'S THEORY My own differences from certain supposed parts of Mr Wordsworth's theory ground themselves on the assumption, that his words had been rightly interpreted, as purporting that the proper diction for poetry in general consists altogether in a language taken, with due exceptions, from the mouths of men in real life, a language which actually constitutes the natural conversation of men under the influence of natural feelings. My objection is, first, that in any sense this rule is applicable only to certain classes of poetry; secondly, that even to these classes it is not applicable, except in such a sense, as hath never by any one (as far as I know or have read) been denied or doubted; and lastly, that as far as, and in that degree in which it is practicable, it is yet as a rule useless, if not injurious, and therefore either need not, or ought not to be practised. The poet informs his reader, that he had generally chosen low and rustic life; but not as low and rustic, or in order to repeat that pleasure of doubtful moral effect, which persons of elevated rank and of superior refinement oftentimes derive from a happy imitation of the rude unpolished manners and discourse of their inferiors. For the pleasure so derived may be traced to three exciting causes. The first is the naturalness, in fact, of the things represented. The second is the apparent

naturalness of the representation, as raised and qualified by an imperceptible infusion of the author's own knowledge and talent, which infusion does, indeed, constitute it an imitation as distinguished from a mere copy. The third cause may be found in the reader's conscious feeling of his superiority awakened by the contrast presented to him; even as for the same purpose the kings and great barons of yore retained, sometimes actual clowns and fools, but more frequently shrewd and witty fellows in that character. These, however, were not Mr Wordsworth's objects. *He* chose low and rustic life, 'because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language; because in that condition of life our elementary feelings coexist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from those elementary feelings; and from the necessary character of rural occupations are more easily comprehended, and are more durable; and lastly, because in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature.'

Now it is clear to me, that in the most interesting of the poems, in which the author is more or less dramatic, as 'The Brothers', 'Michael', 'Ruth', 'The Mad Mother', and others, the persons introduced are by no means taken from low or rustic life in the common acceptation of those words; and it is not less clear, that the sentiments and language, as far as they can be conceived to have been really transferred from the minds and conversation of such persons, are attributable to causes and circumstances not necessarily connected with 'their occupations and abode'. The thoughts, feelings, language, and manners of the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland, as far as they are actually adopted in those poems, may be accounted for from causes, which will and do produce the same results in every state of life, whether in town or country. As the two principal I rank that independence, which raises a man above servitude, or daily toil for the profit of others, yet not above the necessity of

industry and a frugal simplicity of domestic life; and the accompanying unambitious; but solid and religious, education, which has rendered few books familiar, but the Bible, and the Liturgy or Hymn book....

If then I am compelled to doubt the theory, by which the choice of characters was to be directed, not only *a priori*, from grounds of reason, but both from the few instances in which the poet himself need be supposed to have been governed by it, and from the comparative inferiority of those instances; still more must I hesitate in my assent to the sentence which immediately follows the former citation; and which I can neither admit as particular fact, nor as general rule. 'The language, too, of these men has been adopted (purified indeed from what appear to be its real defects, from all lasting and rational causes of dislike or disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is originally derived; and because, from their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse, being less under the action of social vanity, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and unelaborated expressions.' To this I reply; that a rustic's language, purified from all provincialism and grossness, and so far reconstructed as to be made consistent with the rules of grammar—(which are in essence no other than the laws of universal logic, applied to psychological materials)—will not differ from the language of any other man of common sense, however learned or refined he may be, except as far as the notions, which the rustic has to convey, are fewer and more indiscriminate. This will become still clearer, if we add the consideration—(equally important though less obvious)—that the rustic, from the more imperfect development of his faculties, and from the lower state of their cultivation, aims almost solely to convey insulated facts, either those of his scanty experience or his traditional belief; while the educated man chiefly seeks to discover and express those connections of things, or those relative bearings of fact to fact, from which some more or less general law is deducible. For facts are valuable to a wise man, chiefly as they lead to the discovery of the indwelling law, which is the true being of things, the sole solution of their

modes of existence, and in the knowledge of which consists our dignity and our power.

As little can I agree with the assertion, that from the objects with which the rustic hourly communicates the best part of language is formed. For first, if to communicate with an object implies such an acquaintance with it, as renders it capable of being discriminately reflected on, the distinct knowledge of an uneducated rustic would furnish a very scanty vocabulary. The few things and modes of action requisite for his bodily conveniences would alone be individualized; while all the rest of nature would be expressed by a small number of confused general terms. Secondly, I deny that the words and combinations of words derived from the objects, with which the rustic is familiar, whether with distinct or confused knowledge, can be justly said to form the best part of language. It is more than probable, that many classes of the brute creation possess discriminating sounds, by which they can convey to each other notices of such objects as concern their food, shelter, or safety. Yet we hesitate to call the aggregate of such sounds a language, other than metaphorically. The best part of human language, properly so called, is derived from reflection on the acts of the mind itself. It is formed by a voluntary appropriation of fixed symbols to internal acts, to processes and results of imagination, the greater part of which have no place in the consciousness of uneducated man; though in civilized society, by imitation and passive remembrance of what they hear from their religious instructors and other superiors, the most uneducated share in the harvest which they neither sowed nor reaped. If the history of the phrases in hourly currency among our peasants were traced, a person not previously aware of the fact would be surprised at finding so large a number, which three or four centuries ago were the exclusive property of the universities and the schools; and, at the commencement of the Reformation, had been transferred from the school to the pulpit, and thus gradually passed into common life. The extreme difficulty, and often the impossibility, of finding words for the simplest moral and intellectual processes in the languages of uncivilized tribes has proved perhaps the weightiest obstacle to the progress

of our most zealous and adroit missionaries. Yet these tribes are surrounded by the same nature as our peasants are; but in still more impressive forms; and they are, moreover, obliged to particularize many more of them. When, therefore, Mr Wordsworth adds, 'accordingly, such a language'—(meaning, as before, the language of rustic life purified from provincialism)—'arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets, who think that they are conferring honour upon themselves and their art in proportion as they indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression'; it may be answered, that the language, which he has in view, can be attributed to rustics with no greater right, than the style of Hooker or Bacon to Tom Brown or Sir Roger L'Estrange. Doubtless, if what is peculiar to each were omitted in each, the result must needs be the same. Further, that the poet, who uses an illogical diction, or a style fitted to excite only the low and changeable pleasure of wonder by means of groundless novelty, substitutes a language of folly and vanity, not for that of the rustic, but for that of good sense and natural feeling.

Here let me be permitted to remind the reader, that the positions, which I controvert, are contained in the sentences—'a selection of the real language of men'; 'the language of these men' (that is, men in low and rustic life) 'has been adopted; I have proposed to myself to imitate, and, as far as is possible, to adopt the very language of men'.

'Between the language of prose and that of metrical composition, there neither is, nor can be, any *essential difference*.' It is against these exclusively that my opposition is directed.

I object, in the very first instance, to an equivocation in the use of the word 'real'. Every man's language varies, according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its individualities; secondly, the common properties of the class to which he belongs; and thirdly, words and phrases of universal use. The language of Hooker, Bacon, Bishop Taylor, and Burke differs from the common language of the learned class

only by the superior number and novelty of the thoughts and relations which they had to convey. The language of Algernon Sidney differs not at all from that, which every well-educated gentleman would wish to write, and (with due allowances for the undeliberateness, and less connected train, of thinking natural and proper to conversation) such as he would wish to talk. Neither one nor the other differ half as much from the general language of cultivated society, as the language of Mr Wordsworth's homeliest composition differs from that of a common peasant. For 'real' therefore, we must substitute ordinary, or *lingua communis*. And this, we have proved, is no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in that of any other class. Omit the peculiarities of each and the result of course must be common to all. And assuredly the omissions and changes to be made in the language of rustics, before it could be transferred to any species of poem, except the drama or other professed imitation, are at least as numerous and weighty, as would be required in adapting to the same purpose the ordinary language of tradesmen and manufacturers. Not to mention, that the language so highly extolled by Mr Wordsworth varies in every county, nay in every village, according to the accidental character of the clergyman, the existence or non-existence of schools; or even, perhaps as the exciseman, publican and barber happen to be, or not to be, zealous politicians, and readers of the weekly newspaper *pro bono publico*. Anterior to cultivation, the *lingua communis* of every country, as Dante has well observed, exists everwhere in parts, and nowhere as a whole.

Neither is the case rendered at all more tenable by the addition of the words, 'in a state of excitement'. For the nature of a man's words, where he is strongly affected by joy, grief, or anger, must necessarily depend on the number and quantity of the general truths, conceptions and images, and of the words expressing them, with which his mind had been previously stored.

COLERIDGE: *Biographia Literaria*

THREE REMARKS BY YEATS

Our words must seem to be inevitable.

I feel that one's verse must be as direct and natural as spoken words.

Never employ two words that mean the same thing.

W. B. YEATS to Lady Wellesley

8

POETRY AND SYMBOLISM

POETRY AND SYMBOLISM There are no lines with more melancholy beauty than these by Burns:

> The white moon is setting behind the white wave,
> And Time is setting with me, O!

and these lines are perfectly symbolical. Take from them the whiteness of the moon and of the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty. But, when all are together, moon and wave and whiteness and setting Time and the last melancholy cry, they evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms. We may call this metaphorical writing, but it is better to call it symbolical writing, because metaphors are not profound enough to be moving, when they are not symbols, and when they are symbols they are the most perfect of all, because the most subtle, outside of pure sound, and through them one can the best find out what symbols are. If one begins the reverie with any beautiful lines that one can remember, one finds they are like those by Burns. Begin with this line by Blake:

> The gay fishes on the wave when the moon sucks up the dew;

or these lines by Nash:

> Brightness falls from the air,
> Queens have died young and fair,
> Dust hath closed Helen's eye;

or these lines by Shakespeare:

> Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
> Upon the bleached verge of the salt flood;
> Who once a day with his embossed froth
> The turbulent surge shall cover;

or take some line that is quite simple, that gets its beauty from its place in a story, and see how it flickers with the light of the many symbols that have given the story its beauty, as a sword-blade may flicker with the light of burning towers.

All sounds, all colours, all forms, either because of their pre-

ordained energies or because of long association, evoke indefinable and yet precise emotions, or, as I prefer to think, call down among us certain disembodied powers, whose footsteps over our hearts we call emotions; and when sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation, a beautiful relation to one another, they become as it were one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion. The same relation exists between all portions of every work of art, whether it be an epic or a song, and the more perfect it is, and the more various and numerous the elements that have flowed into its perfection, the more powerful will be the emotion, the power, the god it calls among us. Because an emotion does not exist, or does not become perceptible and active among us, till it has found its expression, in colour or in sound or in form, or in all of these, and because no two modulations or arrangements of these evoke the same emotion, poets and painters and musicians, and in a less degree because their effects are momentary, day and night and cloud and shadow, are continually making and unmaking mankind. It is indeed only those things which seem useless or very feeble that have any power, and all those things that seem useful or strong, armies, moving wheels, modes of architecture, modes of government, speculations of the reason, would have been a little different if some mind long ago had not given itself to some emotion, as a woman gives herself to her lover, and shaped sounds or colours or forms, or all of these, into a musical relation, that their emotion might live in other minds. A little lyric evokes an emotion, and this emotion gathers others about it and melts into their being in the making of some great epic; and at last, needing an always less delicate body, or symbol, as it grows more powerful, it flows out, with all it has gathered, among the blind instincts of daily life, where it moves a power within powers, as one sees ring within ring in the stem of an old tree. This is maybe what Arthur O'Shaughnessy meant when he made his poets say they had built Nineveh with their sighing; and I am certainly never certain, when I hear of some war, or of some religious excitement or of some new manufacture, or of anything else that fills the ear of the world, that it has not all happened

because of something that a boy piped in Thessaly. I remember once telling a seer to ask one among the gods who, as she believed, were standing about her in their symbolic bodies, what would come of a charming but seeming trivial labour of a friend, and the form answering, 'the devastation of peoples and the overwhelming of cities'. I doubt indeed if the crude circumstance of the world, which seems to create all our emotions, does more than reflect, as in multiplying mirrors, the emotions that have come to solitary men in moments of poetical contemplation; or that love itself would be more than an animal hunger but for the poet and his shadow the priest, for unless we believe that outer things are the reality, we must believe that the gross is the shadow of the subtle, that things are wise before they become foolish, and secret before they cry out in the market-place. Solitary men in moments of contemplation receive, as I think, the creative impulse from the lowest of the Nine Hierarchies, and so make and unmake mankind, and even the world itself, for does not 'the eye altering alter all'?

> Our towns are copied fragments from our breast;
> And all man's Babylons strive but to impart
> The grandeurs of his Babylonian heart.

The purpose of rhythm, it has always seemed to me, is to prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake, which is the one moment of creation, by hushing us with an alluring monotony, while it holds us waking by variety, to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols. If certain sensitive persons listen persistently to the ticking of a watch, or gaze persistently on the monotonous flashing of a light, they fall into the hypnotic trance; and rhythm is but the ticking of a watch made softer, that one must needs listen, and various, that one may not be swept beyond memory or grow weary of listening; while the patterns of the artist are but the monotonous flash woven to take the eyes in a subtler enchantment. I have heard in meditation voices that were forgotten the moment they had spoken; and I have been swept, when in more profound

meditation, beyond all memory but of those things that came from beyond the threshold of waking life. I was writing once a very symbolical and abstract poem, when my pen fell on the ground; and as I stooped to pick it up, I remembered some phantastic adventure that yet did not seem phantastic, and then another like adventure, and when I asked myself when these things had happened, I found that I was remembering my dreams for many nights. I tried to remember what I had done the day before, and then what I had done that morning; but all my waking life had perished from me, and it was only after a struggle that I came to remember it again, and as I did so that more powerful and startling life perished in its turn. Had my pen not fallen on the ground and so made me turn from the images that I was weaving into verse, I would never have known that meditation had become a trance, for I would have been like one who does not know that he is passing through a wood because his eyes are on the pathway. So I think that in the making and in the understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep, and it may be far beyond it, without knowing that we have ever set our feet upon the steps of horn or of ivory.

Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone —and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight us fully, away from rhythm and pattern—there are intellectual symbols, symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions; and outside the very definite traditions of mysticism and the less definite criticism of certain modern poets, these alone are called symbols. Most things belong to one or another kind, according to the way we speak of them and the companions we give them, for symbols, associated with ideas which are more than fragments of the shadows thrown upon the intellect by the emotions they evoke, are the playthings of the allegorist or the pedant, and soon pass away. If I say 'white' or 'purple' in an ordinary line of poetry, they evoke emotions so exclusively that I

cannot say why they move me; but if I bring them into the same sentence with such obvious intellectual symbols as a cross or a crown of thorns, I think of purity and sovreignty. Furthermore, innumerable meanings, which are held to 'white' or to 'purple' by bonds of subtle suggestion, and alike in the emotions and in the intellect, move visibly through my mind, and move invisibly beyond the threshold of sleep, casting lights and shadows of an indefinable wisdom on what had seemed before, it may be, but sterility and noisy violence. It is the intellect that decides where the reader shall ponder over the procession of the symbols, and if the symbols are merely emotional, he gazes from amid the accidents and destinies of the world; but if the symbols are intellectual too, he becomes himself a part of pure intellect, and he is himself mingled with the procession. If I watch a rushy pool in the moonlight, my emotion at its beauty is mixed with memories of the man that I have seen ploughing by its margin, or of the lovers I saw there a night ago; but if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient names and meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality, the tower of ivory, the queen of waters, the shining stag among enchanted woods, the white hare sitting upon the hill-top, the fool of faery with his shining cup full of dreams, and it may be 'make a friend of one of these images of wonder', and 'meet the Lord in the air'. So, too, if one is moved by Shakespeare, who is content with emotional symbols that he may come the nearer to our sympathy, one is mixed with the whole spectacle of the world; while if one is moved by Dante, or by the myth of Demeter, one is mixed into the shadow of God or of a goddess. So too one is furthest from symbols when one is busy doing this or that, but the soul moves among symbols and unfolds in symbols when trance, or madness, or deep meditation has withdrawn it from every impulse but its own. 'I then saw', wrote Gerard de Nerval of his madness, 'vaguely drifting into form, plastic images of antiquity, which outlines themselves, became definite, and seemed to represent symbols of which I only seized the idea with difficulty.' In an earlier time he would have been of that multitude, whose souls austerity withdrew, even more perfectly

than madness could withdraw his soul, from hope and memory, from desire and regret, that they might reveal those processions of symbols that men bow to before altars, and woo with incense and offering. But being of our time, he has been like Maeterlinck, like Villiers de L'Isle Adam in *Axel*, like all who are preoccupied with intellectual symbols in our time, a foreshadower of the new sacred book, of which all the arts, as somebody has said, are begging to dream. How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in old times?

If people were to accept the theory that poetry moves us because of its symbolism, what change should one look for in the manner of our poetry? A return to the way of our fathers, a casting out of descriptions of nature for the sake of nature, of the moral law for the sake of the moral law, a casting out of all anecdotes and of that brooding over scientific opinion that so often extinguished the central flame in Tennyson, and of that vehemence that would make us do or not do certain things; or, in other words, we should come to understand that the beryl stone was enchanted by our fathers that it might unfold the pictures in its heart, and not to mirror our own excited faces, or the boughs waving outside the window. With this change of substance, this return to imagination, this understanding that the laws of art, which are the hidden laws of the world, can alone bind the imagination, would come a change of style, and we would cast out of serious poetry those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone; and we would seek out those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms, which are the embodiment of the imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality, some beauty; nor would it be any longer possible for anybody to deny the importance of form, in all its kinds, for although you can expound an opinion, or describe a thing when your words are not quite well chosen, you cannot give a body to something that moves beyond the senses, unless your words are as subtle, as complex, as full of mysterious

life, as the body of a flower or of a woman. The form of sincere poetry, unlike the form of the popular poetry, may indeed be sometimes obscure, or ungrammatical as in some of the best of the Songs of Innocence and Experience, but it must have the perfections that escape analysis, the subtleties that have a new meaning every day, and it must have all this whether it be but a little song made out of a moment of dreamy indolence, or some great epic made out of the dreams of one poet and of a hundred generations whose hands were never weary of the sword.

W. B. YEATS: 'The Symbolism of Poetry', *Essays*

'DIFFICULT' POETRY The difficulty of poetry (and modern poetry is supposed to be difficult) may be due to one of several reasons. First, there may be personal causes which make it impossible for a poet to express himself in any way but an obscure way; while this may be regrettable, we should be glad, I think, that the man has been able to express himself at all. Or difficulty may be due just to novelty: we know the ridicule accorded in turn to Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, Tennyson and Browning—but must remark that Browning was the first to be *called* difficult; hostile critics of the earlier poets found them difficult, but called them silly. Or difficulty may be caused by the reader's having been told, or having suggested to himself, that the poem is going to prove difficult. The ordinary reader, when warned against the obscurity of a poem, is apt to be thrown into a state of consternation very unfavourable to poetic receptivity. Instead of beginning, as he should, in a state of sensitivity, he obfuscates his senses by the desire to be clever and to look very hard for something he doesn't know what—or else by the desire not to be taken in. There is such a thing as stage fright, but what such readers have is pit or gallery fright. The more reasoned reader, he who has reached, in these matters, a state of greater *purity*, does not bother about understanding; not, at least, at first. I know that some of the poetry to which I am most devoted is poetry which I did not understand at first reading; some is poetry which I am not sure I understand yet: for instance, Shakespeare's. And finally, there is the difficulty caused by the author's having left out something

which the reader is used to finding; so that the reader, bewildered, gropes about for what is absent, and puzzles his head for a kind of 'meaning' which is not there, and is not meant to be there.

The chief use of the 'meaning' of a poem, in the ordinary sense, may be (for here again I am speaking of some kinds of poetry and not all) to satisfy one habit of the reader, to keep his mind diverted and quiet, while the poem does its work upon him: much as the imaginary burglar is always provided with a bit of nice meat for the house-dog. This is a normal situation of which I approve. But the minds of all poets do not work that way; some of them, assuming that there are other minds like their own, become impatient of this 'meaning' which seems superfluous and perceive possibilities of intensity through its elimination. I am not asserting that this situation is ideal; only that we must write our poetry as we can, and take it as we find it. It may be that for some periods of society a more relaxed form of writing is right, and for others a more concentrated. I believe that there must be many people who feel, as I do, that the effect of some of the greater nineteenth-century poets is diminished by their bulk. Who now, for the pure pleasure of it, reads Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats even, certainly Browning and Swinburne and most of the French poets of the century—entire? I by no means believe that the 'long poem' is a thing of the past; but at least there must be more in it for the length than our grandfathers seemed to demand; and for us, anything that can be said as well in prose can be said better in prose. And a great deal, in the way of meaning, belongs to prose rather than to poetry. The doctrine of 'art for art's sake', a mistaken one, and more advertised than practised, contained this true impulse behind it, that it is a recognition of the error of the poet's trying to do other people's work. But poetry has as much to learn from prose as from other poetry; and I think that an interaction between prose and verse, like the interaction between language and language, is a condition of vitality in literature.

T. S. ELIOT: *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*

To a Young Poet

You ask if your verses are good. You ask me. You have previously asked others. You send them to journals. You compare them with other poems, and you are troubled when certain editors reject your efforts. Now (as you have permitted me to advise you) I beg you to give all that up. You are looking outwards, and of all things that is what you must now not do. Nobody can advise and help you, nobody. There is only one single means. Go inside yourself. Discover the motive that bids you write; examine whether it sends its roots down to the deepest places of your heart, confess to yourself whether you would have to die if writing were denied you. This before all: ask yourself in the quietest hour of your night: *must* I write? Dig down into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be in the affirmative, if you may meet this solemn question with a strong and simple '*I must*', then build your life according to this necessity; your life must, right to its most unimportant and insignificant hour, become a token and a witness of this impulse. Then draw near to Nature. Then try, as if you were one of the first men, to say what you see and experience and love and lose. Do not write love poems; avoid at first those forms which are too familiar and usual: they are the most difficult, for great and fully matured strength is needed to make an individual contribution where good and in part brilliant traditions exist in plenty. Turn therefore from the common themes to those which your own everyday life affords; depict your sorrows and desires, your passing thoughts and belief in some kind of beauty—depict all that with heartfelt, quiet, humble sincerity and use to express yourself things that surround you, the images of your dreams and the objects of your memory. If your everyday life seems poor to you, do not accuse it; accuse yourself, tell yourself you are not poet enough to summon up its riches; since for the creator there is no poverty and no poor or unimportant place. And even if you were in a prison whose

walls allowed none of the sounds of the world to reach your senses —would you not still have always your childhood, that precious, royal richness, that treasure house of memories? Turn your attention there. Try to raise the submerged sensations of that distant past; your personality will grow stronger, your solitude will extend itself and will become a twilit dwelling which the noise of others passes by in the distance. And if from this turning inwards, from this sinking into your private world, there come verses, you will not think to ask anyone whether they are good verses. You will not attempt, either, to interest journals in these works: for you will see in them your own dear genuine possession, a portion and a voice of your life. A work of art is good if it has grown out of necessity. In this manner of its origin lies its true estimate: there is no other. Therefore, my dear sir, I could give you no advice but this: to go into yourself and to explore the depths whence your life wells forth; at its source you will find the answer to the question whether you *must* create. Accept it as it sounds, without inquiring too closely into every word. Perhaps it will turn out that you are called to be an artist. Then take your fate upon yourself and bear it, its burden and its greatness, without ever asking for that reward which might come from without. For the creator must be a world for himself, and find everything within himself, and in Nature to which he has attached himself.

Perhaps, however, after this descent into yourself and into your aloneness, you will have to renounce your claim to become a poet; (it is sufficient, as I have said, to feel that one could live without writing, in order not to venture it at all). But even then this introversion which I beg of you has not been in vain. Your life will at all events find thenceforward its individual paths; and that they may be good and rich and far reaching I wish for you more than I can say.

What more shall I say to you? Everything seems to me to have its proper emphasis; I would finally just like to advise you to grow through your development quietly and seriously; you can interrupt it in no more violent manner than by looking outwards, and expecting answer from outside to questions which perhaps only your innermost feeling in your most silent hour can answer.

RAINER MARIA RILKE: *Letters to a Young Poet*

Part 2

WRITERS ON WRITING

THE NOVEL

The Novelist Invokes His Muses

Come, bright love of fame, inspire my glowing breast: not thee I call, who, over swelling tides of blood and tears, dost bear the heroe on to glory, while sighs of millions waft his spreading sails; but thee, fair, gentle maid, whom Mnesis, happy nymph, first on the banks of Hebrus did produce. Thee, whom Maeonia educated, whom Mantua charmed, and who, on that fair hill which overlooks the proud metropolis of Britain, sat'st, with thy Milton, sweetly tuning the heroic lyre; fill my ravished fancy with the hopes of charming ages yet to come. Foretel me that some tender maid, whose grandmother is yet unborn, hereafter, when, under fictitious name of Sophia, she reads the real worth which once existed in my Charlotte, shall from her sympathetic breast send forth the heaving sigh. Do thou teach me not only to foresee, but to enjoy, nay, even to feed on future praise. Comfort me by a solemn assurance, that when the little parlour in which I sit at this instant shall be reduced to a worse furnished box, I shall be read with honour by those who never knew nor saw me, and whom I shall neither know or see.

And thou, much plumper dame, whom no airy forms nor phantoms of imagination cloathe; whom the well-seasoned beef, and pudding richly stained with plums, delight: thee I call: of whom in a treckschuyte, in some Dutch canal, the fat Jufvrouw Gelt, impregnated by a jolly merchant of Amsterdam, was delivered: in Grub-street school didst thou suck the elements of thy erudition. Here hast thou, in thy maturer age, taught poetry to tickle not the fancy, but the pride of the patron. Comedy from thee learns a grave and solemn air; while tragedy storms aloud, and rends th' affrighted theatres with its thunders. To soothe thy wearied limbs in slumber, Alderman History tells his tedious tale; and, again, to awaken thee, Monsieur Romance performs his surprising tricks of dexterity. Nor less thy well-fed bookseller obeys thy influence. By thy advice the heavy, unread, folio lump,

which long had dozed on the dusty shelf, piecemealed into numbers, runs nimbly through the nation. Instructed by thee, some books, like quacks, impose on the world by promising wonders; while others turn beaus, and trust all their merits to a gilded outside. Come, thou jolly substance, with thy shining face, keep back thy inspiration, but hold forth thy tempting rewards; thy shining, chinking heap; thy quickly convertible bank-bill, big with unseen riches; thy often-varying stock; the warm, the comfortable house; and, lastly, a fair proportion of that bounteous mother, whose flowing breasts yield redundant sustenance for all her numerous offspring, did not some too greedily and wantonly drive their brethren from the teat. Come thou, and if I am too tasteless of thy valuable treasures, warm my heart with the transporting thought of conveying them to others. Tell me, that through thy bounty, the pratling babes, whose innocent play hath often been interrupted by my labours, may one time be amply rewarded for them.

And now this ill-yoked pair, this lean shadow and this fat substance, have prompted me to write, whose assistance shall I invoke to direct my pen?

First, Genius; thou gift of Heaven; without whose aid in vain we struggle against the stream of nature. Thou who dost sow the generous seeds which art nourishes, and brings to perfection. Do thou kindly take me by the hand, and lead me through all the mazes, the winding labyrinths of nature. Initiate me into all those mysteries which profane eyes never beheld. Teach me, which to thee is no difficult task, to know mankind better than they know themselves. Remove that mist which dims the intellects of mortals, and causes them to adore men for their art, or to detest them for their cunning, in deceiving others, when they are, in reality, the objects only of ridicule, for deceiving themselves. Strip off the thin disguise of wisdom from self-conceit, of plenty from avarice, and of glory from ambition. Come, thou that hast inspired thy Aristophanes, thy Lucian, thy Cervantes, thy Rabelais, thy Molière, thy Shakespear, thy Swift, thy Marivaux, fill my pages with humour; till mankind learn the good-nature to laugh only at the follies of others, and the humility to grieve at their own.

And thou, almost the constant attendant on true genius, Humanity, bring all thy tender sensations. If though hast already disposed of them all between thy Allen and thy Lyttleton, steal them a little while from their bosoms. Not without these the tender scene is painted. From these alone proceed the noble, disinterested friendship, the melting love, the generous sentiment, the ardent gratitude, the soft compassion, the candid opinion; and all those strong energies of a good mind, which fill the moistened eyes with tears, the glowing cheeks with blood, and swell the heart with tides of grief, joy, and benevolence.

And thou, O Learning! (for without thy assistance nothing pure, nothing correct, can genius produce) do thou guide my pen. Thee in thy favourite fields, where the limpid, gently rolling Thames washes thy Etonian banks, in early youth I have worshipped. To thee, at thy birchen altar, with true Spartan devotion, I have sacrificed my blood. Come then, and from thy vast, luxuriant stores, in long antiquity piled up, pour forth the rich profusion. Open thy Maeonian and thy Mantuan coffers, with whatever else includes thy philosophic, thy poetic, and thy historical treasures, whether with Greek or Roman characters thou hast chosen to inscribe the ponderous chests: give me a while that key to all thy treasures, which to thy Warburton thou hast entrusted.

Lastly, come Experience, long conversant with the wise, the good, the learned, and the polite. Nor with them only, but with every kind of character, from the minister at his levee, to the bailiff in his spunging-house; from the dutchess at her drum, to the landlady behind her bar. From thee only can the manners of mankind be known; to which the recluse pedant, however great his parts or extensive his learning may be, hath ever been a stranger.

Come all these, and more, if possible; for arduous is the task I have undertaken; and, without all your assistance, will, I find, be too heavy for me to support. But if you all smile on my labours, I hope still to bring them to a happy conclusion.

HENRY FIELDING: *The History of Tom Jones*

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THE NATURE OF THE NOVEL

PROBABILITY THE PROVINCE OF THE NOVELIST Man is the highest subject (unless on very extraordinary occasions indeed) which presents itself to the pen of our historian, or of our poet; and, in relating his actions, great care is to be taken that we do not exceed the capacity of the agent we describe. . . .

It is by falling into fiction, therefore, that we generally offend against this rule, of deserting probability, which the historian seldom, if ever, quits, till he forsakes his character and commences a writer of romance. In this, however, those historians who relate public transactions, have the advantage of us who confine ourselves to scenes of private life. The credit of the former is by common notoriety supported for a long time; and public records, with the concurrent testimony of many authors bear evidence to their truth in future ages. Thus a Trajan and an Antoninus, a Nero and a Caligula, have all met with the belief of posterity; and no one doubts but that men so very good, and so very bad, were once the masters of mankind.

But we who deal in private character, who search into the most retired recesses, and draw forth examples of virtue and vice from holes and corners of the world, are in a more dangerous situation. As we have no public notoriety, no concurrent testimony, no records to support and corroborate what we deliver, it becomes us to keep within the limits not only of possibility, but of probability too; and this more especially in painting what is greatly good and amiable. Knavery and folly, though never so exorbitant, will more easily meet with assent; for ill-nature adds great support and strength to faith. . . .

. . . the actions should be such as may not only be within the compass of human agency, and which human agents may probably be supposed to do; but they should be likely for the very actors and characters themselves to have performed; for what may be only wonderful and surprising in one man, may become improbable, or indeed impossible, when related of another.

This last requisite is what the dramatic critics call conversa-

tion of character; and it requires a very extraordinary degree of judgment, and a most exact knowledge of human nature.

It is admirably remarked by a most excellent writer, that zeal can no more hurry a man to act in direct opposition to itself, than a rapid stream can carry a boat against its own current. I will venture to say, that for a man to act in direct contradiction to the dictates of his nature, is, if not impossible, as improbable and as miraculous as anything which can well be conceived. Should the best parts of a story of M. Antoninus be ascribed to Nero, or should the worst incidents of Nero's life be imputed to Antoninus, what would be more shocking to belief than either instance? whereas both these being related of their proper agent, constitute the truly marvellous.

Our modern authors of comedy have fallen almost universally into the error here hinted at; their heroes generally are notorious rogues, and their heroines abandoned jades, during the first four acts; but in the fifth, the former become very worthy gentlemen, and the latter women of virtue and discretion: nor is the writer often so kind as to give himself the least trouble to reconcile or account for this monstrous change and incongruity. There is, indeed, no other reason to be assigned for it, than because the play is drawing to a conclusion; as if it was no less natural in a rogue to repent in the last act of a play, than in the last of his life; which we perceive to be generally the case at Tyburn, a place which might indeed close the scene of some comedies with much propriety, as the heroes in these are most commonly eminent for those very talents which not only bring men to the gallows, but enable them to make an heroic figure when they are there.

Within these few restrictions, I think, every writer may be permitted to deal as much in the wonderful as he pleases; nay, if he thus keeps within the rules of credibility, the more he can surprise the reader the more he will engage his attention, and the more he will charm him. As a genius of the highest rank observes in his fifth chapter of the Bathos: 'The great art of all poetry is to mix truth with fiction, in order to join the credible with the surprising.'

For though every good author will confine himself within the

bounds of probability, it is by no means necessary that his characters, or his incidents, should be trite, common, or vulgar; such as happen in every street, or in every house, or which may be met with in the home articles of a newspaper. Nor must he be inhibited from showing many persons and things, which may possibly have never fallen within the knowledge of great part of his readers. If the writer strictly observes the rules above-mentioned, he hath discharged his part; and is then intitled to some faith from his reader, who is indeed guilty of critical infidelity if he disbelieves him.

HENRY FIELDING: *The History of Tom Jones*

A LARGE DIFFUSED PICTURE A novel is a large diffused picture, comprehending the characters of life, disposed in different groups and exhibited in various attitudes, for the purpose of a uniform plan. This plan cannot be executed with propriety, probability, or success, without a principal personage to attract the attention, unite the incidents, unwind the clue of the labyrinth, and at last close the scene, by virtue of his own importance.

TOBIAS SMOLLETT: Dedication to *Ferdinand, Count Fathom*

A PECULIAR AND UNHEARD-OF EVENT . . . What is a novel but a peculiar and as yet unheard-of event? This is the proper meaning of this name; and much which in Germany passes as a novel is no novel at all, but a mere narrative, or whatever else you may like to call it.

GOETHE: *Conversations with Eckermann*

ACCORDING TO TROLLOPE A novel should give a picture of common life enlivened by humour and sweetened by pathos. To make that picture worthy of attention, the canvas should be crowded with real portraits, not of individuals known to the world or to the author, but of created personages impregnated with traits of character which are known.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

HARDY'S VIEW A novel is an impression, not an argument.

THOMAS HARDY: Preface to *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*

THE 'SCIENTIFIC' NOVEL This is what constitutes the experimental novel: to possess a knowledge of the mechanism of the phenomena inherent in man, to show the machinery of his intellectual and sensory manifestations, under the influences of heredity and environment, such as physiology shall give them to us, and then finally to exhibit man living in social conditions produced by himself, which he modifies daily, and in the heart of which he himself experiences a continual transformation. Thus, then, we lean on physiology; we take man from the hands of the physiologist solely, in order to continue the solution of the problem, and to solve scientifically the question of how men behave when they are in society.

EMILE ZOLA: *The Experimental Novel*

REALISM The novelist who would claim to give us an exact image of life must carefully avoid a series of events which appear exceptional. His aim is not to tell a story, to amuse us or to move us, but to force us to think, to understand the deeper, hidden meaning of events. Because he has seen and reflected, he regards the universe, events, actions and men in a certain way, a way peculiar to himself, derived from the sum-total of his carefully pondered observations. It is this personal vision of the world which he seeks to communicate to us and to reproduce in his writing. In order to move us as he himself has been moved by the spectacle of life, he must reproduce it before our eyes with scrupulous fidelity. He will then compose a work in a manner so skilful, so artful, and in appearance so simple, that it will be impossible to look into it and point out his plan or expose his purpose.

Instead of engineering a series of unexpected or surprising events and unfolding them in such a way as to maintain interest until the denouement, he will take up his characters at a certain stage in their lives and lead them by a natural transition to the next stage. Thus he will show, sometimes how men are modified

by the influence of external circumstances, sometimes how their feelings and passions develop; how one man is vain, how another despises himself; how, whatever the social surrounding may be, man fights with man; how bourgeois interests, financial interests, family interests and political interests clash.

The skill of his conception will not then consist in emotion or in charm, in a gripping opening or a striking end, but in the skilful grouping of small, consistent details, whence the true feeling of the work will emerge. If he intends to deal in three hundred pages with ten years of a man's life, in order to show what has been its special and characteristic meaning among all the beings that have surrounded it, he must know how to omit from the innumerable petty happenings of daily life all those which are without significance, and must know how to bring to light all those which remain unperceived by less clairvoyant spectators and which give the book its scope, its total value. . . .

To sum up, if the novelist of yesterday chose to tell of life's crises, the more piercing conditions of the heart and soul, the novelist of to-day writes the history of the heart, the soul and the intelligence in their normal state. To produce the effect which he seeks, the emotion of simple reality, and to extract the artistic precept which he would draw from it, the revelation of what is truly the contemporary human being before his eyes, he must make use only of actions, the truth of which is unimpeachable and constant.

But even though one takes the point of view of the realistic artists, one must discuss and debate their theory, which may be summed up in the words: *The whole truth and nothing but the truth.*

Their aim being to disengage a philosophy from certain constant and everyday events, they will often be obliged to correct events for the benefit of verisimilitude and to the detriment of truth, for 'sometimes the truth is not probable'.

The realist, if he is an artist, will seek not to give us a banal photography of life but a vision of it that is fuller, sharper, more convincing than reality itself.

To tell everything would be impossible; at least one volume a day would be necessary, to enumerate the multitude of insignificant incidents that fill up our lives. . . . The artist, having chosen

his theme, will use of this life, crowded with accidents and trifles as it is, only those characteristic details which are useful to his subject, and he will jettison all the rest, everything marginal. One example from a thousand: The number of people who die each day by accident is considerable. But can we, in the middle of a story, let a tile fall on the head of a principal character, or throw him under the wheels of a carriage, on the plea that we must make allowances for accidents?

Life arranges everything according to the same plan, precipitates actions or spins them out indefinitely. Art, on the other hand, consists in taking precautions and making preparations, in contriving expert and artful transitions, in bringing into clear light, by the dexterity of the composition itself, essential events, and in giving all the others the degrees of relief appropriate to them according to their importance, all this in order to produce the profound sensation of truth that one wishes to effect.

To make true consists then in giving the complete illusion of truth, following the ordinary logic of facts, and not in slavishly transcribing them pell-mell as they happen.

From this I conclude that Realists of talent ought rather to be called Illusionists.

It is, after all, childishness to believe in reality when we each one of us carry our own reality in our thought and in our sense organs. Our eyes, ears, smell, taste, dissimilar as they are to anyone else's, create as many truths as there are men on earth. And our minds, which receive their instructions from these sense organs, analyse and judge as if each one of us belonged to a race of his own. Each one of us, then, makes for himself an illusion of a world—poetic, sentimental, joyful, melancholy, ugly or gloomy according to his nature. And the writer has no mission other than to reproduce faithfully, with all the methods of art which he has learned and can command, this illusion. . . . The great artists are those who impose their particular illusion on humanity.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT: Preface to *Pierre et Jean*

PROUST ON THE REALITY TO BE EXPRESSED A picture of life

brings with it multiple and varied sensations. The sight, for instance, of the cover of a book which has been read spins from the characters of its title the moonbeams of a distant summer night. The taste of our morning coffee brings us that faint hope of a fine day which formerly so often smiled at us in the unsettled dawn from a fluted bowl or porcelain which seemed like hardened milk. An hour is not merely an hour, it is a vase filled with perfumes, with sounds, with projects, with climates. What we call reality is a relation between those sensations and those memories which simultaneously encircle us—a relation which a cinematographic vision destroys because its form separates it from the truth to which it pretends to limit itself—that unique relation which the writer must discover in order that he may link two different states of being together for ever in a phrase. In describing objects one can make those which figure in a particular place succeed each other indefinitely; the truth will only begin to emerge from the moment that the writer takes two different objects, posits their relationship, the analogue in the world of art to the only relationship of causal law in the world of science, and encloses it within the circle of fine style. In this, as in life, he fuses a quality common to two sensations, extracts their essence and in order to withdraw them from the contingencies of time, unites them in a metaphor, thus chaining them together with the indefinable bond of a verbal alliance. Was not nature herself from this point of view, on the track of art, was she not the beginning of art, she who often only permitted me to realize the beauty of an object long afterwards in another, mid-day at Combray only through the sound of its bells, mornings at Doncières only through the groans of our heating apparatus. The relationship may be of little interest, the objects commonplace, the style bad but unless there is that relationship, there is nothing. A literature which is content with 'describing things', with offering a wretched summary of their lines and surfaces, is, in spite of its pretention to realism, the furthest from reality, the one which impoverishes us and saddens us the most, however much it may talk of glory and grandeur, for it abruptly severs communication between our present self, the past in which objects retain their essence and the

future in which they encourage us to search for it again. But there is more. If reality were that sort of waste experience approximately identical in everyone because when we say: 'bad weather', 'war', 'cab-stand', 'lighted restaurant', 'flower garden', everybody knows what we mean—if reality were that, no doubt a sort of cinematographic film of these things would suffice and 'style', 'literature' isolating itself from that simple datum, would be an artificial *hors d'oeuvre*. But is it so in reality? If I tried to render conscious to myself what takes place in us at the moment a circumstance or an event makes a certain impression, if, on the day I crossed the Vivonne bridge, the shadow of a cloud on the water made me jump for joy and ejaculate 'hullo!' if, listening to a phrase of Bergotte, all I could make of my impression were an expression such as 'Admirable!' which did not specially apply to it, if, annoyed by somebody's bad behaviour, Bloch uttered words with no particular reference to so sordid an adventure: such as 'I consider it fantastic for a man to behave like that', or if flattered at being well received by the Guermantes and perhaps a little drunk on their wine, I could not help saying to myself in an undertone as I left them: 'After all, they're charming people whom it would be delightful to spend one's life with,' I perceived that to express those impressions, to write that essential book, which is the only true one, a great writer does not, in the current meaning of the word, invent it, but, since it exists already in each one of us, interprets it. The duty and the task of a writer are those of an interpreter.

MARCEL PROUST: *Time Regained*

GIDE DREAMS OF THE 'PURE NOVEL' I should like to strip the novel of every element that does not specifically belong to the novel. Just as photography in the past freed painting from its concern for a certain sort of accuracy, so the phonograph will eventually no doubt rid the novel of the kind of dialogue which is drawn from the life and which realists take so much pride in. Outward events, accidents, traumatisms, belong to the cinema. The novel should leave them to it. Even the description of the characters does not seem to me properly to belong to the *genre*. No; this

does not seem to me the business of the *pure* novel (and in art, as in everything else, purity is the only thing I care about). No more than it is the business of the drama. And don't let it be argued that the dramatist does not describe his characters because the spectator is intended to see them transposed alive on the stage; for how often on the stage an actor irritates and baffles us because he is so unlike the person our own imagination has figured better without him. The novelist does not as a rule rely sufficiently on the reader's imagination.

AND OF THE NOVEL OF MORAL TRAGEDY There is a kind of tragedy, it seems to me, which has hitherto almost entirely eluded literature. The novel has dealt with the contrariness of fate, good or evil fortune, social relationships, the conflicts of passions and of characters—but not with the very essence of man's being.

And yet, the whole effect of Christianity was to transfer the drama on to the moral plane. But properly speaking, there are no Christian novels. There are novels whose purpose is edification; but that has nothing to do with what I mean. Moral tragedy —the tragedy, for instance, which gives such terrific meaning to the Gospel text: 'If the salt have lost his flavour wherewith shall it be salted?'—that is the tragedy with which I am concerned. ←

ANDRÉ GIDE: 'Edouard's Journal', *The Counterfeiters*

A LUMINOUS HALO Admitting the vagueness which afflicts all criticism of novels, let us hazard the opinion that for us at this moment the form of fiction most in vogue more often misses than secures the thing we seek. Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide. Nevertheless, we go on perseveringly, conscientiously, constructing our two and thirty chapters after a design which more and more ceases to resemble the vision in our minds. So much of the enormous labour of proving the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story is not merely labour thrown away but labour

misplaced to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception. The writer seems constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn. But sometimes, more and more often as time goes by, we suspect a momentary doubt, a spasm of rebellion, as the pages fill themselves in the customary way. Is life like this? Must novels be like this?

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted sense, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

. . . 'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss. And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing

in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured.

VIRGINIA WOOLF: 'The Modern Novel', *The Common Reader*

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ESSENTIALS OF THE NOVELIST

THE NOVELIST ALSO A POET Every successful novelist must be more or less a poet, even although he may never have written a line of verse. The quality of imagination is absolutely indispensible to him; his accurate power of examining and embodying human character and human passion, as well as the external face of nature, is not less essential; and the talent describing well what he feels with acuteness, added to the above requisites, goes far to complete the poetic character.

SIR WALTER SCOTT: *Lives of the Novelists*

THE NOVELIST AND THE DRAMATIST It is the object of the novel-writer, to place before the reader as full and accurate a representation of the events which he relates, as can be done by the mere force of an excited imagination, without the assistance of material objects. His sole appeal is made to the world of fancy and ideas, and in this consists his strength and his weakness, his poverty and his wealth. He cannot, like the painter, present a visible and tangible representation of his towns and woods, his palaces and castles; but, by awakening the imagination of a congenial reader, he places before his mind's eye, landscapes fairer than those of Claude, and wilder than those of Salvator. He cannot, like the dramatist, present before our living eyes the heroes of former days, or the beautiful creations of his own fancy, embodied in the grace and majesty of Kemble or of Siddons; but he can teach his reader to conjure up forms even more dignified and beautiful than theirs. The same difference follows him through every branch of his art. The author of a novel, in short, has neither stage nor scene-painter, nor company of comedians, nor dresser, nor wardrobe; words, applied with the best of his skill, must supply all that these bring to the dramatist. Action, and tone, and gesture, the smile of the lover, the frown of the tyrant, the grimace of the buffoon —all must be told, for nothing can be shown. Thus, the very dialogue becomes mixed with the narration; for he must not only

tell what the characters actually said, in which his task is the same as that of the dramatic author, but must also describe the tone, the look, the gesture, with which their speech was accompanied —telling, in short, all which, in the drama, it becomes the province of the actor to express. It must, therefore, frequently happen, that the author best qualified for a province, in which all depends on the communication of his own ideas and feelings to the reader, without any intervening medium, may fall short of the skill necessary to adapt his compositions to the medium of the stage, where the very qualities most excellent in a novelist are out of place, and an impediment to success. Description and narration, which form the essence of the novel, must be very sparingly introduced into dramatic composition, and scarce ever have a good effect upon the stage. . . . The drama speaks to the eye and ear; and, when it ceases to address these bodily organs, and would exact from a theatrical audience that exercise of the imagination which is necessary to follow forth and embody circumstances neither spoken nor exhibited, there is an immediate failure, though it be the failure of a man of genius. Hence it follows, that though a good acting play may be made by selecting a plot and characters from a novel, yet scarce any effort of genius could render a play into a narrative romance. In the former case, the author has only to contract the events within the space necessary for representation, to choose the most striking characters, and exhibit them in the most forcible contrast, discard from the dialogue whatever is redundant or tedious, and so dramatize the whole. But we know not any effort of genius, which could successfully insert into a good play, those accessories of description and delineation, which are necessary to dilate it into a readable novel. It may thus easily be conceived, that he whose chief talent lies in addressing the imagination only, and whose style, therefore, must be expanded and circumstantial, may fail in a kind of composition where so much must be left to the efforts of the actor, with his allies and assistants the scene-painter and property-man, and where every attempt to interfere with their province, is an error unfavourable to the success of the piece. . . . He who in a novel had only to fit sentiments, action and character, to the ideal

beings, is now compelled to assume the much more difficult task of adapting all these to real existing persons, who, unless their parts are exactly suited to their own taste, and their peculiar capacities, have, each in his line, the means, and not unfrequently the inclination, to ruin the success of the play. Such are, amongst many others, the peculiar difficulties of the dramatic art, and they seem impediments which lie peculiarly in the way of the novelist who aspires to extend his sway over the stage. . . .

SIR WALTER SCOTT: *Lives of the Novelists*

THE NOVELIST AND THE HISTORIAN The historian has to deal with the results of an event, the artist with the fact of the event. An historian in describing a battle says: 'The left flank of such and such an army was advanced to attack such and such a village and drove out the enemy but was compelled to retire; then the cavalry, which was sent to attack, overthrew . . .' and so on. But these words have no meaning for an artist and do not actually touch the event itself. Either from his own experience, or from letters, memoirs, and accounts, the artist realizes a certain event to himself, and very often (to take the example of a battle) the deductions the historian permits himself to make as to the activity of such and such armies prove to be the very opposite of the artist's deductions. The difference of the results arrived at is also to be explained by the sources from which the two draw their information. For the historian (to keep to the case of a battle) the chief source is found in the reports of the commanding officers and of the commander-in-chief. The artist can draw nothing from such sources; they tell him nothing and explain nothing to him. More than that: the artist turns away from them as he finds inevitable falsehood in them. To say nothing of the fact that after any battle the two sides nearly always describe it in quite contradictory ways, in every description of a battle there is a necessary lie, resulting from the need of describing in a few words the actions of thousands of men spread over several miles, and subject to most violent moral excitement under the influence of fear, shame, and death.

In descriptions of battles it is generally said that such and such armies were sent to attack such and such points, and were then ordered to retire and so on, as if assuming that discipline, which subjects tens of thousands of men to the will of one man on a parade-ground, will have the same effect where it is a question of life and death. Anyone who has been in a war knows how untrue that is, yet the reports are based on that assumption, and on them the military descriptions. Make a round of the troops immediately after a battle, or even next day or the day after, before the reports have been drawn up, and ask any of the soldiers and senior and junior officers how the affair went: you will be told what all these men experienced and saw, and you will form a majestic, complex, infinitely varied, depressing and indistinct impression; and from no one—least of all from the commander-in-chief—will you learn what the whole affair was like. Two or three days later the reports begin to be handed in. Talkers begin to narrate how things happened which they did not see; finally a general report is drawn up, and on this report the general opinion of the army is formed. Everyone is glad to exchange his own doubts and questionings for this deceptive, but clear and always flattering, presentation. Question a month or two later a man who was in the battle, and you will no longer feel in his account the raw, vital material that was there before, but he will answer according to the report. Thus I was told of the battle of Borodinó by many lively, clever participants in that affair. They all told me one and the same thing, and all in accord with the false accounts of Mikhaylóvski-Danílevski, Glínka, and others: even the details they mentioned were all identical, though the narrators had been several miles apart from one another.

TOLSTOI: 'Some Words About *War and Peace*'

DETACHMENT I do not even think that the novelist ought to express his own opinion on the things of this world. He can communicate it, but I do not like him to say it. (That is a part of my art of poetry.) I limit myself, then, to declaring things as they appear to me, to expressing what seems to me to be true. And the

devil take the consequences; rich or poor, victors or vanquished, I admit none of all that. I want neither love, nor hate, nor pity, nor anger. As for sympathy, that is different; one never has enough of that. The reactionaries, besides, must be less spared than the others, for they seem to be more criminal.

Is it not time to make justice a part of art? The impartiality of painting would then reach the majesty of the law—and the precision of science!

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to George Sand

THE NOVELIST AS GOD The artist should be in his work, like God in creation, invisible and all-powerful; he should be felt everywhere and seen nowhere. And then art should be raised above personal affections and nervous susceptibilities. It is time to give it the precision of the physical sciences by means of pitiless method. For me the capital difficulty none the less continues to be style, form, the indefinable beauty, which is the result of the conception itself, and which is the splendour of truth, as Plato used to say.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to Mlle de Chautepie

OR AS IMPARTIAL WITNESS It seems to me it is not for writers of fiction to solve such questions as that of God, of pessimism, etc. The writer's business is simply to describe who has been speaking about God or about pessimism, how, and in what circumstances. The artist must not be the judge of his characters and of their conversations, but merely an impartial witness. I have heard a desultory conversation of two Russians about pessimism—a conversation which settles nothing—and I must report that conversation as I heard it; it is for the jury, that is, for the readers, to decide on the value of it. My business is merely to be talented, i.e., to know how to distinguish important statements from unimportant, how to throw light on the characters, and to speak their language. Shtcheglov-Leontyev blames me for finishing the story with the words: 'There's no making out anything in this world.' He thinks a writer who is a good psychologist ought to be able to make it out—that is what he is a psychologist for. But I don't agree with

him. It is time that writers, especially those who are artists, recognized that there is no making out anything in this world, as once Socrates recognized it, and Voltaire, too. The mob thinks it knows and understands everything; and the more stupid it is the wider it imagines its outlook to be. And if a writer whom the mob believes in has the courage to say that he does not understand anything of what he sees, that alone will be something gained in the realm of thought and a great step in advance.

TCHEHOV to Suvarin, *Letters*

OBSERVER AND EXPERIMENTALIST . . . The novelist is equally an observer and an experimentalist. The observer in him gives the facts as he has observed them, suggests the point of departure, displays the solid earth on which his characters are to tread and the phenomenon to develop. Then the experimentalist appears and introduces an experiment, that is to say, sets his characters going in a certain story so as to show that the succession of facts will be such as the requirements of the determinism of the phenomena under examination call for. Here it is nearly always an experiment '*pour voir*', as Claude Bernard calls it. The novelist starts out in search of a truth.

EMILE ZOLA: *The Experimental Novel*

LIBERTY OF IMAGINATION Liberty of imagination should be the most precious possession of a novelist. To try voluntarily to discover the fettering dogmas of some romantic, realistic, or naturalistic creed in the free work of its own inspiration, is a trick worthy of human perverseness which, after inventing an absurdity, endeavours to find for it a pedigree of distinguished ancestors. It is weakness of inferior minds when it is not the cunning device of those who, uncertain of their talent, would seek to add lustre to it by the authority of a school. Such, for instance, are the high priests who have proclaimed Stendhal for a prophet of Naturalism. But Stendhal himself would have accepted no limitation of his freedom. Stendhal's mind was of the first order. His spirit above

must be raging with a peculiarly Stendhalesque scorn and indignation. For the truth is that more than one kind of intellectual cowardice hides behind the literary formulas. And Stendhal was pre-eminently courageous. He wrote his two great novels, which so few people have read, in a spirit of fearless liberty.

It must not be supposed that I claim for the artist in fiction the freedom of moral Nihilism. I would require from him many acts of faith of which the first would be the cherishing of an undying hope; and hope, it will not be contested, implies all the piety of effort and renunciation. It is the God-sent form of trust in the magic force and inspiration belonging to the life of this earth. We are inclined to forget that the way of excellence is in intellectual, as distinguished from emotional, humility. What one feels so hopelessly barren in declared pessimism is just its arrogance. It seems as if the discovery made by many men at various times that there is much evil in the world were a source of proud and unholy joy unto some of the modern writers. That frame of mind is not the proper one in which to approach seriously the art of fiction. It gives an author—goodness only knows why—an elated sense of his own superiority. And there is nothing more dangerous than such an elation to that absolute loyalty towards his feelings and sensations an author should keep hold of in his most exalted moments of creation.

To be hopeful in an artistic sense it is not necessary to think that the world is good. It is enough to believe that there is no impossibility of its being made so. If the flight of imaginative thought may be allowed to rise superior to many moralities current amongst mankind, a novelist who would think himself of a superior essence to other men would miss the first condition of his calling. To have the gift of words is no such great matter. A man furnished with a long-range weapon does not become a hunter or a warrior by the mere possession of a firearm; many other qualities of character and temperament are necessary to make him either one or the other. Of him from whose armoury of phrases one in a hundred thousand may perhaps hit the far-distant and elusive mark of art I would ask that in his dealings with mankind he should be capable of giving a tender recognition

to their obscure virtues. I would not have him impatient with their small failings and scornful of their errors. I would not have him expect too much gratitude from that humanity whose fate, as illustrated in individuals, it is open to him to depict as ridiculous or terrible. I would wish him to look with a large forgiveness at men's ideas and prejudices, which are by no means the outcome of malevolence, but depend on their education, their social status, even their professions. The good artist should expect no recognition of his toil and no admiration of his genius, because his toil can with difficulty be appraised and his genius cannot possibly mean anything to the illiterate who, even from the dreadful wisdom of their evoked dead, have, so far, culled nothing but inanities and platitudes. I would wish him to enlarge his sympathies by patient and loving observation while he grows in mental power. It is in the impartial practice of life, if anywhere, that the promise of perfection for his art can be found, rather than in the absurd formulas trying to prescribe this or that particular method of technique or conception. Let him mature the strength of his imagination amongst the things of this earth, which it is his business to cherish and know, and refrain from calling down his inspiration ready-made from some heaven of perfections of which he knows nothing. And I would not grudge him the proud illusion that will come sometimes to a writer: the illusion that his achievement has almost equalled the greatness of his dream.

JOSEPH CONRAD: *Notes on Life and Letters*

BENNETT'S VIEWS 15 *October* 1896. Essential characteristic of the really great novelist: a Christ-like, all-embracing compassion.

11 *January* 1897. The novelist of contemporary manners needs to be saturated with a sense of the picturesque in modern things. Walking down Edith Grove this afternoon, I observed the vague, mysterious beauty of the vista of houses and bare trees melting imperceptibly into a distance of grey fog. And then, in King's Road, the figures of tradesmen at shopdoors, of children romping or stealing along mournfully, of men and women each totally

different from every other, and all serious, wrapt up in their own thoughts and ends—these seemed curiously strange and novel and wonderful. Every scene, even the commonest, is wonderful, if only one can detach oneself, casting off all memory of use and custom, and behold it (as it were) for the first time; in its right, authentic colours; without making comparisons. The novelist should cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply, artlessly, ignorantly; of seeing like a baby or a lunatic, who lives each moment by itself and tarnishes by the present no remembrance of the past.

ARNOLD BENNETT: *Journals*

THE NOVELIST'S VOCATION A new light arose in me, less brilliant indeed than the one that had made me perceive that a work of art is the only means of regaining lost time. And I understood that all the material of a literary work was in my past life, I understood that I had acquired it in the midst of frivolous amusements, in idleness, in tenderness and in pain, stored up by me without my divining its destination or even its survival, as the seed has in reserve all the ingredients which will nourish the plant. Like the seed I might die when the plant had developed and I might find I had lived for it without knowing it, without my life having ever seemed to require contact with the books I wanted to write and for which when I formerly sat down at my table, I could find no subject. Thus all my life up to that day might have been or might not have been summed up under the title: 'A vocation?' In one sense, literature had played no active part in my life. But, in another, my life, the memories of its sorrows, of its joys, had been forming a reserve like albumen in the ovule of a plant. It is from this that the plant draws its nourishment in order to transform itself into seed at a time when one does not yet know that the embryo of the plant is developing through chemical phenomena and secret but very active respirations are taking place in it. Thus my life had been lived in constant contact with the elements which would bring about its ripening. And those who would later derive nourishment from it would be as ignorant of the process that supplied it as those who eat the products of grain are unaware of

the rich aliments it contains though they have manured the soil in which it was grown and have enabled it to reach maturity. In this connection the comparisons which are false if one starts from from them may be true if one ends by them. The writer envies the painter, he would like to make sketches and notes and, if he does so, he is lost. Yet, in writing, there is not a gesture of his characters, not a mannerism, an accent, which has not impregnated his memory; there is not a single invented character to whom he could not give sixty names of people he has observed, of whom one posed for a grimace, another for an eyeglass, another for his temper, another for a particular movement of the arms. And a writer discovers that if his aspiration to be a painter could not be consciously realized, he had nevertheless filled his notebooks with sketches without being aware of it. For, owing to his instinct, the writer long before he knew he was going to be one, habitually avoided looking at all sorts of things other people noticed, and was, in consequence, accused by others of absent-mindedness and by himself of being incapable of attention and observation, while all the time he was ordering his eyes and his ears to retain for ever what to others seemed puerile, the tone in which a phrase had been uttered, the facial expression and movement of the shoulders of a particular person at a particular moment perhaps years ago, who was otherwise unknown to him, and this because he had heard that tone before or felt he might hear it again, that it was a recurrent and permanent characteristic. It is the feeling for the general in the potential writer, which selects material suitable to a work of art because of its generality. He only pays attention to others, however dull and tiresome, because in repeating what their kind say like parrots, they are for that very reason prophetic birds, spokesmen of a psychological law. He recalls only what is general. Through certain ways of speaking, through a certain play of features and through certain movements of the shoulders even though they had been seen when he was a child, the life of others remains within himself and when later on he begins writing, that life will help to recreate reality, possibly by the use of that movement of the shoulders common to many people. This movement is as true to life as though it had

been noted by an anatomist, but the writer expresses thereby a psychological verity by grafting on to the shoulders of one individual the neck of another, both of whom had only posed to him for a moment.

It is uncertain whether in the creation of a literary work the imagination and the sensibility are not interchangeable and whether the second, without disadvantage, cannot be substituted for the first just as people whose stomach is incapable of digesting entrust this function to their intestines. An innately sensitive man who has no imagination could, nevertheless, write admirable novels. The suffering caused him by others and the conflict provoked by his efforts to protect himself against them, such experiences interpreted by the intelligence might provide material for a book as beautiful as if it were imagined and invented and as objective, as startling and unexpected as the author's imaginative fancy would have been, had he been happy and free from persecution. The stupidest people unconsciously express their feelings by their gestures and their remarks and thus demonstrate laws they are unaware of which the artist brings to light. On account of this, the vulgar wrongly believe the writer to be mischievous for the artist sees an engaging generality in an absurd individual and no more imputes blame to him than a surgeon despises his patient for being affected with a chronic ailment of the circulation. Moreover, no one is less inclined to scoff at absurd people than the artist. Unfortunately he is more unhappy than mischievous where his own passions are concerned; though he recognizes their generality just as much in his own case, he escapes personal suffering less easily. Obviously, we prefer to be praised rather than insulted and still more when a woman we love deceives us, what would we not give that it should be otherwise. But the resentment of the affront, the pain of the abandonment would in that event have been worlds we should never have known, the discovery of which, painful as it may be for the man, is precious for the artist. In spite of himself and of themselves, the mischievous and the ungrateful must figure in his work. The publicist involuntarily associates the rascals he has castigated with his own celebrity. In every work of art we can recognize the

man the artist has most hated, and, alas, even the woman he has most loved. They were posing for the writer at the very moment when, against his will, they were making him suffer the most. When I was in love with Albertine I fully realized she did not love me and I had to resign myself to her only teaching me the pain of love even at its dawn. And when we try to extract generality from our sorrow so as to write about it we are a little consoled, perhaps for another reason than those we have hitherto given, which is, that thinking in a general way, writing is a sanitary and indispensible function for the writer and gives him satisfaction in the same way that exercises, sweating and baths do a physical man.

INTUITION Intuition alone, however tenuous its consistency, however improbable its shape, is a criterion of truth and, for that reason, deserves to be accepted by the mind because it alone is capable, if the mind can extract that truth, of bringing it to greater perfection and of giving it pleasure without alloy. Intuition for the writer is what experiment is for the learned, with the difference that in the case of the learned the work of the intelligence precedes and in the case of the writer it follows. That which we have not been forced to decipher, to clarify by our own personal effort, that which was made clear before, is not ours. Only that issues from ourselves which we ourselves extract from the darkness within ourselves and which is unknown to others. And as art exactly recomposes life, an atmosphere of poetry surrounds those truths within ourselves to which we attain, the sweetness of a mystery which is but the twilight through which we have passed.

MARCEL PROUST: *Time Regained*

THE CREATIVE MOOD To live *in* the world of creation—to get into it and stay in it—to frequent it and haunt it—to *think* intensely and fruitfully—to woo combinations and inspirations into being by a depth and continuity of attention and meditation—this is the only thing.

HENRY JAMES: *Notebooks*

THE NOVELIST NOT A SPECIALIST There is no need for the writer of fiction to be an expert on any subject but his own; on the contrary, it is hurtful to him, since, human nature being weak, he is hard put to it to resist the temptation of inappositely using his special knowledge. The novelist is ill-advised to be too technical. The practice, which came into fashion in the 'nineties, of using a multitude of cant terms is tiresome. It should be possible to give verisimilitude without that, and atmosphere is dearly bought at the price of tediousness. The novelist should know something about the great issues that occupy men, who are his topics, but it is generally enough if he knows a little. He must avoid pedantry at all costs. But even at that the field is vast and I have tried to limit myself to such works as were significant to my purpose. You can never know enough about your characters. Biographies and reminiscences, technical works, will give you often an intimate detail, a telling touch, a revealing hint, that you might never have got from a living model. People are hard to know. It is a slow business to induce them to tell you the particular thing about themselves that can be of use to you. They have the disadvantage that often you cannot look at them and put them aside, as you can a book, and you have to read the whole volume, as it were, only to learn that it had nothing much to tell you.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

THE SINGLE VISION . . . If there is one gift more essential to a novelist than another it is the power of combination—the single vision. The success of the masterpieces seems to lie not so much in their freedom from faults—indeed we tolerate the grossest errors in them all—but in the immense persuasiveness of a mind which has completely mastered its perspective.

VIRGINIA WOOLF: *The Novels of E. M. Forster*

A PERMANENT INTEREST IN CHARACTER IN ITSELF . . . Novelists differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in characters when they have learned enough about it

for practical purposes. They go a step further; they feel that there is something permanently interesting in character in itself. When all the practical business of life has been discharged, there is something about people which continues to seem to them of overwhelming importance, in spite of the fact that it has no bearing whatever upon their happiness, comfort, or income. The study of character becomes to them an absorbing pursuit; to impart character an obsession. And this I find it very difficult to explain: what novelists mean when they talk about character, what the impulse is that urges them so powerfully every now and then to embody their view in writing.

VIRGINIA WOOLF: *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown*

II

SHAPE AND STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL

FOCUS The most important thing in a work of art is that it should have a kind of focus, i.e. there should be some place where all the rays meet or from which they issue. And this focus must not be able to be completely explained in words. This indeed is one of the significant facts about a true work of art—that its content in its entirety can be expressed only by itself.

LEO TOLSTOI: *Talks with Tolstoi*

FORM Don't let anyone persuade you—there are plenty of ignorant and fatuous duffers to try to do it—that strenuous selection and comparison are not the very essence of art, and that Form *is* (not) substance to that degree that there is absolutely no substance without it. Form alone *takes*, and holds and preserves, substance—saves it from the welter of helpless verbiage that we swim in as in a sea of tasteless tepid pudding, and that makes one ashamed of an art capable of such degradations. Tolstoi and D. [Dostoevsky] are fluid puddings, though not tasteless, because the amount of their own minds and souls in solution in the broth gives it saviour and flavour, thanks to the strong, rank quality of their genius and their experience. But there are all sorts of things to be said of them, and in particular that we see how great a vice is their lack of composition, their defiance of economy and architecture, directly they are emulated and imitated; *then*, as subjects of emulation, models, they quite give themselves away. There is nothing so deplorable as a work of art with a *leak* in its interest; and there is no such leak of interest as through commonness of form. Its opposite, the *found* (because the sought-for) form is the absolute citadel and tabernacle of interest.

HENRY JAMES to Hugh Walpole, *Letters of Henry James*

FORM ACCORDING TO BENNETT It is a hard saying for me, and full of danger in any country whose artists have shown contempt for form, yet I am obliged to say that, as the years pass, I attach less and less importance to good technique in fiction. I love it, and I have fought for a better recognition of its importance in England, but I now have to admit that the modern history of fiction will not support me. With the single exception of Turgenev, the great novelists of the world, according to my own standards, have either ignored technique or have failed to understand it.

ARNOLD BENNETT: *Journals*

THE 'NEW FORM' Thirty years ago the novel was still the newest, as it remains the Cinderella, of art-forms. (That of the 'Movies' had not yet appeared.) The practice of novel writing had existed for a bare two hundred and fifty years: the novelist was still regarded as a rogue and vagabond, and the novel as a 'waste of time'—or worse. And the idea of the novel as a work of art, capable of possessing a form, even as sonnets or sonatas possess forms—that idea had only existed since 1850, and in the France of Flaubert alone, at that. Writers had certainly aimed at 'progressions of effect' in short efforts since the days of Margaret of Navarre: and obviously what the Typical English Novelist had always aimed at—if he had aimed at any form at all—and what the Typical English Critic looked for—if he ever condescended to look at a novel—was a series of short stories with linked characters and possibly a culmination. Indeed, that conception of the novel has been forced upon the English Novelist by the commercial exigencies of hundreds of years. The Romances of Shakespeare, novels written for ranted recitation and admirable in the technique of that form, were moulded by the necessity for concurrent action in varying places: the curtain had to be used. So you had the Strong Situation in order that the psychological stages of Othello should be firm in the hearer's mind whilst Desdemona was alone before the audience. The novels of Fielding, of Dickens, and of Thackeray were written for publication in parts; at the end of every part must come the Strong Situation,

to keep the Plot in the reader's head until the First of Next Month.

. . . It was against the tyranny of this convention that Conrad was revolting when so passionately he sought for the New Form. How often, in those distant days, lamenting the unlikelihood of our making even modest livings by our pens, have we not sighingly acknowledged that Serialization was not for us! For I think we both started out with at least this much of a New Form in our heads: we considered a novel to be a rendering of an Affair. We used to say, I will admit, that a Subject must be seized by the throat until the last drop of dramatic possibility was squeezed out of it. I suppose we had to concede that much to the Cult of the Strong Situation. Nevertheless, a Novel was the rendering of an Affair: of one embroilment, one set of embarrassments, one human coil, one psychological progression. From this the Novel got its Unity. No doubt it might have its caesura—or even several; but these must be brought about by temperamental pauses, markings of time when the treatment called for them. But the whole novel was to be an exhaustion of aspects, was to proceed to one culmination, to reveal once for all, in the last sentences, or the penultimate; in the last phrase, or the one before it—the psychological significance of the whole.

FORD MADOX FORD: *Return to Yesterday*

THE STORY And now the story can be defined. It is a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence—dinner coming after breakfast, Tuesday after Monday, decay after death, and so on. *Qua* story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next. These are the only two criticisms that can be made on the story that is a story. It is the lowest and simplest of literary organisms. Yet it is the highest factor common to all the very complicated organisms known as novels.

When we isolate the story like this from the nobler aspects through which it moves, and hold it out on the forceps—wrig-

gling and interminable, the naked worm of time—it presents an appearance that is both unlovely and dull. But we have much to learn from it. Let us begin by considering it in connection with daily life.

Daily life is also full of the time sense. We think one event occurs after or before another, the thought is often in our minds, and much of our talk and action proceeds on the assumption. Much of our talk and action, but not all; there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called 'value', something which is measured not by minutes or hours, but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart. Neither memory nor anticipation is much interested in Father Time, and all dreamers, artists and lovers are partially delivered from his tyranny; he can kill them, but he cannot secure their attention, and at the very moment of doom, when the clock collected in the tower its strength and struck they may be looking the other way. So daily life, whatever it may be really, is practically composed of two lives—the life in time and the life by values —and our conduct reveals a double allegiance. 'I only saw her for five minutes, but it was worth it.' There you have both allegiances in a single sentence. And what the story does is to relate the life in time. And what the entire novel does—if it is a good novel—is to include the life by values as well. . . . It, also, pays a double allegiance. But in it, in the novel, the allegiance to time is imperative: no novel could be written without it. Whereas in daily life the allegiance may not be necessary: we do not know, and the experience of certain mystics suggests, indeed, that it is not necessary, and that we are quite mistaken in supposing that Monday is followed by Tuesday, or death by decay. It is always possible for you or me in daily life to deny that time exists and act accordingly even if we become unintelligible and are sent by our fellow citizens to what they choose to call a lunatic asylum. But it is never possible for a novelist to deny time inside the fabric of his novel: he must cling however lightly to the thread of his story,

he must touch the interminable tapeworm, otherwise he becomes unintelligible, which, in his case, is a blunder.

THE PLOT We have defined a story as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence. A plot is also a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality. 'The king died and then the queen died,' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief,' is a plot. The time-sequence is preserved, but the sense of causality overshadows it. Or again: 'The queen died, no one knew why, until it was discovered that it was through grief at the death of the king.' This is a plot with a mystery in it, a form capable of high development. It suspends the time-sequence, it moves as far away from the story as its limitations will allow. Consider the death of the queen. If it is in a story we say 'and then?' If it is in a plot we ask 'why?' That is the fundamental difference between these two aspects of the novel. A plot cannot be told to a gaping audience of cave men or to a tyrannical sultan or to their modern descendant the movie-public. They can only be kept awake by 'and then—and then—' they can only supply curiosity. But a plot demands intelligence and memory also.

E. M. FORSTER: *Aspects of the Novel*

THE NECESSITY OF A STORY Though an unconnected course of adventure is what most frequently occurs in nature, yet the province of the romance-writer being artificial, there is more required from him than a mere compliance with the simplicity of reality.

SIR WALTER SCOTT: *Lives of the Novelists*

THE COMPULSION OF THE STORY I have from the first felt sure that the writer, when he sits down to commence his novel, should do so, not because he has to tell a story, but because he has a story to tell. The novelist's first novel will generally have sprung from the right cause. Some series of events, or some development of character, will have presented itself to his imagination—and this he feels so strongly that he thinks he can present his picture in strong and agreeable language to others. He sits down and tells

his story because he has a story to tell; as you, my friend, when you have heard something which has at once tickled your fancy or moved your pathos, will hurry to tell it to the first person you meet.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

THE UNUSUAL AND THE ETERNAL A story must be exceptional enough to justify its telling. We story-tellers are all Ancient Mariners, and none of us is justified in stopping Wedding Guests (in other words, the hurrying public) unless he has something more unusual to relate than the ordinary experience of every average man and woman.

The whole secret of fiction and the drama—in the constructional part—lies in the adjustment of things unusual to things eternal and universal. The writer who knows exactly how exceptional, and how non-exceptional, his events should be made, possesses the key to the art.

Howells and those of his school forget that a story *must* be striking enough to be worth telling. Therein lies the problem—to reconcile the average with that uncommonness which alone makes it natural that a tale or experience would dwell in the memory and induce repetition.

THOMAS HARDY: *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy*

THE PLOTLESS NOVEL With regard to novels, I should like to see one undertaken without any plot at all. I do not mean that it should have no story; but I should like some writer of luxuriant fancy to begin with a certain set of characters—one family, for instance—without any preconceived design further than one or two incidents and dialogues, which would naturally suggest fresh matter, and so proceed in this way, throwing in incident and characters profusely, but avoiding all stage tricks and strong situations, till some death or marriage should afford a natural conclusion to the book.

MISS MITFORD: *Life and Letters of Mary Russell Mitford*

THE FUNCTION OF THE PLOT Now as to the plot—it is there that you fail and are like to fail. In *Love and War* there is absolutely no plot—no contrived arrangement of incidents by which interest is excited. You simply say that a girl was unhappy in such and such circumstances, and was helped by such and such (improbable) virtues and intelligences. You must work more out of your imagination than this before you can be a story-teller for the public. And I think you could do it. In spite of Dogberry, the thing is to be done by cudgelling. But you must exercise your mind upon it, and not sit down simply to write the details of a picture which is conveyed to you, not by your imagination, but by your sympathies. Both sympathy and imagination must be at work—and must work in unison—before you can attract.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE to Kate Field, *Trollope: A Commentary*

DIRECTION OF INTEREST It is a natural desire in the reader to want to know what happens to the people in whom his interest has been aroused and the plot is the means by which you gratify this desire. A good story is obviously a difficult thing to invent, but its difficulty is a poor reason for despising it. It should have coherence and sufficient probability for the needs of the theme; it should be of a nature to display the development of character, which is the chief concern of fiction at the present day, and it should have completeness, so that when it is finally unfolded no more questions can be asked about the persons who took part in it. It should have like Aristotle's tragedy a beginning, a middle, and an end. The chief use of a plot is one that many people do not seem to have noticed. It is a line to direct the reader's interest. That is possibly the most important thing in fiction, for it is by direction of interest that the author carries the reader along from page to page and it is by direction of interest that he induces in him the mood he desires. The author always loads his dice, but he must never let the reader see that he has done so, and by the manipulation of his plot he can engage the reader's attention so that he does not perceive what violence has been done him.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

FURTHER VALUE OF THE PLOT A plot is like the bones of a person, not interesting like expression or signs of experience, but the support of the whole.

PLOT AND REAL LIFE As regards plots I find real life no help at all. Real life seems to have no plots. And as I think a plot desirable and almost necessary, I have this extra grudge against life. But I think there are signs that strange things happen, though they do not emerge. I believe it would go ill with many of us, if we were faced by a strong temptation, and I suspect that with some of us it does go ill.

I. COMPTON-BURNETT: 'A Conversation', *Orion I*

I am almost inclined to say that I could not spend an hour in anyone's company without getting the material to write at least a readable story about him. It is pleasant to have so many stories in mind that whatever your mood you have one upon which, for an hour or two, for a week or so, you can let your fancy linger. Reverie is the groundwork of creative imagination; it is the privilege of the artist that with him it is not as with other men an escape from reality, but the means by which he accedes to it. His reverie is purposeful. It affords him a delight in comparison with which the pleasures of sense are pale and it affords him the assurance of his freedom. One cannot wonder if sometimes he is unwilling to exchange its enjoyment for the drudgery and loss of execution.

But though I have had variety of invention, and this is not strange since it is the outcome of the variety of mankind, I have had small power of imagination. I have taken living people and put them into the situations, tragic or comic, that their characters suggested. I might well say that they invented their own stories. I have been incapable of those great, sustained flights that carry the author on broad pinions into a celestial sphere. My fancy, never very strong, has been hampered by my sense of probability. I have painted easel pictures, not frescoes.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

THE GERM OF THE STORY I have always fondly remembered a remark that I heard fall years ago from the lips of Ivan Turgenev in regard to his own experience of the usual origin of the fictive picture. It began for him almost always with the vision of some person or persons, who hovered before him, soliciting him, as the active or passive figure, interesting him and appealing to him just as they were and by what they were. He saw them, in that fashion, as *disponibles*, saw them subject to the chances, the complications of existence, and saw them vividly, but then had to find for them the right relations, those that would most bring them out; to imagine, to invent and select and piece together the situations most useful and favourable to the sense of the creatures themselves, the complications they would be most likely to produce and to feel.

'To arrive at these things is to arrive at my "story",' he said, "and that's the way I look for it. The result is that I'm often accused of not having "story" enough. I seem to myself to have as much as I need—to show my people, to exhibit their relations with each other; for that is all my measure. If I watch them long enough I see them come together, I see them *placed*, I see them engaged in this or that act and in this or that difficulty. How they look and move and speak and behave, always in the setting I have found for them, is my account of them—of which I dare say, alas, *que cela manque souvent d'architecture*. But I would rather, I think, have too little architecture than too much—when there's danger of its interfering with my measure of the truth.'

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*

HENRY JAMES BECOMES INFECTED It was years ago, I remember, one Christmas Eve when I was dining with friends, a lady beside me made in the course of talk one of those allusions that I have always found myself recognizing on the spot as 'germs'. The germ, wherever gathered, has ever been for me the germ of a 'story', and most of the stories straining to shape under my hand have sprung from a single small seed, a seed as minute and

wind-blown as that casual hint for *The Spoils of Poynton* dropped unwittingly by my neighbour, a mere floating particle in the stream of talk. What above all comes back to me with this reminiscence is the sense of the inveterate minuteness, on such happy occasions, of the precious particle—reduced, that is, to its mere fruitful essence. Such is the interesting truth about the stray suggestion, the wandering word, the vague echo, at touch of which the novelist's imagination winces as at the prick of some sharp point: its virtue is all in its needle-like quality, the power to penetrate as finely as possible. This fineness it is that communicates the virus of suggestion, anything more than the minimum of which spoils the operation. If one is given a hint at all designedly one is sure to be given too much; one's subject is in the merest grain, the speck of truth, of beauty, of reality, scarce visible to the common eye—since, I firmly hold, a good eye for a subject is anything but usual. Strange and attaching, certainly, the consistency with which the first thing to be done for the communicated and seized idea is to reduce almost to nought the form, the air as of a mere disjointed and lacerated lump of life, in which we may have happened to meet it. Life being all inclusion and confusion, and art being all discrimination and selection, the latter, in search of the hard latent *value* with which alone it is concerned, sniffs round the mass as instinctively and unerringly as a dog suspicious of some buried bone. The difference here, however, is that, while the dog desires his bone but to destroy it, the artist finds in *his* tiny nugget, washed free of awkward accretions and hammered into a sacred hardness, the very stuff for a clear affirmation, the happiest chance for the indestructible. It at the same time amuses him again and again to note how, beyond the first step of the actual case, the case that constitutes for him his germ, his vital particle, his grain of gold, life persistently blunders and deviates, loses herself in the sand. The reason is of course that life has no direct sense whatever for the subject and is capable, luckily for us, of nothing but splendid waste. Hence the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves, and hoards and 'banks', investing and re-investing these fruits of toil in wondrous useful 'works' and thus making up for

us, desperate spendthrifts that we all naturally are, the most princely of incomes.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*

'THE PRINCESS CASSAMASSIMA' The simplest account of the origin of *The Princess Cassamassima* is, I think, that this fiction proceeded quite directly, during the first year of a long residence in London, from the habit and the interest of walking the streets. I walked a great deal—for exercise, for amusement, for acquisition, and above all I always walked home at the evening's end, when the evening had been spent elsewhere, as happened more often than not; and as to do this was to receive many impressions, so the impressions worked and sought an issue, so the book after a time was born. It is a fact that, as I look back, the attentive exploration of London, the assault directly made by the great city upon an imagination quick to react, fully explains a large part of it. There is a minor element that refers itself to another source, of which I shall presently speak, but the prime idea was unmistakably the ripe round fruit of perambulation. One walked of course with one's eyes greatly open, and I hasten to declare that such a practice, carried on for a long time and over a considerable space, positively provokes, all round, a mystic solicitation, the urgent appeal, on the part of everything, to be interpreted and, so far as may be, reproduced. 'Subjects' and situations, character and history, the tragedy and comedy of life, are things of which the common air, in such conditions, seems pungently to taste; and to a mind curious, before the human scene, of meanings and revelations the great grey Babylon easily becomes, on its face, a garden bristling with an immense illustrative flora. Possible stories, presentable figures, rise from the thick jungle as the observer moves, fluttering up like startled game, and before he knows it indeed he has fairly to guard himself against the brush of importunate wings. He goes on as with his head in a cloud of humming presence—especially during the younger, the initiatory time, the fresh, the sharply apprehensive months or years, more or less numerous. We use our material up, we use up even the

thick tribute of the London streets—if perception and attention but sufficiently light our steps. But I think of them as lasting, for myself, quite sufficiently long; I think of them as even still—dreadfully changed for the worse in respect to any romantic idea as I find them—breaking out on occasion into eloquence, throwing out deep notes from their vast vague murmur.

There was a moment at any rate when they offered me no image more vivid than that of some individual sensitive nature or fine mind, some small obscure intelligent creature whose education should have been almost wholly derived from them, capable of profiting by all the civilization, all the accumulations to which they testify, yet condemned to see these things only from outside—in mere quickened consideration, mere wistfulness and envy and despair. It seemed to me I had only to imagine such a spirit intent enough and troubled enough, and to place it in presence of the comings and goings, the great gregarious company, of the more fortunate than himself—all on the scale on which London could show them—to get possession of an interesting theme. I arrived so at the history of little Hyacinth Robinson—he sprang up for me out of the London pavement. To find his possible adventure interesting I had only to conceive his watching the same public show, the same innumerable appearances, I had watched myself, and of his watching very much as I had watched; save indeed for one little difference. This difference would be that so far as all the swarming facts should speak of freedom and ease, knowledge and power, money, opportunity and satiety, he should be able to revolve round them but at the most respectful of distances and with every door of approach shut in his face. For one's self, all conveniently, there had been doors that opened—opened into light and warmth and cheer, into good and charming relations; and if the place as a whole lay heavy on one's consciousness there was yet always for relief this implication of one's own lucky share of the freedom and ease, lucky acquaintance with the number of lurking springs at light pressure of which particular vistas would begin to recede, great lighted, furnished, peopled galleries, sending forth gusts of agreeable sound.

That main happy sense of the picture was always there and

that retreat from the general grimness never forbidden; whereby one's own relation to the mere formidable mass and weight of things was eased off and adjusted. One learned from an early period what it might be to know London in such a way as that—an immense and interesting discipline, an education on terms mostly convenient and delightful. But what would be the effect of the other way, of having so many precious things perpetually in one's eyes, yet of missing them all for any closer knowledge, and of the confinement of closer knowledge entirely to matters with which a connection, however intimate, couldn't possibly pass for a privilege? Truly, of course, there are London mysteries (dense categories of dark arcana) for every spectator, and it's in a degree an exclusion and a state of weakness to be without experience of the meaner conditions, the lower manners and types, the general sordid struggle, the weight of the burden of labour, the ignorance, the misery and the vice. With such matters as those my tormented young man would have had contact—they would have formed, fundamentally, from the first, his natural and immediate London. But the reward of a romantic curiosity would be the question of what the total assault, that of the world of his work-a-day life and the world of his divination and his envy together, would have made of him, and what in especial he would have made of them. As tormented, I say, I thought of him, and that would be the point—if one could only see him feel enough to be interesting without his feeling so much as not to be natural.

This in fact I have ever found rather terribly the point—that the figures in any picture, the agents in any drama, are interesting only in proportion as they feel their respective situations; since the consciousness, on their part, of the complication exhibited forms for us their link of connection with it. But there are degrees of feeling—the muffled, the faint, the just sufficient, the barely intelligent, as we may say; and the acute, the intense, the complete, in a word—the power to be finely aware and richly responsible. It is those moved in this latter fashion who 'get most' out of all that happens to them and who in so doing enable us, as readers of their records, as participators by a fond attention, also to get most. Their being finely aware—as Hamlet and Lear, say,

are finely aware—*makes* absolutely the intensity of their adventure, gives the maximum of sense to what befalls them. We care, our curiosity and our sympathy care, comparatively little for what happens to the stupid, the coarse and the blind; care for it, and for the effects of it, at the most as helping to precipitate what happens to the more deeply wondering, to the really sentient. Hamlet and Lear are surrounded, amid their complications, by the stupid and the blind, who minister in all sorts of ways to their recorded fate. Persons of markedly limited sense would, on such a principle as that, play a part in the career of my tormented youth; but he wouldn't be of markedly limited sense himself—he would note as many things and vibrate to as many occasions as I might venture to make him. . . .

I recognize at the same time, and in planning *The Princess Cassamassima* felt it highly important to recognize, the danger of filling too full any supposed and above all any obviously limited vessel of consciousness. If persons either tragically or comically embroiled with life allow us the comic or tragic value of their embroilment in proportion as their struggle is a measured and directed one, it is strangely true, none the less, that beyond a certain point they are spoiled for us by this carrying of a due light. They may carry too much of it for our credence, for our compassion, for our derision. They may be shown as knowing too much and feeling too much—not certainly for their remaining remarkable, but for their remaining 'natural' and typical, for their having the needful communities with our own precious liability to fall into traps and be bewildered. It seems probable that if we were never bewildered there would never be a story to tell about us; we should partake of the superior nature of the all-knowing immortals whose annals are dreadfully dull so long as flurried humans are not, for the positive relief of bored Olympians, mixed up with them. Therefore it is that the wary reader for the most part warns the novelist against making his characters too *interpretative* of the muddle of fate, or in other words too divinely, too priggishly clever. 'Give us plenty of bewilderment,' this monitor seems to say, 'so long as there is plenty of slashing out in the bewilderment too. But don't, we beseech you, give us too much

intelligence; for intelligence—well, *endangers*; endangers not perhaps the slasher himself, but the very slashing, the subject-matter of any self-respecting story. It opens up too many considerations, possibilities, issues; it *may* lead the slasher into dreary realms where slashing somehow fails and falls to the ground.'

That is well reasoned on the part of the reader, who can in spite of it never have an idea—or his earnest discriminations would come to him less easily—of the extreme difficulty, for the painter of the human mixture, of reproducing that mixture aright. 'Give us in the persons represented, the subjects of the bewilderment (that bewilderment without which there would be no question of an issue or of the fact of suspense, prime implications in any story) as much experience as possible, but keep down the terms in which you report that experience, because we only understand the very simplest': such in effect are the words in which the novelist constantly hears himself addressed, such the plea made him by the would-be victims of his spell on behalf of that sovereign principle, the economy of interest, a principle as to which their instinct is justly strong. He listens anxiously to the charge—nothing can exceed his own solicitude for an economy of interest; but feels himself all in presence of an abyss of ambiguities, the mutual accommodations in which the reader wholly leaves to him. Experience, as I see it, is our apprehension and our measure of what happens to us as social creatures—any intelligent report of which has to be based on that apprehension. The picture of the exposed and entangled state is what is required, and there are certainly always plenty of grounds for keeping down the complexities of a picture. A picture it still has to be, however, and by that condition has to deal effectually with its subject, so that the simple device of more and more keeping down may well not see us quite to our end or even quite to our middle. One suggested way of keeping down, for instance, is not to attribute feeling, or feelings, to persons who wouldn't in all probability have had any to speak of. The less space, within the frame of the picture, their feelings take up the more spaces is left for their doings—a fact that may at first seem to make for a refinement of economy.

All of which is charming—yet would be infinitely more so if

here at once ambiguity didn't yawn; the unreality of the sharp distinction, where the interest of observation is at stake, between doing and feeling. In the immediate field of life, for action, for application, for getting through a job, nothing may so much matter perhaps as the descent of a suspended weight on this, that or the other spot, with all its subjective concomitants quite secondary and irrelevant. But the affair of the painter is not the immediate, it is the reflective field of life, the realm not of application, but of *appreciation*—a truth that makes our measure of effect altogether different. My report of people's experience—my report as a 'story-teller'—is essentially my appreciation of it, and there is no 'interest' for me in what my hero, my heroine or any one else does save through that admirable process. As soon as I begin to appreciate simplification is imperilled: the sharply distinguished parts of any adventure, any case of endurance and performance, melt together as an appeal. I then see their 'doing', that of the persons just mentioned, as, immensely, their feeling, their feeling as their doing; since I can have none of the conveyed sense and taste of their situation without becoming intimate with them, I can't be intimate without that sense and taste, and I can't appreciate save by intimacy any more than I can report save by a projected light. Intimacy with a man's specific behaviour, with his given case, is desperately certain to make us see it as a whole —in which event arbitrary limitations of our vision lose whatever beauty they may on occasion have pretended to. What a man thinks and what he feels are the history and the character of what he does; on all of which things the logic of intensity rests. Without intensity where is vividness, and without vividness where is presentability? If I have called the most general state of one's most exposed and assaulted figures the state of bewilderment—the condition for instance on which Thackeray so much insists in the interest of *his* exhibited careers, the condition of a humble heart, a bowed head, a patient wonder, a suspended judgment, before the 'awful will' and the mysterious decrees of Providence —so it is rather witless to talk of merely getting rid of that displayed mode of reaction, one of the oft-encountered, one of the highly recommended, categories of feeling.

The whole thing comes to depend thus on the *quality* of bewilderment characteristic of one's creature, the quality involved in the given case or supplied by one's data.

. . . I have endeavoured to characterize the peremptory fashion in which my fresh experience of London—the London of the habitual observer, the preoccupied painter, the pedestrian prowler —reminded me; an admonition that represented, I think, the sum of my investigations. I recall pulling no wires, knocking at no closed doors, applying for no 'authentic' information; but I recall also on the other hand the practice of never missing an opportunity to add a drop, however small, to the bucket of my impressions or to renew my sense of being able to dip into it. To haunt the great city and by this habit to penetrate it, imaginatively, in as many places as possible—*that* was to be informed, *that* was to pull wires, *that* was to open doors, *that* positively was to groan at times under the weight of one's accumulations.

Face to face with the idea of Hyacinth's subterraneous politics and occult affiliations, I recollect perfectly feeling, in short, that I might well be ashamed if, with my advantages—and there wasn't a street, a corner, an hour, of London that was not an advantage—I shouldn't be able to piece together a proper semblance of those things, as indeed a proper semblance of all the odd parts of his life. There was always of course the chance that the propriety might be challenged—challenged by readers of a knowledge greater than mine. Yet knowledge, after all, of what? My vision of the aspects I more or less fortunately rendered *was*, exactly, my knowledge. If I made my appearances live, what was this but the utmost one could do with them? Let me at the same time not deny that, in answer to probable ironic reflections on the full license for sketchiness and vagueness and dimness taken indeed by my picture, I had to bethink myself in advance of a defence of my 'artistic position'. Shouldn't I find it in the happy contention that the value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society's not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface? I couldn't deal with that positive

quantity for itself—my subject had another too exacting side; but I might perhaps show the social ear as on occasion applied to the ground, or catch some gust of hot breath that I had at many an hour seemed to see escape and hover. What it all came back to was, no doubt, something like *this* wisdom—that if you haven't, for fiction, the root of the matter in you, haven't the sense of life and the penetrating imagination, you are a fool in the very presence of the revealed and assured; but that if you *are* so armed you are not really helpless, not without your resource, even before mysteries abysmal.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Princess Cassamassima*

12

THE TELLING OF THE NOVEL

EVERYTHING SUBORDINATED TO THE STORY There should be no episodes in a novel. Every sentence, every word, through all those pages, should tend to the telling of the story. Such episodes distract the attention of the reader, and always do so disagreeably. Who has not felt this to be the case even with *The Curious Impertinent* and with the *History of the Man of the Hill*. And if it be so with Cervantes and Fielding, who can hope to succeed? Though the novel which you have to write must be long, let it be all one. And this exclusion of episodes should be carried down into the smallest details. Every sentence and every word used should tend to the telling of the story. 'But', the young novelist will say, 'with so many pages before me to be filled, how shall I succeed if I thus confine myself—how am I to know beforehand what space this story of mine will require? There must be the three volumes, or the certain number of magazine pages which I have contracted to supply. If I may not be discursive should occasion require, how shall I complete my task? The painter suits the size of his canvas to his subject, and must I in my art stretch my subject to my canvas?' This undoubtedly must be done by the novelist; and if he will learn his business, may be done without injury to his effect. He may not paint different pictures on the same canvas, which he will do if he allow himself to wander away to matters outside his own story; but by studying proportion in his work, he may teach himself so to tell his story that it shall naturally fall into the required length. Though his story should be all one, yet it may have many parts. Though the plot itself may require but few characters, it may be so enlarged as to find its full development in many. There may be subsidiary plots, which shall all tend to the elucidation of the main story, and which will take their places as part of one and the same work—as there may be many figures on a canvas which shall not to the spectator seem to form themselves into separate pictures.

There is no portion of a novelist's work in which this fault of

episodes is so common as in the dialogue. It is so easy to make any two persons talk on any casual subject with which the writer presumes himself to be conversant! Literature, philosophy, politics, or sport, may thus be handled in a loosely discursive style; and the writer, while indulging himself and filling his pages, is apt to think that he is pleasing the reader. I think he can make no greater mistake. The dialogue is generally the most agreeable part of the novel; but it is only so as long as it tends in some way to the telling of the main story. It need not seem to be confined to that, but it should always have a tendency in that direction. The unconscious critical acumen of a reader is both just and severe. When a long dialogue on extraneous matter reaches his mind, he at once feels that he is being cheated into taking something which he did not bargain to accept when he took up that novel. He does not at that moment require politics or philosophy, but he wants his story. He will not perhaps be able to say in so many words that at some certain point the dialogue has deviated from the story; but when it does so he will feel it, and the feeling will be unpleasant.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

The first thing you have to consider when writing a novel is your story, and then your story—and then your story! If you wish to feel more dignified you may call it your 'subject'. Once started it must go on and on to its appointed end. Any digression will make a *longueur*, a patch over which the mind will progress heavily. You may have the most wonderful scene from real life that you might introduce into your book. But if it does not make your subject progress it will divert the attention of the reader. A good novel needs all the attention the reader can give it. And then some more.

Of course, you must appear to digress. That is the art which conceals your Art. The reader, you should premise, will always dislike you and your book. He thinks it an insult that you should dare to claim his attention, and if lunch is announced or there is a ring at the bell he will welcome the digression. So you will provide him with what he thinks are digressions—with occasions on

which he thinks he may let his attention relax. . . . But really not one single thread must ever escape your purpose.

FORD MADOX FORD: *It Was the Nightingale*

MANY WAYS OF TELLING A STORY What is the best way of telling a story? Since the standard must be the interest of the audience, there must be several or many good ways rather than one best. For we get interested in the stories life presents to us through divers orders and modes of presentation. Very commonly our first awakening to a desire of knowing a man's past or future comes from our seeing him as a stranger in some unusual or pathetic or humorous situation, or manifesting some remarkable characteristics. We make inquiries in consequence, or we become observant and attentive whenever opportunities of knowing more may happen to present themselves without our search. You have seen a refined face among the prisoners picking tow in gaol; you afterwards see the same unforgetable face in a pulpit: he must be of dull fibre who would not care to know more about a life which showed such contrasts, though he might gather his knowledge in a fragmentary and unchronological way.

Again, we have heard much, or at least something not quite common, about a man whom we have never seen, and hence we look round with curiosity when we are told that he is present: whatever he says or does before us is charged with a meaning due to our previous hearsay knowledge about him, gathered either from dialogue of which he was expressly and emphatically the subject, or from incidental remark, or from general report either in or out of print.

These indirect ways of arriving at knowledge are always the most stirring even in relation to impersonal subjects. To see a chemical experiment gives an attractiveness to a definition of chemistry, and fills it with a significance which it would never have had without the pleasant shock of an unusual sequence such as the transformation of a solid into gas, and vice versa. To see a word for the first time either as substantive or adjective in a connection where we care about knowing its complete meaning,

is the way to vivify its meaning in our recollection. Curiosity becomes the more eager from the incompleteness of the first information. Moreover, it is in this way that memory works in its incidental revival of events: some salient experience appears in inward vision, and in consequence the antecedent facts are retraced from what is regarded as the beginning of the episode in which that experience made a more or less strikingly memorable part. 'Ah! I remember addressing the mob from the hustings at Westminster—you wouldn't have thought that I could ever have been in such a position. Well, how I came there was in this way . . .' and then follows a retrospective narration.

The modes of telling a story founded on these processes of outward and inward life derive their effectiveness from the superior mastery of images and pictures in grasping the attention —or, one might say with more fundamental accuracy, from the fact that our earliest, strongest impressions, our most intimate convictions, are simply images added to more or less of sensation. These are the primitive instruments of thought. Hence it is not surprising that early poetry took this way—telling a daring deed, a glorious achievement, without caring for what went before. The desire for orderly narration is a later, more reflective birth. The presence of the Jack-in-the-Box affects every child: it is the more reflective lad, the miniature philosopher, who wants to know how he got there.

The only stories life presents to us in an orderly way are those of our autobiography, or the career of our companions from our childhood upwards, or perhaps of our own children. But it is a great art to make a connected strictly relevant narrative of such careers as we can recount from the beginning. In these cases the sequence of associations is almost sure to overmaster the sense of proportion. Such narratives *ab ovo* are summer's-day stories for happy loungers; not the cup of self-forgetting excitement to the busy who can snatch an hour of entertainment.

But the simple opening of a story with a date and necessary account of places and people, passing on quietly towards the more rousing elements of narrative and dramatic presentation, without need of retrospect, has its advantages which have to be measured

by the nature of the story. Spirited narrative, without more than a touch of dialogue here and there, may be made eminently interesting, and is suited to the novelette. Examples of its charm are seen in the short tales of which the French have a mastery never reached by the English, who usually demand coarser flavours than are given by that delightful gaiety which is well described by La Fontaine as not anything that provokes fits of laughter, but a certain charm, an agreeable mode of handling which lends attractiveness to all subjects even the most serious. And it is this sort of gaiety which plays around the best French novelettes. But the opening chapters of the *Vicar of Wakefield* are as fine as anything that can be done in this way.

Why should a story not be told in the most irregular fashion that an author's idiosyncrasy may prompt, provided that he gives us what we can enjoy? The objections to Sterne's wild way of telling *Tristam Shandy* lie more solidly in the quality of the interrupting matter than in the fact of interruption. The dear public would do well to reflect that they are often bored from the want of flexibility in their own minds. They are like the topers of 'one liquor'.

GEORGE ELIOT: *Leaves from a Notebook*

'THE POINT OF VIEW' And may I say (as I *can* read nothing, if I read it at all, save in the light of how one would one's self proceed in tackling the same *data*!) just two other things? One is that I think your material suffers a little from the fact that the reader feels you approach your subject too *immediately*, show him its elements, the cards in your hand, too bang off from the first page —so that a wait to begin to guess *what and whom the thing is going to be about* doesn't impose itself: the antechamber or two and the crooked corridor before he is already in the Presence. The other is that you don't give him a positive sense of dealing with your subject from its logical centre. This centre I gathered to be, from what you told me in Rome (and one gathers it also from the title), the consciousness of Eleanor—to which all the rest (Manisty, Lucy, the whole phantasmagoria and drama) is presented by life. I should have urged you: 'Make that consciousness full, rich,

universally prehensile, and *stick* to it—don't shift—and don't shift *arbitrarily*—how, otherwise, do you get your unity of subject or keep up your reader's sense of it?' To which, if you say: How then do I get *Lucy's* consciousness, I impudently retort: 'By that magnificent and masterly *indirectness* which means the *only* dramatic straightness and intensity. You get it, in other words, by Eleanor.' 'And how does Eleanor get it?' 'By *everything*! By Lucy, by Manisty, by every pulse of the action in which she is engaged and of which she is the fullest—an exquisite—register. Go behind *her*—miles and miles; don't go behind the others, or the subject—i.e. the unity of impression—goes to smash.'

HENRY JAMES to Mrs Humphrey Ward, *Letters*

The Ambassadors had been, all conveniently, 'arranged for'; its first appearance was from month to month, in *The North American Review* during 1903, and I had been open from far back to any pleasant provocation for ingenuity that might reside in one's actively adopting—so as to make it, in its way, a small compositional law—recurrent breaks and resumptions I had made up my mind here regularly to exploit and enjoy these often rather rude jolts—having found, as I believed, an admirable way to it; yet every question of form and pressure, I easily remember, paled in the light of the major propriety, recognized as soon as really weighed; that of employing but one centre and keeping it all within my hero's compass. The thing was to be so much this worthy's intimate adventure that even the projection of his consciousness upon it from beginning to end without intermission or deviation would probably still leave a part of its value for him, and *a fortiori* for ourselves, unexpressed. I might, however, express every grain of it that there would be room for—on condition of contriving a splendid particular economy. Other persons in no small number were to people the scene, and each with his or her axe to grind, his or her situation to treat, his or her coherency not to fail of, his or her relation to my leading motive, in a word, to establish and carry on. But Strether's sense of these things, and Strether's only, should avail me for showing them; I should

know them but through his more or less groping knowledge of them, since his very gropings would figure among his most interesting motions, and a full observance of the rich vigour I spoke of would give me more of the effect I should be most 'after' than all other possible observances together. It would give me a large unity, and that in turn would crown me with the grace to which the enlightened story-teller will at any time, for his interest, sacrifice if need be all other graces whatever. I refer of course to the grace of intensity, which there are ways of signally achieving and ways of signally missing—as we see it, all round us, helplessly and woefully missed.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Ambassadors*

. . . The point of view from which the story may be told.

To some critics this is the fundamental device. 'The whole intricate question of method, in the craft of fiction,' says Mr Percy Lubbock, 'I take to be governed by the question of the *point of view*—the question of the relation in which the narrator stands to the story.' And his book, *The Craft of Fiction*, examines various points of view with genius and insight. The novelist, he says, can either describe the characters from outside, as an impartial or partial onlooker; or he can assume omniscience and describe them from within; or he can place himself in the position of one of them and affect to be in the dark as to the motives of the rest; or there are certain intermediate attitudes.

Those who follow him will lay a sure foundation for the aesthetics of fiction. . . . For me the whole intricate question of method resolves itself not into formulæ but into the power of the writer to bounce the reader into accepting what he says—a power which Mr Lubbock admits and admires, but locates at the edge of the problem instead of at the centre. I should put it plumb in the centre. Look how Dickens bounces us in *Bleak House*. . . . Logically, *Bleak House* is all to pieces, but Dickens bounces us, so that we do not mind the shifting of the viewpoint.

Critics are more apt to object than readers. Zealous for the novel's eminence, they are a little too apt to look for problems that shall be peculiar to it, and differentiate it from the drama; they

feel it ought to have its own technical troubles before it can be accepted as an independent art; and since the problem of a point of view certainly is peculiar to the novel they have rather overstressed it. I do not myself think it is so important as a proper mixture of characters—a problem which the dramatist is up against also. And the novelist must bounce us; that is imperative. . . .

A novelist can shift his point of view if it comes off, and it came off with Dickens and Tolstoi. Indeed this power to expand and contract perception (of which the shifting viewpoint is a symptom), this right to intermittent knowledge—I find it one of the great advantages of the novel-form, and it has a parallel in our own perception of life. We are stupider at some times than others; we can enter into people's minds occasionally but not always, because our own minds get tired; and this intermittence lends in the long run variety and colour to the experiences we receive. A quantity of novelists, English novelists especially, have behaved like this to the people in their books: played fast and loose with them, and I cannot see why they should be censured.

E. M. FORSTER: *Aspects of the Novel*

DANGERS OF FIRST-PERSON NARRATION It is always dangerous to write from the point of 'I'. The reader is unconsciously taught to feel that the writer is glorifying himself, and rebels against the self-praise. Or otherwise the 'I' is pretentiously humble, and offends from exactly the other point of view. In telling a tale it is, I think, always well to sink the personal pronoun. The old way, 'Once upon a time,' with slight modifications is the best way of telling a story.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE to Kate Field, *Trollope: A Commentary*

. . . that accurst autobiographic form which puts a premium on the loose, the improvised, the cheap and the easy. Save in the fantastic and the romantic (Copperfield, Jane Eyre, that charming thing of Stevenson's with the bad title—*Kidnapped?*) it has

no authority, no persuasive or convincing force—its grasp of reality and truth isn't strong and disinterested. R. Crusoe, e.g., isn't a novel at all. There is, to my vision, no authentic, and no really interesting and no *beautiful*, report of things on the novelist's, the painter's part unless a particular detachment has operated, unless the great stewpot or crucible of the imagination, of the observant and recording and interpreting mind in short, has intervened and played its part—and this detachment, this chemical transmutation for the aesthetic, the representational, end is terribly wanting in autobiography brought, as the horrible phrase is, up to date.

HENRY JAMES to H. G. Wells, *Letters of Henry James*

DIALOGUE The dialogue, on which the modern novelist in consulting the taste of his probable readers must depend most, has to be constrained also by other rules. The writer may tell much of his story in conversations, but he may only do so by putting such words into the mouths of his personages as persons so situated would probably use. He is not allowed for the sake of his tale to make his characters give utterance to long speeches, such as are not customarily heard from men and women. The ordinary talk of ordinary people is carried on in short sharp expressive sentences, which very frequently are never completed—the language of which, even among educated people, is often incorrect. The novel-writer in constructing his dialogue must so steer between absolute accuracy of language—which would give to his conversation an air of pedantry, and the slovenly inaccuracy of ordinary talkers, which if closely followed would offend by an appearance of grimace—as to produce upon the ear of his readers a sense of reality. If he be quite real he will seem to attempt to be funny. If he be quite correct he will seem to be unreal. And above all, let the speeches be short. No character should utter much above a dozen words at a breath—unless the writer can justify to himself a longer flood of speech by the speciality of the occasion.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

ADVICE FROM DICKENS When one is impelled to write this or that, one still has to consider: 'How much of this will tell for what I mean? How much of it is my own wild emotion and superfluous energy—how much remains that is truly belonging to this ideal character and these ideal circumstances?' It is in the laborious struggle to make this distinction, and in the determination to try for it, that the road to correction of faults lies. (Perhaps I may remark, in support of the sincerity with which I write this, that I am an impatient and impulsive person myself, but that it has been for many years the constant effort of my life to practise at my desk what I preach to you.)

CHARLES DICKENS to Miss Jolly, *Letters*

It strikes me that you constantly hurry your narrative (and yet without getting on) *by telling it, in a sort of impetuous breathless way, in your own person, when the people should tell it and act it for themselves.* My notion always is, that when I have made the people to play out the play, it is, as it were, their business to do it, and not mine. Then, unless you really have led up to a great situation like Basil's death, you are bound in art to make more of it. Such a scene should form a chapter of itself. Impressed upon the reader's memory, it would go far to make the fortune of the book. Suppose yourself telling that affecting incident in a letter to a friend. Wouldn't you describe how you went through the life and stir of the streets and roads to the sickroom? Wouldn't you say what kind of room it was, what time of day it was, whether it was sunlight, starlight, or moonlight? Wouldn't you have a strong impression on your mind of how you were received, when you first met the look of the dying man, what strange contrasts were about you and struck you? I don't want you, in a novel, to present *yourself* to tell such things, but I want the things to be there. You make no more of the situation than the index might, or a descriptive playbill might in giving a summary of the tragedy under representation.

CHARLES DICKENS to Mrs Brookfield, *Letters*

A NATURALIST DEFINES DESCRIPTION The word description is no

longer suitable. It is as bad as the word *roman*, which has no longer any significance when applied to our naturalistic studies. To describe is no longer our end: we simply desire to complete and determine. For example, the zoologist who in speaking of a particular kind of insect finds it necessary to study the plant upon which the insect lives, and from which it draws its being, even up to its form and its colour, finds it necessary to make a description: but this description enters into the very analysis of the insect; there is in this the necessity of a savant and not the mere display of a painter. This amounts to saying that we no longer describe for the sake of describing, from a caprice and a pleasure of rhetoricians. We consider that man cannot be separated from his surroundings, that he is completed by his clothes, his house, his city, and his country; and hence we shall not note a single phenomenon of his brain or heart without looking for the causes or the consequence in his surroundings. . . . I should define description: 'An account of environment which determines and completes man.' . . . In a novel, in a study of humanity, I blame all description which is not according to that definition.

EMILE ZOLA: *The Experimental Novel*

THE NOVEL PRESENTED AS DRAMA If the art of the drama, as a great French master of it has said, is above all the art of preparations, that is true only to a less extent of the art of the novel, and true exactly in the degree in which the art of the particular novel comes near to that of the drama. The first half of a fiction insists ever on figuring to me as the stage or theatre for the second half, and I have in general given so much space to making the theatre propitious that my halves have too often proved strangely unequal. Thereby has arisen with grim regularity the question of artfully, of consummately masking the fault and conferring on the false quantity the brave appearance of the true.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Tragic Muse*

THE SCENIC SYSTEM Going over the pages here placed together

has been for me, at all events, quite to watch the scenic system at play. The treatment by 'scene', regularly, quite rhythmically recurs; the intervals between, the massing of the elements to a different effect and by quite other law, remain, in this fashion, all preparative, just as the scenic occasions in themselves become, at a given moment, illustrative, each of the agents, true to its function, taking up the theme from the other very much as the fiddles, in an orchestra, may take it up from the cornets and flutes, or the wind instruments take it up from the violins. The point, however, is that the scenic passages are *wholly* and logically scenic, having for their rule of beauty the principle of the 'conduct', the organic development, of a scene—the entire succession of values that flower and bear fruit on ground solidly laid for them. The great advantage for the total effect is that we feel, with the definite alteration, how the theme *is* being treated. That is we feel it when, in such tangled connections, we happen to care. I shouldn't really go on as if this were the case with many readers.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *What Maisie Knew*

THE 'TIME-SHIFT' There is nothing really startling in the method. It is that of every writer of workmanlike detective stories. My friend on the *New York Times* calls me a master of the time-shift. He adds that a great many people dislike my books because I use that device. But he is mistaken. It is me they dislike, not the time-shift, which is a thing that delights everybody. It is, in fact, indispensible to the detective-writer. He begins the story with the words: ' "He is dead", she said.' Then he gives some details of the past of him and her. He returns to the present to introduce the sleuths and the district attorney. The chief sleuth delves for pages into the past of him or her, going back thirty years to 'his' past in Muddy Creek and Pekin. He returns to lunch with the District Attorney who is trying to doublecross him and then back and back and back. . . . And back once more to the '15th March 19—'. Eventually the final clue is given, by something that happened in 1922, and you return to the present for half a page to dispose of the sleuth and the dashing young lady . . . that tech-

nique is identical with that of all modern novelists, or of myself. . . . Or Proust.

FORD MADOX FORD: *It Was the Nightingale*

TOUCHING THE READER'S HEART I have read your story 'On the Road'. If I were the editor of an illustrated magazine, I should publish the story with great pleasure; but here is my advice as a reader: when you depict sad or unlucky people, and want to touch the reader's heart, try to be colder—it gives their grief, as it were, a background, against which it stands out in greater relief. As it is, your heroes weep and you sigh. Yes, you must be cold.

ANTON TCHEHOV: *Letters*

MISS BOWEN SUMS IT UP

PLOT: [*Essential. The Pre-essential*] Plot might seem to be a matter of choice. It is not. The particular plot for the particular novel is something the novelist is driven to. It is what is left after the whittling-away of alternatives. The novelist is confronted, at a moment (or at what appears to be the moment: actually its extension may be indefinite) by the impossibility of saying what is to be said in any other way.

He is forced towards his plot. By what? By 'what is to be said'. What is 'what is to be said'? A mass of subjective matter that has accumulated—impressions received, feelings about experience, distorted results of ordinary observation, and something else—*x*. This matter is *extra* matter. It is superfluous to the non-writing life of the writer. It is luggage left in the hall between two journeys, as opposed to the perpetual furniture of rooms. It is destined to be elsewhere. It cannot move till its destination is known. Plot is the knowing of destination.

Plot is diction. Action of language, language of action.

Plot is story. It is also 'a story' in the nursery sense—lie. The novel lies, in saying that something happened that did not. It must, therefore, contain uncontradictable truth, to warrant the original lie.

Story involves action. Action towards an end not to be foreseen (by the reader) but also towards an end which, having *been* reached, must be seen to have been from the start inevitable.

Action by whom? The Characters (see CHARACTERS). Action in view of what, and because of what? The 'what is to be said'.

What about the idea that the function of action is to *express* the characters? That is wrong. The characters are there to provide the action. Each character is created, and must only be so created, as to give his or her action (or rather, contributory part in the novel's action) verisimilitude.

What about the idea that plot should be ingenious, complicated —a display of ingenuity remarkable enough to command attention? If more than such a display, what? Tension, or mystification towards tension, are good for emphasis. For their own sakes, bad.

Plot must further the novel towards its object. What object? The non-poetic statement of a poetic truth.

Have not all poetic truths been already stated? The essence of a poetic truth is that no statement of it can be final.

Plot, story, is in itself un-poetic. At best it can only be not anti-poetic. It cannot claim a single poetic licence. It must be reasoned—only from the moment when its none-otherness, its only-possibleness has become apparent. Novelist must always have one foot, sheer circumstantiality, to stand on, whatever the other foot may be doing. [N.B. Much to be learned from story-telling to children. Much to be learned from the detective story —especially non-irrelevance. (See RELEVANCE.)]

Flaubert's '*Il faut interesser*'. Stress on manner of telling: keep in mind, 'I will a tale *unfold*'. Interest of watching a dress that has been well-packed unpacked from a dress-box. Interest of watching silk handkerchiefs drawn from a conjuror's watch.

Plot must not cease to move forward. (See ADVANCE.) The *actual* speed of movement must be even. *Apparent* variations in speed are good, necessary, but there must be no actual variations in speed. To obtain those apparent variations is part of the illusion —task of the novel. Variations in texture can be made to give the effect of variations in speed. Why are *apparent* variations in speed necessary? (*a*) For emphasis. (*b*) For non-resistance, or 'give', to

the nervous time-variations of the reader. Why is *actual* evenness, non-variation, of speed necessary? For the sake of internal evenness for its own sake. Perfection of evenness=perfection of control. The tautness of the taut string is equal (or even) all along and at any part of the string's length.

CHARACTERS Are the characters, then, to be constructed to formula—the formula pre-decided by the plot? Are they to be drawn, cut out, jointed, wired, in order to be manipulated for the plot?

No. There is no question as to whether this would be right or wrong. It would be impossible. One cannot 'make' characters, only marionettes. The manipulated movement of the marionette is not the 'action' necessary for plot. Characterless action is not action at all, in the plot sense. It is the indivisibility of the act from the actor, and the inevitability of *that* act on the part of *that* actor, that gives action verisimilitude. Without that, action is without force or reason. Forceless, reasonless action disrupts plot. The term 'creation of character' (or characters) is misleading. Characters pre-exist. They are *found*. They reveal themselves slowly to the novelist's perception—as might fellow-travellers seated opposite one in a very dimly lit railway carriage.

The novelist's perception of his characters take place *in the course of the actual writing of the novel*. To an extent, the novelist is in the same position as his reader. But his perceptions should be always just in advance.

The ideal way of presenting character is to invite perception.

In what do the characters pre-exist? I should say, in the mass of matter (see PLOT) that had accumulated before the inception of the novel.

(N.B. The unanswerability of the question, from an outsider: 'Are the characters in your novel invented, or are they from real life?' Obviously, neither is true. The outsider's notion of 'real life' and the novelist's are hopelessly apart.)

How, then, is the pre-existing character—with its own inner spring of action, its contrarieties—to be made to play a pre-assigned role? In relation to character, or characters, once these have

been contemplated, *plot* must at once seem over-rigid, arbitrary.

What about the statement (in relation to PLOT) that 'each character is created in order, and only in order, that he or she may supply the required action'? To begin with, strike out 'created'. Better, the character is *recognized* (by the novelist) by the signs he or she gives of unique capacity to act in a certain way, which 'certain way' fulfils a need of the plot.

The character is there (in the novel) for the sake of the action he or she is able to contribute to the plot. Yes. But also, he or she exists *outside* the action being contributed to the plot.

Without that existence of the character outside the (necessarily limited) action, the action itself would be invalid.

Action is the simplification (for story purposes) of complexity. For each one act, there are an x number of rejected alternatives. It is the palpable presence of the alternatives that gives action interest. Therefore, in each of the characters, while he or she is acting, the play and pull of alternatives must be felt. It is in being seen to be capable of alternatives that the character becomes, for the reader, valid.

Roughly, the action of a character should be unpredictable before it has been shown, inevitable when it has been shown. In the first half of a novel, the unpredictability should be the more striking. In the second half, the inevitability should be the more striking.

(Most exceptions to this are, however, masterpiece-novels. In *War and Peace*, *L'Education Sentimentale*, and *La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, unpredictability dominates up to the end.)

The character's prominence in the novel (pre-decided by the plot) decides the character's range—of alternatives. The novelist must allot (to the point of rationing) psychological space. The 'hero', 'heroine' and 'villain' (if any) are, by agreement, allowed most range. They are entitled, for the portrayal of their alternatives, to time and space. Placing the characters in receding order to their importance to the plot, the number of their alternatives may be seen to diminish. What E. M. Forster has called the 'flat' character has no alternatives at all.

The ideal novel is without 'flat' characters.

Characters must *materialize*—i.e., must have a palpable physical reality. They must be not only seeable (visualizable); they must be to be felt. Power to give physical reality is probably a matter of the extent and nature of the novelist's physical sensibility, or susceptibility. In the main, English novelists weak in this, as compared to French and Russians. Why?

Hopelessness of categoric 'description'. Why? Because this is static. Physical personality belongs to action: cannot be separated from it. Pictures must be in movement. Eyes, hands, stature, etc., must appear, and only appear, *in play*. Reaction to physical personality is part of action—love, or sexual passages, only more marked application of this general rule.

(Conrad an example of strong, non-sexual use of physical personality.)

The materialization (in the above sense) of the character for the novelist must be instantaneous. It happens. No effort of will —and obviously no effort of intellect—can induce it. But the unmaterialized character represents an enemy pocket in an area that has been otherwise cleared. This cannot go on for long. It produces a halt in the plot.

When the materialization *has* happened, the chapters written before it happened will almost certainly have to be recast. From the plot point of view, they will be found invalid.

Also, it is essential that for the reader the materialization of the character should begin early. I say begin, because for the *reader* it may, without harm, be gradual.

Is it from this failure, or tendency to fail, in materialization that the English novelist depends so much on engaging emotional sympathy for his characters?

Ruling sympathy out, a novel must contain at least one *magnetic* character. At least one character capable of keying the reader up, as though he (the reader) were in the presence of someone he is in love with. This is not a rule of salesmanship but a pre-essential of *interest*. The character must do to the reader what he has done to the novelist—magnetize towards himself perceptions, sense-impressions, desires.

The unfortunate case is, where the character has, obviously,

acted magnetically upon the author, but fails to do so upon the reader.

There must be combustion. Plot depends for its movement on internal combustion.

Physically, characters are almost always copies, or composite copies. Traits, gestures, etc., are searched for in, and assembled from, the novelist's memory. Or, a picture, a photograph or the cinema screen may be drawn on. Nothing physical can be *invented.* (Invented physique stigmatizes the inferior novel.) Proust (in last volume) speaks of this assemblage of traits. Though much may be lifted from a specific person in 'real life', no person in 'real life' could supply everything (physical) necessary for the character in the novel. No such person could have just that exact degree of physical intensity required for the character.

Greatness of characters is the measure of the unconscious greatness of the novelist's vision. They are 'true' in so far as he is occupied with poetic truth. Their degrees in realness show the degrees of his concentration.

SCENE: [*Is a derivative of Plot. Gives actuality to Plot*] Nothing can happen nowhere. The *locale* of the happening always colours the happening, and often, to a degree, shapes it.

Plot having pre-decided what is to happen, scene, scenes, must be so found, so chosen, as to give happening the desired force.

Scene, being physical, is, like the physical traits of the characters, generally a copy, or a composite copy. It, too, is assembled —out of memories which, in the first place, may have had no rational connection with one another. Again, picture, photographs, the screen are sources of supply. Also dreams.

Almost anything drawn from 'real life'—house, town, room, park, landscape—will almost certainly be found to require *some* distortion for the purposes of plot. Remote memories, already distorted by the imagination, are most useful for the purposes of scene. Unfamiliar or once-seen places yield more than do familiar often-seen places.

Wholly invented scene is as unsatisfactory (thin) as wholly invented physique for a character.

Scene, much more than character, is inside the novelist's conscious power. More than any other constituent of the novel, it makes him conscious *of* his power.

This can be dangerous. The weak novelist is always, compensatorily, scene-minded. (Jane Austen's economy of scene-painting, and her abstentions from it in what might be expected contexts, could in itself be proof of her mastery of the novel.)

Scene is only justified in the novel where it can be shown, or at least felt, to act upon action or character. In fact, where it has dramatic use.

Where not intended for dramatic use, scene is a sheer slower-down. Its staticness is a dead weight. It cannot make part of the plot's movement by being shown *in play*. (Thunderstorms, the sea, landscape flying past car or railway-carriage windows are not scene but *happenings*.)

The deadeningness of straight and prolonged 'description' is as apparent with regard to scene as it is with regard to character. Scene must be evoked. For its details relevance (see RELEVANCE) is essential. Scene must, like the characters, not fail to materialize. In this it follows the same law—instantaneous for the novelist, gradual for the reader.

In 'setting a scene' the novelist directs, or attempts to direct, the reader's visual imagination. He must allow for the fact that the reader's memories will not correspond with his own. Or, at least, not at all far along the way.

DIALOGUE Must (1) Further Plot; (2) Express Character.

Should not on any account be a vehicle for ideas for their own sake. Ideas only permissible where they provide a key to the character who expresses them.

Dialogue requires more art than does any other constituent of the novel. Art in the *celare artem* sense. Art in the trickery, self-justifying distortion sense. Why? Because dialogue must appear realistic without being so. Actual realism—the lifting, as it were, of passages from a stenographer's take-down of a 'real life' conversation—would be disruptive. Of what? Of the illusion of the

novel. In 'real life' everything is diluted; in the novel everything is condensed.

What are the realistic qualities to be imitated (or faked) in novel dialogue? Spontaneity. Artless or hit-or-miss arrival at words used. Ambiguity (speaker not sure, himself, what he means). Effect of choking (as in engine): more to be said than can come through. Irrelevance. Allusiveness. Erraticness: unpredictable course. Repercussion.

What must novel dialogue, behind mask of these faked realistic qualities, really be and do? It must be pointed, intentional, relevant. It must crystallize situation. It must express character. It must advance plot.

During dialogue, the characters confront one another. The confrontation is in itself an occasion. Each one of these occasions, throughout the novel, is unique. Since the last confrontation, something has changed, advanced. What is being said is the effect of something that has happened; at the same time, what is being said *is in itself something happening*, which will, in turn, leave its effect.

Dialogue is the ideal means of showing what is between the characters. It crystallizes relationships. It *should*, ideally, so be effective as to make analysis or explanation of the relationships between the characters unnecessary.

Short of a small range of physical acts—a fight, murder, love-making—dialogue is the most vigorous and visible inter-action of which characters in a novel are capable. Speech is what the characters *do to each other*.

Dialogue provides means for the psychological materialization of the characters. It should short-circuit description of mental traits. Every sentence in dialogue should be descriptive of the character who is speaking. Idiom, tempo, and shape of each spoken sentence should be calculated by novelist, towards this descriptive end.

Dialogue is the first case of the novelist's need for notation from real life. Remarks or turns of phrase indicatory of class, age, degree of intellectual pretention, *idées reçues*, nature and strength of governing fantasy, sexual temperament, persecution-sense or

acumen (fortuitous arrival at general or poetic truth) should be collected. (N.B. Proust, example of the semi-conscious notation and putting to use of it.)

All the above, from *class* to *acumen*, may already have been established, with regard to each character, by a direct statement by the novelist to the reader. It is still, however, the business of dialogue to show these factors, or qualities in play.

There must be present in dialogue—i.e., in each sentence spoken by each character—*either* (*a*) calculation, or (*b*) involuntary self-revelation.

Each piece of dialogue *must* be 'something happening'. Dialogue *may* justify its presence by being 'illustrative'—but this secondary use of it must be watched closely, challenged. Illustrativeness can be stretched too far. Like straight description, it then becomes static, a dead weight—halting the movement of the plot. The 'amusing' for its own sake, should above all be censored. So should infatuation with any idiom.

The functional use of dialogue for the plot must be the first thing in the novelist's mind. Where functional usefulness cannot be established, dialogue must be left out.

What is this functional use? That of a bridge.

Dialogue is the thin bridge which must, from time to time, carry the entire weight of the novel. Two things must be kept in mind: (*a*) the bridge is there to permit *advance*; (*b*) the bridge must be strong enough for the weight.

Failure in any one piece of dialogue is a loss, at once to the continuity and the comprehensibility of the novel.

Characters should, on the whole, be under rather than over-articulate. What they *intend* to say should be more evident, more striking (because of its greater inner importance to the plot) than what they arrive at *saying*.

ANGLE The question of *angle* comes up twice over in the novel.

Angle has two senses: (*a*) visual; (*b*) moral.

(*a*) *Visual Angle*. This has been much discussed—particularly, I think, by Henry James. Where is the camera-eye to be located?

(1) In the breast or brow of *one* of the characters? This is, of course, simplifying and integrating. But it imposes on the novel the limitations of the 'I'—whether the first person is explicitly used or not. Also, with regard to any matter that the specific character does not (cannot) know, it involves the novelist in long cumbrous passages of cogitation, speculation and guesses. E.g. —of any character other than the specific (or virtual) 'I' it must always be 'he appeared to feel', 'he could be seen to see', rather than 'he felt', 'he saw'. (2) In the breast or brow of a succession of characters? This is better. It *must*, if used, involve very careful considered division of the characters, by the novelist, in the *seeing* and the *seen*. Certain characters gain in importance and magnetism by being only *seen*: this makes them more romantic, fatal-seeming, sinister. In fact, no character in which these qualities are, for the plot, essential should be allowed to enter the *seeing* class. (3) In the breast or brow of omniscient story-teller (the novelist)? This, though appearing naïve, would appear best. The novelist should retain right of entry, at will, into any of the characters: their memories, sensations and thought-processes should remain his, to requisition for appropriate use. What conditions 'appropriateness'? The demands of the plot. Even so, the novelist must not lose sight of point made above—the gain in necessary effect, for some characters, of their remaining *seen*—their remaining closed, apparently, even to the omniscience of the novelist.

The cinema, with its actual camera-work, is interesting study for the novelist. In a good film, the camera's movement, angle and distance have all worked towards one thing—the fullest possible realization of the director's idea, the completest possible surrounding of the subject. Any trick is justified if it adds a statement. With both film and novel, plot is the pre-imperative. The novelist's relation to the novel is that of the director's relation to the film. The cinema, cinema-going, has no doubt built up in novelists a great authoritarianism. This seems to me good.

(*b*) *Moral Angle.* This too often means, pre-assumptions—social, political, sexual, national, aesthetic, and so on. These may all exist, sunk at different depths, in the same novelist. Their existence cannot fail to be palpable; and their nature determines,

more than anything else, the sympatheticness or antipatheticness of a given novel to a given circle of readers.

Pre-assumptions are bad. They limit the novel to a given circle of readers. They cause the novel to act immorally *on* that given circle. (The lady asking the librarian for a 'nice' novel to take home is, virtually, asking for a novel whose pre-assumptions will be identical with her own.) Outside the given circle, a novel's pre-assumptions must invalidate it for all other readers. The increasingly bad smell of most pre-assumptions probably accounts for the growing prestige of the detective story: the detective story worked on the single and universally acceptable, pre-assumption that an act of violence is anti-social, and that the doer, in the name of injured society, must be traced.

Great novelists write without pre-assumption. They write from outside their own nationality, class, or sex.

To write thus should be the ambition of any novelist who wishes to state poetic truth.

Does this mean he must have no angle, no moral view-point? No, surely. Without these, he would be (*a*) incapable of maintaining the *conviction* necessary for the novel; (*b*) incapable of *lighting* the characters, who to be seen at all must necessarily be seen in a moral light.

From what source, then, must the conviction come? and from *what* morality is to come the light to be cast on the characters?

The conviction must come from certainty of the validity of the truth the novel is to present. The 'moral light' has not, actually, a moral source; it is moral (morally powerful) according to the strength of its power of revelation. Revelation of what? The virtuousness or non-virtuousness of the action of the character. What is virtue in action? Truth in action. Truth by what ruling, in relation to what? Truth by the ruling of, and in relation to, the inherent poetic truth that the novel states.

The presence, and action, of the poetic truth is the motive (or motor) morality of the novel.

The direction of the action of the poetic truth provides—in fact, *is*—the moral angle of the novel. If he remains with that truth in view, the novelist has no option as to his angle.

The action, or continuous line of action, of a character is 'bad' in so far as it runs counter to, or attempts to deny, the action of the poetic truth. It is predisposition towards such action that constitutes 'badness' in a character.

'Good' action, or 'goodness' in the character from predisposition towards such action, is movement along with, expressive of and contributary to, the action of the poetic truth.

If the novelist's moral angle is (*a*) decided by recognition of the poetic truth, and (*b*) maintained by the necessity of stating the truth by showing the truth's action, it will be, as it should be, impersonal. It will be, and (from the 'interest' point of view) will be able to stand being, pure of pre-assumptions—national, social, sexual, etc.

(N.B. 'Humour' is the weak point in the front against pre-assumptions. Almost all English humour shows social (sometimes, now, backed by political) pre-assumptions. Extreme cases—that the lower, or employed, classes are quaint or funny—that aristocrats, served by butlers, are absurd. National pre-assumptions show in treatment of foreigners.)

ADVANCE It has been said that plot must advance; that the underlying (or inner) speed of the advance must be even. How is this arrived at?

(1) Obviously, first, by the succession, the succeedingness, of events or happenings. It is to be remembered that *everything* put on record at all—an image, a word spoken, an interior movement of thought or feeling on the part of a character—is an event or happening. These proceed out of one another, give birth to one another in a continuity that must be (*a*) obvious; (*b*) unbroken.

(2) Every happening cannot be described, stated. The reader must be made to feel that what has not been described or stated has, none the less, happened. How? By the showing of subsequent events or happenings whose source *could* only have been in what has not actually been stated. Tuesday is Tuesday by virtue of being the day following Monday. The stated Tuesday must be shown as a derivative of the unstated Monday.

(3) For the sake of emphasis, time must be falsified. But the

novelist's consciousness of the subjective, arbitrary and emotional nature of the falsification should be evident to the reader. Against this falsification—in fact, increasing the force of its effect by contrast—a clock should be heard always impassively ticking away at the same speed. The passage of time, and its demarcation, should be a factor in the plot. The either concentration or even or uneven spacing-out of events along time is important.

The statement 'Ten years had passed', or the statement 'It was now next day'—each of these is an event.

(4) Characters most of all promote, by showing, the advance of the plot. How? By the advances, from act to act, in their action. By their showing (by emotional or physical changes) the effects both of action and of the passage of time. The diminution of the character's alternatives shows (because it is the work of) advance—by the end of a novel the character's alternatives, many at the beginning, have been reduced to almost none. In the novel, everything that happens happens either *to* or *because* of one of the characters. By the end of the novel, the character has, like the silkworm at work on the cocoon, spun itself out. Completed action is marked by the exhaustion (from one point of view) of the character. Throughout the novel, each character is expending potentiality. This expense of potentiality must be felt.

(5) Scene promotes, or contributes to, advance by its *freshness*. Generically, it is fresh, striking, from being unlike the scene before. It is the new 'here and now'. Once a scene ceases to offer freshness, it is a point-blank enemy to advance. Frequent change of scene *not* being an imperative of the novel—in fact, many novels by choice, and by wise choice, limiting themselves severely in this matter—how is there to continue to be freshness? By means of ever-differing presentation. Differing because of what? Season of year, time of day, effects of a happening (e.g. with house, rise or fall in family fortunes, an arrival, a departure, a death), beholding character's mood. At the first presentation, the *scene* has freshness; afterwards, the freshness must be in the *presentation*. The same scene can, by means of a series of presentations, each having freshness, be made to ripen, mature, to actually advance. The *static* properties in scene can be good for advance when so stressed as to

show advance by contrast—advance on the part of the characters. Striking 'unchangingness' gives useful emphasis to change. Change should not be a factor, at once, in *both* scene and character: either unchanged character should see, or be seen, against changed scene, or changed character should see, or be seen, against unchanged scene. *Two* changes, obviously cancel each other out, and would cancel each other's contribution to the advance of plot.

RELEVANCE Relevance—the question of it—is the headache of novel-writing.

As has been said, the model for relevance is the well-constructed detective story: nothing is 'in' that does not tell. But the detective story is, or would appear to be, simplified by having *fact* as its kernel. The detective story makes towards concrete truth; the novel makes towards abstract truth.

With the detective story, the question 'relevant to *what*?' can be answered by the intelligence. With the novel, the same question must constantly, and in every context, be referred to the intuition. The intelligence, in a subsequent check-over, may detect, but cannot itself put right, blunders, lapses, or false starts on the part of the intuition.

In the notes on Plot, Character, Scene and Dialogue, everything has come to turn, by the end, on relevance. It is seen that all other relevances are subsidiary to the relevance of the plot, i.e., the relevance to itself that the plot demands. It is as contributory, in fact relevant to plot that character, scene and dialogue are examined. To be perfectly contributory, these three must be perfectly relevant. If character, scene or dialogue has been weakened by anything irrelevant *to itself*, it can only be imperfectly relevant —which must mean, to a degree disruptive—to the plot.

The main hope for character (for each character) is that it should be magnetic—i.e., that it should *attract* its parts. This living propensity of the character to assemble itself, to integrate itself, to make itself in order to *be* itself will not, obviously, be resisted by the novelist. The magnetic, or magnetizing, character can be trusted as to what is relevant to *itself*. The trouble comes when what is relevant to the character is found to be not relevant

to the plot. At this point, the novelist must adjudicate. It is possible that the character may be right; it is possible that there may be some flaw in the novelist's sense of what is relevant to the plot.

Again, the character may, in fact must, decide one half of the question of relevance in dialogue. The character attracts to itself the right, in fact the only possible, idiom, tempo and phraseology for *that* particular character in speech. In so far as dialogue is *illustrative*, the character's, or characters', pull on it must not be resisted.

But in so far as dialogue must be 'something happening'—part of action, a means of advancing plot—the other half of the question of dialogue-relevance comes up. Here, the pull from the characters may conflict with the pull from the plot. Here again the novelist must adjudicate. The recasting and recasting of dialogue that is often necessary is, probably, the search for ideal compromise.

Relevance in scene is more straightforward. Chiefly, the novelist must control his infatuation with his own visual power. *No* non-contributory image, must be the rule. Contributory to what? To the mood of the 'now', the mood that either projects or reflects action. It is a good main rule that objects—chairs, trees, glasses, mountains, cushions—introduced into the novel should be stage-properties, necessary for 'business'. It will be also recalled that the well-set stage shows many objects *not* actually necessary for 'business'—but that these have a right to place by being descriptive—explanatory. In a play, the absence of the narrating voice makes it necessary to establish the class, period and general psychology of the characters by means of objects that can be seen. In the novel, such putting of objects to a descriptive (explanatory) use is excellent—alternative to the narrator's voice.

In scene, then, relevance demands either usefulness for action or else explanatory power in what is shown. There is no doubt that with some writers (Balzac, sometimes Arnold Bennett) categoricalness, in the presentation of scene, is effective. The aim is, usually, to suggest, by multiplication and exactitude of detail, either a scene's material oppressiveness or its intrinsic authority. But in general, for the purposes of most novelists, the

number of objects genuinely necessary for explanation will be found to be very small.

Irrelevance, in any part, is a cloud and a drag on, a weakener of, the novel. It dilutes meaning. Relevance crystallizes meaning.

The novelist's—any writer's—object is, to whittle down his meaning to the exactest and finest possible point. What, of course, is fatal is when he does not know what he does mean: he has no point to sharpen.

Much irrelevance is introduced into novels by the writer's vague hope that at least some of this *may* turn out to be relevant after all. A good deal of what might be called provisional writing goes to the first drafts of the first chapters of most novels. At a point in the novel's progress, relevance becomes clearer. The provisional chapters are then recast.

The most striking fault in work by young or beginning novelists, submitted for criticism, is irrelevance—due either to infatuation or indecision. To direct such an author's attention to the imperative of relevance is certainly the most useful—and possibly the only—help that can be given.

ELIZABETH BOWEN: 'Notes on Writing a Novel', *Orion II*

13

CHARACTERS

THE NOVELIST'S RELATION TO HIS CHARACTERS

Dear George, Twenty-second December 1840

The child lying dead in the little sleeping-room, which is behind the open screen. It is winter-time, so there are no flowers; but upon her breast and pillow, and about her bed, there may be strips of holly and berries, and such free green things. Window overgrown with ivy. The little boy who had that talk with her about angels may be by the bedside, if you like it so; but I think it will be quieter and more peaceful if she is quite alone. I want it to express the most beautiful repose and tranquillity, and to have something of a happy look, if death can.

The child has been buried inside the church, and the old man, who cannot be made to understand that she is dead, repairs to the grave and sits there all day long, waiting for her arrival, to begin another journey. His staff and knapsack, her little bonnet and basket, etc., lie beside him. 'She'll come to-morrow,' he says when it gets dark, and goes sorrowfully home. I think an hour-glass running out would help the notion; perhaps her little things upon his knee, or in his hand.

I am breaking my heart over this story, and cannot bear to finish it.

Ever and always heartily,

CHARLES DICKENS to George Cattermole, *Letters*

But the novelist has other aims than the elucidation of his plot. He desires to make his readers so intimately acquainted with his characters that the creatures of his brain should be to them speaking, moving, living, human creatures. This he can never do unless he know those fictitious personages himself, and he can never know them unless he can live with them in the full reality of established intimacy. They must be with him as he lies down to

sleep, and as he wakes from his dreams. He must learn to hate them and to love them. He must argue with them, quarrel with them, forgive them, and even submit to them. He must know of them whether they be cold-blooded or passionate, whether true or false, and how far true, and how far false. The depth and the breadth, and the narrowness and the shallowness of each should be clear to him. And, as here, in our outer world, we know that men and women change—become worse or better as temptation or conscience may guide them—so should these creations of his change, and every change should be noted by him. On the last day of each month recorded, every person in his novel should be a month older than on the first. If the would-be novelist have aptitudes that way, all this will come to him without much struggling —but if it do not come, I think he can only make novels of wood.

It is so that I have lived with my characters, and thence has come whatever success I have obtained. There is a gallery of them, and of all in that gallery I may say that I know the tone of the voice, and the colour of the hair, every flame of the eye, and the very clothes they wear. Of each man I could assert whether he would have said these or the other words; of every woman, whether she would then have smiled or so have frowned. When I shall feel that this intimacy ceases, then I shall know that the old horse should be turned out to grass. That I shall feel it when I ought to feel it, I will by no means say. I do not know that I am at all wiser than Gil Blas's canon; but I do know that the power indicated is one without which the teller of tales cannot tell them to any good effect.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

It was with many misgivings that I killed my old friend Mrs Proudie. I could not, I think, have done it, but for a resolution taken and declared under circumstances of great momentary pressure.

It was thus that it came about. I was sitting one morning at work upon the novel at the end of the long drawing-room of the Athenaeum Club—as was then my wont when I had slept the previous night in London. As I was there, two clergymen, each

with a magazine in his hand, seated themselves, one on one side of the fire and one on the other, close to me. They soon began to abuse what they were reading, and each was reading some part of some novel of mine. The gravamen of their complaint lay in the fact that I reintroduced the same characters so often! 'Here', said one, 'is that archdeacon whom we have had in every novel he has ever written.' 'And here', said the other, 'is the old duke whom he has talked about till everybody is tired of him. If I could not invent new characters, I would not write novels at all.' Then one of them fell foul of Mrs Proudie. It was impossible for me not to hear their words, and almost impossible to hear them and be quiet. I got up, and standing between them, I acknowledged myself to be the culprit. 'As to Mrs Proudie,' I said, 'I will go home and kill her before the week is over.' And so I did. The two gentlemen were utterly confounded, and one of them begged me to forget his frivolous observations.

I have sometimes regretted the deed, so great was my delight in writing about Mrs Proudie, so thorough was my knowledge of all the little shades of her character. It was not only that she was a tyrant, a bully, a would-be priestess, a very vulgar woman, and one who would send headlong to the nethermost pit all who disagreed with her; but that at the same time she was conscientious, by no means a hypocrite, really believing in the brimstone which she threatened, and anxious to save the souls around her from its horrors. And as her tyranny increased so did the bitterness of the moments of her repentance increase, in that she knew herself to be a tyrant—till that bitterness killed her. Since her time others have grown up equally dear to me—Lady Glencora and her husband, for instance; but I have never dissevered myself from Mrs Proudie, and still live much in company with her ghost.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

CHARACTER MUST BE TYPICAL I don't agree with you that there is anything worth while to be done with the character of the *ideal Artist*; he would be a monster. Art is not made to paint the exceptions, and I feel an unconquerable repugnance to putting on

paper something from out of my heart. I even think that a novelist *hasn't the right to express his opinion* on any subject whatsoever. Has the good God ever uttered it, his opinion? That is why there are not a few things that choke me which I should like to spit out, but which I swallow. Why say them, in fact! The first comer is more interesting than Monsieur Gustave Flaubert, because he is more *general* and therefore more typical.

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to George Sand

THE 'FLAT' CHARACTER Flat characters were called 'humours' in the seventeenth century, and are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round. The really flat character can be expressed in one sentence such as 'I never will desert Mr Micawber'. There is Mrs Micawber—she says she won't desert Mr Micawber, she doesn't, and there she is...

One great advantage of flat characters is that they are easily recognized whenever they come in—recognized by the reader's emotional eye, not by the visual eye which merely notes the recurrence of a proper name. In Russian novels, where they so seldom occur, they would be a decided help. It is a convenience for an author when he can strike with his full force at once, and flat characters are very useful to him, since they never need reintroducing, never run away, have not to be watched for development, and provide their own atmosphere—little luminous disks of a pre-arranged size, pushed hither and thither like counters across the void or between the stars; most satisfactory.

A second advantage is that they are easily remembered by the reader afterwards. They remain in his mind as unalterable for the reason that they were not changed by circumstances; they moved through circumstances, which gives them in retrospect a comforting quality, and preserves them when the book that produced them may decay.

THE 'ROUND' CHARACTER The test of a round character is

whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it—life within the pages of a book. And by using it sometimes alone, more often in combination with the other kind, the novelist achieves his task of acclimatization, and harmonizes the human race with the other aspects of his work.

THE TEST OF A CHARACTER'S REALITY . . . Now we can get a definition as to when a character in a book is real: it is real when the novelist knows everything about it. He may not choose to tell us all he knows—many of the facts, even of the kind we call obvious, may be hidden. But he will give us the feeling that though the character has not been explained, it is explicable, and we get from this a reality of a kind we can never get in daily life.

For human intercourse, as soon as we look at it for its own sake and not as a social adjunct, is seen to be haunted by a spectre. We cannot understand each other, except in a rough-and-ready way; we cannot reveal ourselves, even when we want to; what we call intimacy is only a makeshift; perfect knowledge is an illusion. But in the novel we can know people perfectly, and, apart from the general pleasure of reading, we can find here a compensation for their dimness in life. In this direction fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly, well —he has tried. He can post his people in as babies, he can cause them to go on without sleep or food, he can make them be in love, love and nothing but love, provided he seems to know everything about them, provided they are his creations. That is why Moll Flanders cannot be here, that is one of the reasons why Amelia and Emma cannot be here. They are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible: we are people whose secret lives are invisible.

And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and

thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power.

E. M. FORSTER: *Aspects of the Novel*

CONCEALED PSYCHOLOGY Since all of them are simply generalized expressions of a temperament we should not be angry with any theory. Two above all have often been discussed while being opposed to each other instead of both being admitted: that of the novel of pure analysis and that of the objective novel. The supporters of the novel of analysis claim that the writer should set himself to demonstrate the slightest evolutions of the soul and all the secret motives which determine our actions and accord to action itself only a secondary importance, that of the point of arrival, the simple landmark, the pretext for the novel. . . . The supporters of objectivity, on the other hand, claim to give us an exact representation of that which takes place in life, avoiding carefully all complex explanations, all dissertation on motives, and limiting themselves to bringing about characters and actions before our eyes. For them, psychology must be concealed in the book as in reality it is concealed under the facts of existence.

Conceived in this way, the novel gains thereby in interest, in movement of the story, in colour, and in the restlessness of life.

Instead of explaining at length a character's state of mind, the objective writers seek the action or the gesture which will realize inevitably the character's state of mind in a given situation. They so write that, from beginning to end, every action, every ripple of movement, are the reflection of the character's secret nature, of his thoughts, desires, and indecisions. They conceal psychology instead of exposing it; they make it the framework of the book, as the unseen bone structure is the framework of the human body. The painter who paints our portrait does not show us our skeleton.

The novel written in this manner seems to me also to gain in sincerity. From the first it is more probable, since the people we see in action about us do not tell us the motives which they are obeying. . . .

Since it is impossible for him to acquire different sense organs, which are the intermediaries between ourselves and the external

world, which impose their perceptions upon us, determine our sensibility and create in us a soul essentially other from all those surrounding us, the man who creates from pure psychology can do no more than substitute himself for all the characters in the diverse situations in which he sets them. Into the characters whose hidden, unknown being we pretend to reveal we can only partly transplant our own vision, our own knowledge of the world, our own ideas of life. So, whether we are describing a king, an assassin, a thief, an honest man, a prostitute, a nun, a young girl, or a stall-holder in a market, it is always ourselves that we are describing, for we are obliged to ask ourselves the following question: 'If I were a king, an assassin, a thief, a prostitute, a nun, a young girl, a stall-holder, what would *I* do, what would *I* think, how would *I* behave?' We vary our characters only by changing the age, sex, position and circumstances of life of our own egos, egos that nature has surrounded with a barrier of inflexible sense organs. The writer's skill lies in not allowing the reader to recognize his ego behind the various masks assumed to hide it.

But though, from the point of view of complete accuracy, pure psychological analysis is disputable, it can yet give us works of art as beautiful as those resulting from other methods.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT: Preface to *Pierre et Jean*

UNROLLING THE CHARACTER A character is interesting as it comes out, and by the process and duration of that emergence; just as a procession is effective by the way it unrolls, turning to a mere mob if all of it passes at once.

HENRY JAMES: *The Spoils of Poynton*

CONSISTENCY IN CHARACTERS Inconsistency. Characters in a novel or a play who act all the way through exactly as one expects them to. . . . This consistency of theirs, which is held up to our admiration, is on the contrary the very thing which makes us recognize that they are artificially composed.

ANDRÉ GIDE: Edouard's Journal, *The Counterfeiters*

TAKING THE READER ASIDE . . . May the writer take the reader into his confidence about his characters? Answer has already been indicated: better not. It is dangerous, it generally leads to a drop in the temperature, to intellectual and emotional laxity, and worse still to facetiousness and to a friendly invitation to see how the figures hook up behind. 'Doesn't A look nice—she always was my favourite.' 'Let's think of why B does that—perhaps there's more in him than meets the eye—yes, see—he has a heart of gold —having given you this peep at it I'll pop it back—I don't think he's noticed.' 'And C—he always was the mystery man.' Intimacy is gained but at the expense of illusion and nobility. It is like standing a man a drink so that he may not criticize your opinions. With all respect to Fielding and Thackeray it is devastating, it is bar-parlour chattiness, and nothing has been more harmful to the novels of the past. To take your reader into your confidence about the universe is a different thing. It is not dangerous for a novelist to draw back from his characters, as Hardy and Conrad do, and to generalize about the conditions under which he thinks life is carried on. It is confidences about the individual people that do harm, and beckon the reader away from the people to an examination of the novelist's mind. Not much is ever found in it at such a moment, for it is never in the creative state: the mere process of saying 'come along, let's have a chat' has cooled it down.

E. M. FORSTER: *Aspects of the Novel*

LAWRENCE DEFENDS HIS CHARACTERIZATION I don't agree with you about the *Wedding Ring* [afterwards *The Rainbow*]. You will find that in a while you will like the book as a whole. I don't think the psychology is wrong: it is only that I have a different attitude to my characters, and that necessitates a different attitude in you, which you are not prepared to give. As for its being my *cleverness* which would pull the thing through—that sounds odd to me, for I don't think I am so very clever, in that way. I think the book is a bit futuristic—quite unconsciously so. But when I read Marinetti—'the profound intuitions of life added one to the other, word by word, according to their illogical conception, will

give us the general lines of an intuitive physiology of matter'—I see something of what I am after. I translate him clumsily, and his Italian is obfuscated—and I don't care about physiology of matter—but somehow—that which is physic—non-human, in humanity, is more interesting to me than the old-fashioned human element—which causes one to conceive a character in a certain moral scheme and make him consistent. The certain moral scheme is what I object to. In Turgenev, and in Tolstoi, and in Dostoevsky, the moral scheme into which all the characters fit—and it is nearly the same scheme—is, whatever the extraordinariness of the characters themselves, dull, old, dead. When Marinetti writes: 'It is the solidity of a blade of steel that is interesting by itself, that is, the incomprehending and inhuman alliance of its molecules in resistance to, let us say, a bullet. The heat of a piece of wood or iron is in fact more passionate, for us, than the laughter or tears of a woman'—then I know what he means. He is stupid, as an artist, for contrasting the heat of the iron and the laugh of the woman. Because what is interesting in the laugh of the woman is the same as the binding of the molecules of steel or their action in heat: it is the inhuman will, call it physiology, or like Marinetti —physiology of matter, that fascinates me. I don't so much care about what the woman *feels*—in the ordinary usage of the word. That presumes an *ego* to feel with. I only care about what the woman *is*—what she is—inhumanly, physiologically, materially—according to the use of the word: but for me, what she *is* as a phenomenon (or as representing some greater, inhuman will), instead of what she feels according to the human conception. That is where the futurists are stupid. Instead of looking for the new human phenomenon, they will only look for the phenomena of the science of physics to be found in human beings. They are crassly stupid. But if anyone would give them eyes, they would pull the right apples off the tree, for their stomachs are true in appetite. You mustn't look in my novel for the old stable *ego* of the character. There is another *ego*, according to whose action the individual is unrecognizable, and passes through, as it were, allotropic states which it needs a deeper sense than any other we've been used to exercise, to discover are states of the same

single radically unchanged element. (Like as diamond and coal are the same pure single element of carbon. The ordinary novel would trace the history of the diamond—but I say, 'Diamond, what! This is carbon.' And my diamond might be coal or soot, and my theme is carbon.) You must not say my novel is shaky—it is not perfect, because I am not expert in what I want to do. But it is the real thing, say what you like. And I shall get my reception, if not now, then before long. Again I say, don't look for the development of the novel to follow the lines of certain characters: the characters fall into the form of some other rhythmic form, as when one draws a fiddle-bow across a fine tray delicately sanded, the sand takes lines unknown.

D. H. LAWRENCE to Edward Garnett, *Letters of D. H. Lawrence*

THE WORLD AS THE CENTRAL CHARACTER You—or at least I—cannot make the world your central character. Perhaps it ought to be done. Perhaps that may prove to be the culmination of the novel. I, at any rate, did not feel that I had the strength to do without the attraction of human nature. For mankind in the bulk seems to lose the character of humanity and to become mere statistics. I sit frequently and dream of writing an immense novel in which all the characters should be great masses of people—or interests. You would have Interest A, remorselessly and under the stress of blind necessities, slowly or cataclysmically overwhelming Interest Z, without the attraction of sympathy for a picturesque or upright individual. It ought, I have felt for years, to be done. But I doubt if I shall ever get to it. More power, then, to the elbow of the man who eventually tackles the job.

FORD MADOX FORD: *It Was the Nightingale*

THE NOVELIST'S TOUCH It consists, I should say, in a failure to realize the complexities of the ordinary human mind; it selects for literary purposes two or three facets of a man or woman, generally the most spectacular, and therefore useful ingredients in their character and disregards all the others. Whatever fails to fit in

with these specially chosen traits is eliminated—must be eliminated, for otherwise the description would not hold water. Such and such are the data: everything incompatible with these data has to go by the board. It follows that the novelist's touch argues, often logically, from a wrong premise: it takes what it likes and leaves the rest. The facts may be correct as far as they go but there are too few of them: what the author says may be true and yet by no means be the truth. That is the novelists' touch. It falsifies life.

NORMAN DOUGLAS: *A Plea for Better Manners*

I should say that the practice of drawing characters from actual models is not only universal but necessary. I do not see why any writer should be ashamed to acknowledge it. As Turgenev said, it is only if you have a definite person in your mind that you can give vitality and idiosyncrasy to your own creation.

I insist that it is a creation. We know very little even of the persons we know most intimately; we do not know them enough to transfer them to the pages of a book and make human beings of them. People are too elusive, too shadowy, to be copied; and they are also too incoherent and contradictory. The writer does not copy his originals; he takes what he wants from them, a few traits that have caught his attention, a turn of mind that has fired his imagination, and therefrom constructs his character.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

I think that actual life supplies a writer with characters much less than is thought. Of course there must be a beginning to every conception, but so much change seems to take place in it at once, that almost anything comes to serve the purpose—a face of a stranger, a face in a portrait, almost a face in the fire. And people in life hardly seem to be definite enough to appear in print. They are not good or bad enough, or clever or stupid enough, or comic or pitiful enough. They would have to be presented by means of detailed description, and would not come through in talk. I think that the reason why a person is often angered by a supposed por-

trait of himself, is that the author leaves in some recognizable attributes, while the conception has altered so much that the subject is justified in thinking there is no resemblance. And I believe that we know much less of each other than we think, that it would be a great shock to find oneself suddenly behind another person's eyes. The things we think we know about each other, we often imagine and read in. I think this is another reason why a supposed portrait gives offence. It is really far from the truth.

In cases where a supposed portrait of some living person has caused trouble, I have thought that the explanation lies in these things, and that the author's disclaimer of any intention of portraiture is in the main sincere and just.

1. COMPTON-BURNETT: 'A Conversation', *Orion I*

14

THE NOVELIST'S STYLE

THE ONE RULE I see but one rule: *to be clear.* If I am not clear, all *my world* crumbles to nothing.

STENDHAL to Balzac

PLEASANT WORDS AND A READY STYLE An author can hardly hope to be popular unless he can use popular language. That is quite true; but then comes the question of achieving a popular—in other words, I may say, a good and lucid style. How may an author best acquire a mode of writing which shall be agreeable and easily intelligible to the reader? He must be correct, because without correctness he can be neither agreeable nor intelligible. Readers will expect him to obey those rules which they, consciously or unconsciously, have been taught to regard as binding on language; and unless he does obey them, he will disgust. Without much labour, no writer will achieve such a style. He has very much to learn; and, when he has learned that much, he has to acquire the habit of using what he has learned with ease. But all this must be learned and acquired—not while he is writing that which shall please, but long before. His language must come from him as music comes from the rapid touch of the great performer's fingers; as words come from the mouth of an indignant orator; as letters fly from the fingers of the trained compositor; as the syllables tinkled out by little bells form themselves to the ear of the telegraphist. A man who thinks much of his words as he writes them will generally leave behind him work that smells of oil. I speak here, of course, of prose; for in poetry we know what care is necessary, and we form our taste accordingly.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

THE AIMS OF FLAUBERT I believe that the rounding of the phrase is nothing. But that *writing well* is everything, because 'writing well is at the same time perceiving well, thinking well and saying well' (Buffon). The last term is then dependent on the other two,

since one has to feel strongly, so as to think, and to think, so as to express.

All the bourgeois can have a great deal of heart and delicacy, be full of the best sentiments and the greatest virtues, without becoming for all that, artists. In short, I believe that the form and the matter are two subtleties, two entities, neither of which can exist without the other.

This anxiety for external beauty which you reproach me with is for me *a method.* When I discover a bad assonance or a repetition in one of my phrases, I am sure that I am floundering in error; by dint of searching, I find the exact expression which was the only one and is, at the same time, the harmonious one. The word is never lacking when one possesses the idea.

FLAUBERT to George Sand

STYLE WITHOUT TEARS I should like to put it on record that I never took the smallest pains with my style, have never thought about it, and do not know or want to know whether it is a style at all or whether it is not, as I believe and hope, just common, simple straightforwardness. I cannot conceive how any man can take thought for his style without loss to himself and his readers.

SAMUEL BUTLER: *Notebooks*

TECHNICAL ELEMENTS OF STYLE Music and literature, the two temporal arts, contrive their pattern of sounds in time; or, in other words, of sounds and pauses. Communication may be made in broken words, the business of life be carried on with substantives alone; but that is not what we call literature; and the true business of the literary artist is to plait or weave his meaning, involving it around itself; so that each sentence, by successive phrases, shall first come into a kind of knot, and then, after a moment of suspended meaning, solve and clear itself. In every properly constructed sentence there should be observed this knot or hitch; so that (however delicately) we are led to foresee, to expect, and then to welcome the successive phrases. The pleasure

may be heightened by an element of surprise, as, very grossly, in the common figure of the antithesis, or, with much greater subtlety, where an antithesis is first suggested and then deftly evaded. Each phrase, besides, is to be comely in itself; and between the implication and the evolution of the sentence there should be a satisfying equipoise of sound; for nothing more often disappoints the ear than a sentence solemnly and sonorously prepared, and hastily and weakly finished. Nor should the balance be too striking and exact, for the one rule is to be infinitely various; to interest, to disappoint, to surprise, and yet still to gratify; to be ever changing, as it were, the stitch, and yet still to give the effect of an ingenious neatness.

The conjuror juggles with two oranges, and our pleasure in beholding him springs from this, that neither is for an instant overlooked or sacrificed. So with the writer. His pattern, which is to please the supersensual ear, is yet addressed, throughout and first of all, to the demands of logic. Whatever be the obscurities, whatever the intricacies of the argument, the neatness of the fabric must not suffer, or the artist has been proved unequal to his design. And, on the other hand, no form of words must be selected, no knot must be tied among the phrases, unless knot and word be precisely what is wanted to forward and illuminate the argument; for to fail in this is to swindle in the game. The genius of prose rejects the *cheville* no less emphatically than the laws of verse; and the *cheville*, I should perhaps explain to some of my readers, is any meaningless or very watered phrase employed to strike a balance in the sound. Pattern and argument live in each other; and it is by the brevity, clearness, charm, or emphasis of the second, that we judge the strength and fitness of the first.

Style is synthetic; and the artist, seeking, so to speak, a peg to plait about, takes up at once two or more elements or two or more views of the subject in hand; combines, implicates, and contrasts them; and while, in one sense, he was merely seeking an occasion for the necessary knot, he will be found, in the other, to have greatly enriched the meaning, or to have transacted the work of two sentences in the space of one. In the change from the successive shallow statements of the old chronicler to the dense and

luminous flow of highly synthetic narrative, there is implied a vast amount of both philosophy and wit. The philosophy we clearly see, recognizing in the synthetic writer a far more deep and stimulating view of life, and a far keener sense of the generation and affinity of events. The wit we might imagine to be lost; but it is not so, for it is just that wit, these perpetual nice contrivances, these difficulties overcome, this double purpose attained, these two oranges kept simultaneously dancing in the air, that, consciously or not, afford the reader his delight. Nay, and this wit, so little recognized, is the necessary organ of that philosophy which we so much admire. That style is therefore the most perfect, not, as fools say, which is the most natural, for the most natural is the disjointed babble of the chronicler; but which attains the highest degree of elegant and pregnant implication unobtrusively; or if obtrusively, then with the greatest gain to sense and vigour. Even the derangement of the phrases from their (so-called) natural order is luminous for the mind; and it is by the means of such designed reversal that the elements of a judgment may be most pertinently marshalled, or the stages of a complicated action most perspicuously bound into one.

The web, then, or the pattern: a web at once sensuous and logical, an elegant and pregnant texture: that is style, that is the foundation of the art of literature. Books indeed continue to be read, for the interest of the fact or fable, in which this quality is poorly represented, but still it will be there. And, on the other hand, how many do we continue to peruse and reperuse with pleasure whose only merit is the elegance of texture? I am tempted to mention Cicero; and since Mr Anthony Trollope is dead, I will. It is a poor diet for the mind, a very colourless and toothless 'criticism of life'; but we enjoy the pleasure of a most intricate and dexterous pattern, every stitch a model at once of elegance and of good sense; and the two oranges, even if one of them be rotten, kept dancing with inimitable grace.

R. L. STEVENSON: *The Art of Writing*

'LE MOT JUSTE' Whatever one wishes to say, there is one noun

only by which to express it, one verb only to give it life, one adjective only which will describe it. One must search until one has discovered them, this noun, this verb, this adjective, and never rest content with approximations, never resort to trickery, however happy, or to vulgarisms, in order to dodge the difficulty. To establish all the nuances of meaning one does not need a fantastic, complex, multifarious vocabulary or the Mandarin language which is imposed on us to-day in the name of artistic writing, but one must discriminate, and with the utmost lucidity, all the modifications in the value of a word which are established by the position it occupies in the sentence. We need fewer nouns, verbs and adjectives with almost imperceptible meanings; instead, we need more different phrases, phrases of varying construction, skilfully terse, compact of sonorousness and learned rhythms. We should strive rather to be excellent stylists than collectors of rare words. It is, in fact, harder to mould the phrase to one's own will, to make it say everything, even that which it does not express, to make it convey undertones and hidden, unformulated meanings, than to invent new expressions or rummage in the bottom of old unknown books for all those words whose usage and meaning are lost to us and which for us are dead.

GUY DE MAUPASSANT: Preface to *Pierre et Jean*

TCHEHOV PUTS HIS FINGER ON THE PROBLEM *Treplev: (settling himself to write; runs through what he has written already):* I have talked so much about new forms and now I feel that little by little I am falling into a convention myself. (*Reads.*) 'The placard on the wall proclaimed. . . . The pale face in its setting of dark hair.' Proclaimed, setting. That's stupid. (*Scratches out.*) I will begin when the hero is awakened by the patter of the rain, and throw out all the rest. The description of the moonlight evening is long and over-elaborate. Trigorin has worked out methods for himself, it's easy for him now. . . . With him the broken bottle-neck glitters on the dam and the mill-wheel casts a black shadow —and there you have the moonlight night, while I have the tremulous light, and the soft twinkling of the stars, and the far-away

strains of the piano dying away in the still fragrant air. . . . It's agonizing (*a pause*). I come more and more to the conviction that it is not a question of new and old forms, but that what matters is that a man should write without thinking about forms at all, write because it springs freely from his soul.

TCHEHOV: *The Seagull*

WELLS DECIDES HE'S A JOURNALIST All this talk I had with Conrad and Hueffer and James about the just word, the perfect expression, about this or that being 'written' or not written, bothered me, set me interrogating myself, threw me into a heart-searching defensive attitude. I will not pretend that I got it clear all at once, that I was not deflected by their criticisms and that I did not fluctuate and make attempts to come up to their unsystematized, mysterious and elusive standards. But in the end I revolted altogether and refused to play their game. 'I am a journalist,' I declared, 'I refuse to play the "artist". If sometimes I am an artist it is a freak of the gods. I am journalist all the time and what I write *goes now*—and will presently die.'

I have stuck to that declaration ever since. I write as I walk because I want to get somewhere and I write as straight as I can, just as I walk as straight as I can, because that is the best way to get there.

H. G. WELLS: *Experiment in Autobiography*

15

THE NOVELIST AT WORK

IN PURSUIT OF 'THE AMBASSADORS' Nothing is more easy than to state the subject of *The Ambassadors*, which first appeared in twelve numbers of the *North American Review* (1903) and was published as a whole the same year. The situation involved is gathered up betimes, that is in the second chapter of Book Fifth, for the reader's benefit, into as few words as possible—planted or 'sunk', stiffly and saliently, in the centre of the current, almost perhaps to the obstruction of traffic. Never can a composition of this sort have sprung straighter from a dropped grain of suggestion, and never can that grain, developed, overgrown and smothered, have yet lurked more in the mass as an independent particle. The whole case, in fine, is in Lambert Strether's irrepressible outbreak to little Bilham on the Sunday afternoon in Gloriani's garden, the candour with which he yields, for his young friend's enlightenment, to the charming admonition of that crisis. The idea of the tale resides indeed in the very fact that an hour of such unprecedented ease should have been felt by him *as* a crisis, and he is at pains to express it for us as neatly as we could desire. The remarks to which he thus gives utterance contain the essence of *The Ambassadors*, his fingers close, before he has done, round the stem of the full-blown flower; which, after that fashion, he continues officiously to present to us. 'Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. If you haven't had that what *have* you had? I'm too old—too old at any rate for what I see. What one loses one loses; make no mistake about that. Still, we have the illusion of freedom; therefore don't, like me to-day, be without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it, and now I'm a case of reaction against the mistake. Do what you like so long as you don't make it. For it *was* a mistake. Live, live!' Such is the gist of Strether's appeal to the impressed youth, whom he likes and whom he desires to befriend; the word 'mistake' occurs several times, it will be seen, in the course of his remarks—which gives

the measure of the signal warning he feels attached to his case. He has accordingly missed too much, though perhaps after all constitutionally qualified for a better part, and he wakes up to it conditions that press the spring of a terrible question. *Would* there yet perhaps be time for reparation?—reparation, that is, for the injury done his character; for the affront, he is quite ready to say, so stupidly put upon it and in which he had even himself so clumsy a hand? The answer to which is that he now at all events *sees*; so that the business of my tale and the march of my action, not to say the precious moral of everything, is just my demonstration of this process of vision.

Nothing exceeds the closeness with which the whole fits again into its germ. That had been given me bodily, as usual, by the spoken word, for I was to take the image over exactly as I happened to have met it. A friend had repeated to me, with great appreciation, a thing or two said to him by a man of distinction, much his senior, and to which a sense akin to that of Strether's melancholy eloquence might be imputed—said as chance would have, and so easily might, in Paris, and in a charming old garden attached to a house of art, and on a Sunday afternoon of summer, many persons of great interest being present. The observation there listened to and gathered up had contained part of the 'note' that I was to recognize on the spot as to my purpose—had contained in fact the greater part; the rest was in the place and the time and the scene they sketched: these constituents clustered and combined to give me further support, to give me what I may call the note absolute. There it stands, accordingly, full in the tideway; driven in, with hard taps, like some strong stake for the noose of a cable, the swirl of the current roundabout it. What amplified the hint to more than the bulk of hints in general was the gift with it of the old Paris garden, for in that token were sealed up values infinitely precious. There was of course the seal to break and each item of the packet to count over and handle and estimate; but somehow, in the light of the hint, all the elements of a situation of the sort most to my taste were there. I could even remember no occasion on which, as confronted, I had found it of a livelier interest to take stock, in this fashion, of suggested wealth.

For I think, verily, that there are degrees of merit in subjects—in spite of the fact that to treat even one of the most ambiguous with due decency we must for the time, for the feverish and prejudiced hour, at least figure its merit and its dignity as *possible* absolute. What it comes to, doubtless, is that even among the supremely good—since with such alone is it one's theory of one's honour to be concerned—there is an ideal *beauty* of goodness the invoked action of which is to raise the artistic faith to its maximum. Then truly, I hold, one's theme may be said to shine, and that of *The Ambassadors*, I confess, wore this glow for me from beginning to end. Fortunately thus I am able to estimate this as, frankly quite the best, 'all round', of all my productions; any failure of that justification would have made such an extreme of complacency publicly fatuous. . . .

Even under the weight of my hero's years I could feel my postulate firm; even under the strain of the difference between those of Madame de Vionnet and those of Chad Newsome, a difference liable to be denounced as shocking, I could still feel it serene. Nothing resisted, nothing betrayed, I seem to make out, in this full and sound sense of the matter; it shed from any side I could turn it to the same golden glow. I rejoiced in the promise of a hero so mature, who would give me thereby the more to bite into—since it's only into thickened motive and accumulated character, I think, that the painter of life bites more than a little. My poor friend should have accumulated character, certainly; or rather would be quite naturally and handsomely possessed of it, in the sense that he would have, and would always have felt he had, imagination galore, and that this yet wouldn't have wrecked him. It was immeasurable, the opportunity to 'do' a man of imagination, for if *there* mightn't be a chance to 'bite', where in the world might it be? This personage of course, so enriched, wouldn't give me, for his type, imagination in *predominance* or as his prime faculty, nor should I, in view of other matters, have found that convenient. So particular a luxury—some occasion, that is, for study of the high gift in *supreme* command of a case or of a career—would still doubtless come on the day I should be ready to pay for it; and till then might, as from far back, remain

hung up well in view and just out of reach. The comparative case meanwhile would serve—it was only on the minor scale that I had treated myself even to comparative cases.

I was to hasten to add however that, happy stopgaps as the minor scale had thus yielded, the instance in hand should enjoy the advantage of the full range of the major; since most immediately to the point was the question of that *supplement* of situation logically involved in our gentleman's impulse to deliver himself in the Paris garden on the Sunday afternoon—or if not involved by strict logic then all ideally and enchantingly implied in it. . . . No privilege of the teller of tales and the handler of puppets is more delightful, or has more of the suspense and the thrill of a game of difficulty breathlessly played, than just this business of looking for the unseen and the occult, in a scheme half-grasped, by the light or, so to speak, by the clinging scent of the gage already in hand. No dreadful old pursuit of the hidden slave with bloodhounds and the rag of association can ever, for 'excitement', I judge, have bettered it at its best. For the dramatist always, by the very law of his genius, believes not only in a possible right issues from the rightly conceived tight place; he does much more than this—he believes, irresistibly, in the necessary, the precious 'tightness' of the place (whatever the issue) on the strength of any respectable hint. It being thus the respectable hint that I had with such avidity picked up, what would be the story to which it would most inevitably form the centre? It is part of the charm attendant on such questions that the 'story', with the omens true, as I say, puts on from this stage the authenticity of concrete experience. It then *is*, essentially—it begins to be, though it may more or less obscurely lurk; so that the point is not in the least what to make of it, but only, very delightfully and very damnably, where to put one's hand on it.

In which truth resides surely much of the interest of that admirable mixture for salutary application which we know as art. Art deals with what we see, it must first contribute full-handed that ingredient; it plucks its material, otherwise expressed, in the garden of life—which material elsewhere grown is stale and uneatable. But it has no sooner done this than it has to take account

of a *process*—from which only when it's the basest of the servants of men, incurring ignominious dismissal with no 'character', does it, and whether under some muddled pretext of morality or on any other, pusillanimously edge away. The process, that of the expression, the literal squeezing-out of value is another affair—with which the happy luck of mere finding has little to do. The joys of finding, at this stage, are pretty well over; that quest of the subject as a whole by 'matching', as the ladies say at the shops, the big piece with the snippet, having ended, we assume, with a capture. The subject is found, and if the problem is then transferred to the ground of what to do with it the field opens out for any amount of doing. This is precisely the infusion that, as I submit, completes the strong mixture. It is on the other hand the part of the business that can least be likened to the chase with horn and hound. . . . In consequence of all which, for the interest of the matter, I might seem here to have my choice of narrating my 'hunt' for Lambert Strether, of describing the capture of the shadow imparted by my friend's anecdote, or of reporting on the occurrences subsequent to that triumph. But I had probably best attempt a little to glance in each direction; since it comes to me again and again, over this licentious record, that one's bag of adventures, conceived or conceivable, has been only half-emptied by the mere telling of one's story. It depends so on what one means by that equivocal quantity. There is the story of one's hero, and then, thanks to the intimate connection of things, the story of one's story itself. I blush to confess it, but if one's a dramatist one's a dramatist, and the latter imbroglio is liable on occasion to strike me as really the more objective of the two.

The philosophy imputed to him in that beautiful outbreak, the hour there, amid such happy provision, striking for him, would have been then, on behalf of my man of imagination, to be logically and, as the artless craft of comedy has it, 'led up' to; the probable course to such a goal, the goal of so conscious a predicament, would have in short to be finely calculated. Where has he come from and why has he come, what is he doing (as we Anglo-Saxons, and we only, say, in our foredoomed clutch of exotic aids to expression) in that *galère*? To answer these questions plausibly,

to answer them as under cross-examination in the witness-box by counsel for the prosecution, in other words satisfactorily to account for Strether and for his 'peculiar tone', was to possess myself of the entire fabric. At the same time the clue to its whereabouts would lie in a certain *principle* of probability: he wouldn't have indulged in his peculiar tone without a reason; it would take a felt predicament or a false position to give him so ironic a tone. One hadn't been noting 'tones' all one's life without recognizing when one heard it the voice of the false position. The dear man in the Paris garden was then admirably and unmistakably *in* one —which was no small point gained; what next accordingly concerned us was the determination of *this* identity. One could only go by probabilities, but there was the advantage that the most general of the probabilities were virtual certainties. Possessed of our friend's nationality, to start with, there was a general probability in his narrower localism; which, for that matter, one had really but to keep under the lense for an hour to see it give up its secrets. He would have issued, our rueful worthy, from the very heart of New England—at the heels of which matter of course a perfect train of secrets tumbled for me into the light. They had to be sifted and sorted, and I shall not reproduce the detail of that process; but unmistakably they were all there, and it was but a question, auspiciously, of picking among them. What the 'position' would infallibly be, and why, on his hands, it had turned 'false'—these inductive steps could only be as rapid as they were distinct. I accounted for everything—and 'everything' had by this time become the most promising quantity—by the view that he had come to Paris in some state of mind which was literally undergoing, as a result of new and unexpected assaults and infusions, a change almost from hour to hour. He had come with a view that might have been figured by a clear green liquid, say, in a neat glass phial; and the liquid, once poured into the open cup of *application*, once exposed to the action of another air, had begun to turn from green to red, or whatever, and might, for all he knew, be on its way to purple, to black, to yellow. At the still wilder extremes represented perhaps, for all he could say to the contrary, by a variability so violent, he would at first, naturally,

but have gazed in surprise and alarm; whereby the *situation* clearly would spring from the play of wildness and the development of extremes. I saw in a moment that, should this development proceed both by force and logic, my 'story' would leave nothing to be desired. There is always, of course, for the story-teller, the irresistible determinant and the incalculable advantage of his interest in the story *as such*; it is ever, obviously, overwhelmingly, the prime and precious thing (as other than this I have never been able to see it); as to which what makes for it, with whatever headlong energy, may be said to pale before the energy with which it simply makes for itself. It rejoices, none the less, at its best, to seem to offer itself in a light, to seem to know, and with the very last knowledge, what it's about—liable as it yet is at moments to be caught by us with its tongue in its cheek and absolutely no warrant but its splendid impudence. Let us grant then that the impudence is always there—there, so to speak, for grace and effect and *allure*; there, above all, because the Story is just the spoiled child of art, and because, as we are always disappointed when the pampered don't 'play up', we like it, to that extent, to look all its character. It probably does so, in truth, even when we most flatter ourselves that we negotiate it by treaty.

All of which, again, is but to say that the *steps*, for my fable, placed themselves with a prompt and, as it were, functional assurance—an air quite as of readiness to have dispensed with logic had I been in fact too stupid for my clue. Never, positively, none the less, as the links multiplied, had I felt less stupid for the determination of poor Strether's errand and for the apprehension of his issue. These things continued to fall together, as by the neat action of their own weight and form, even while their commentator scratched his head about them; he easily sees now that they were well in advance of him. As the case completed itself he had in fact, from a good way behind, to catch up with them, breathless and a little flurried, as he best could. *The* false position, for our belated man of the world—belated because he had endeavoured so long to escape being one, and now at last had really to face his doom—the false position for him, I say, was obviously to have presented himself at the gate of that boundless menagerie

primed with a moral scheme of the most approved pattern which was yet framed to break down on any approach to vivid facts; that is to any at all liberal appreciation of them. There would have been of course the case of the Strether prepared, wherever presenting himself, only to judge and to feel meanly; but *he* would have moved for me, I confess, enveloped in no legend whatever. The actual man's note, from the first of our seeing it struck, is the note of discrimination, just as his drama is to become, under stress, the drama of discrimination. It would have been his blest imagination, we have seen, that had already helped him to discriminate; the element that was for so much of the pleasure of cutting thick, as I have intimated, into his intellectual, into his moral substance. Yet here it was, at the same time, just here, that a shade for a moment fell across the scene.

There was the dreadful little old tradition, one of the platitudes of the human comedy, that people's moral scheme *does* break down in Paris; that nothing is more frequently observed; that hundreds of thousands of more or less hypocritical or more or less cynical persons annually visit the place for the sake of the probable catastrophe, and that I came late in the day to work myself up about it. There was in fine the *trivial* association, one of the vulgarest in the world; but which gave me pause no longer, I think, because its vulgarity is so advertised. The revolution performed by Strether under the influence of the most interesting of great cities was to have nothing to do with any *bêtise* of the imputably 'tempted' state; he was to be thrown forward, rather, thrown quite with violence, upon his lifelong trick of intense reflection: which friendly test indeed was to bring him out, through winding passages, through alternations of darkness and light, very much *in* Paris, but with the surrounding scene itself a minor matter, a mere symbol for more things than had been dreamt of in the philosophy of Woollett. Another surrounding scene would have done as well for our show could it have represented a place in which Strether's errand was likely to lie and his crisis to await him. The *likely* place had the great merit of sparing me preparations: there would have been too many involved—not at all impossibilities, only rather worrying and delaying difficul-

ties—in positing elsewhere Chad Newsome's interesting relation, his so interesting complexity of relations. Strether's appointed stage, in fine, could be but Chad's most luckily selected one. The young man had gone in, as they say, for circumjacent charm; and where he would have found it by the turn of his mind, most 'authentic', was where his earnest friend's analysis would most find *him*; as well as where, for that matter, the former's whole analytic faculty would be led such a wonderful dance.

HENRY JAMES: Preface to *The Ambassadors*

GENESIS OF 'THE OLD WIVES' TALE' 18 *November* 1903

Last night, when I went into the Duval for dinner, a middle-aged woman, inordinately stout and with pendent cheeks, had taken the seat opposite to my prescriptive seat. I hesitated, as there were plenty of empty places, but my waitress requested me to take my usual chair. I did so, and immediately thought: 'With *that* thing opposite to me my dinner will be spoilt!' But the woman was evidently also cross at my filling up her table, and she went away, picking up all her belongings, to another part of the restaurant, breathing hard. Then she abandoned her second choice for a third one. My waitress was scornful and angry at this desertion, but laughing also. Soon all the waitresses were privately laughing at the goings-on of the fat woman, who was being served by the most beautiful waitress I have ever seen in any Duval. The fat woman was clearly a crotchet, a 'maniaque', a woman who lived much alone. Her cloak (she displayed on taking it off a simply awful light puce flannel dress) and her parcels were continually the object of her attention and she was always arguing with her waitress. And the whole restaurant secretly made a butt of her. She was repulsive; no one could like or sympathize with her. But I thought—she has been young and slim once. And I immediately thought of a long ten- or fifteen-thousand word short story, 'The History of Two Old Women'. I gave this woman a sister, fat as herself. And the first chapter would be in the restaurant (both sisters) something like to-night—and written rather cruelly. Then I would go back to the infancy of these two,

and sketch it all. One should have lived ordinarily, married prosaically, and become a widow. The other should have become a whore and all that; 'guilty splendour'. Both are overtaken by fat. And they live together again in old age, not too rich, a nuisance to themselves and to others. Neither has any imagination. For 'tone' I thought of *Ivan Ilytch*, and for technical arrangement I thought of that and also of *Histoire d'une Fille de Ferme*. The two lines would have to intertwine. I saw the whole work quite clearly, and hope to do it.

ARNOLD BENNETT: *Journals*

THE SECRET AGENT The inception of *The Secret Agent* followed immediately on a two-years' period of intense absorption in the task of writing that remote novel, *Nostromo*, with its far-off Latin-American atmosphere; and the profoundly personal *Mirror of the Sea*. The first an intense creative effort on what I suppose will always remain my largest canvas, the second an unreserved attempt to unveil for a moment the profounder intimacies of the sea and the formative influences of nearly half my lifetime. It was a period, too, in which my sense of the truth of things was attended by a very intense imaginative and emotional readiness which, all genuine and faithful to facts as it was, yet made me feel (the task once done) as if I were left behind, aimless among mere husks of sensation and lost in a world of other, of inferior, values.

I don't know whether I really felt that I wanted a change, change in my imagination, in my vision and in my mental attitude. I rather think that a change in the fundamental mood had already stolen over me unawares. I don't remember anything definite happening. With *The Mirror of the Sea* finished in the full consciousness that I had dealt honestly with myself and my readers in every line of that book, I gave myself up to a not unhappy pause. Then, while I was yet standing still, as it were, and certainly not thinking of going out of my way to look for anything ugly, the subject of *The Secret Agent*—I mean the tale—came to me in the shape of a few words uttered by a friend in a casual conversation about anarchists or rather anarchist activities; how brought about I don't remember now.

I remember, however, remarking on the criminal futility of the whole thing, doctrine, action, mentality; and on the contemptible aspect of the half-crazy pose as of a brazen cheat exploiting the poignant miseries and passionate credulities of a mankind always so tragically eager for self-destruction. That was what made for me its philosophical pretences so unpardonable. Presently, passing to particular instances, we recalled the already old story of the attempt to blow up the Greenwich Observatory; a bloodstained inanity of so fatuous a kind that it was impossible to fathom its origin by any reasonable or even unreasonable process of thought. For perverse unreason has its own logical processes. But that outrage could not be laid hold of mentally in any sort of way, so that one remained faced by the fact of a man blown to bits for nothing even most remotely resembling an idea, anarchistic or other. As to the outer wall of the Observatory it did not show so much as the faintest crack.

I pointed all this out to my friend who remained silent for a while and then remarked in his characteristically casual and omniscient manner: 'Oh, that fellow was half an idiot. His sister committed suicide afterwards.' These were absolutely the only words that passed between us; for extreme surprise at this unexpected piece of information kept me dumb for a moment and he began at once to talk of something else. It never occurred to me later to ask how he arrived at his knowledge. I am sure that if he had seen once in his life the back of an anarchist that must have been the whole extent of his connection with the underworld. He was, however, a man who liked to talk with all sorts of people, and he may have gathered those illuminating facts at second or third hand, from a crossing-sweeper, from a retired police officer, from some vague man at his club, or even, perhaps, from a Minister of State met at some public or private reception.

Of the illuminating quality there could be no doubt whatever. One felt like walking out of a forest on to a plain—there was not much to see but one had plenty of light. No, there was not much to see and, frankly, for a considerable time I didn't even attempt to perceive anything. It was only the illuminating impression that remained. It remained satisfactory but in a passive way. Then,

about a week later, I came upon a book which as far as I know had never attained any prominence, the rather summary recollections of an Assistant Commissioner of Police, an obviously able man with a strong religious strain in his character who was appointed to his post at the time of the dynamite outrages in London, away back in the 'eighties. The book was fairly interesting, very discreet of course; and I have by now forgotten the bulk of its contents. It contained no revelations, it ran over the surface agreeably, and that was all. I won't even try to explain why I should have been arrested by a little passage of about seven lines, in which the author (I believe his name was Anderson) reproduced a short dialogue held in the Lobby of the House of Commons after some unexpected anarchist outrage, with the Home Secretary. I think it was Sir William Harcourt then. He was very much irritated and the official was very apologetic. The phrase, amongst the three which passed between them, that struck me most was Sir W. Harcourt's angry sally: 'All that's very well. But your idea of secrecy over there seems to consist of keeping the Home Secretary in the dark.' Characteristic enough of Sir W. Harcourt's temper but not much in itself. There must have been, however, some sort of atmosphere in the whole incident because all of a sudden I felt myself stimulated. And then ensued in my mind what a student of chemistry would best understand from the analogy of the addition of the tiniest little drop of the right kind, precipitating the process of crystallization in a test tube containing some colourless solution.

It was at first for me a mental change, disturbing a quieted-down imagination, in which strange forms, sharp in outline but imperfectly apprehended, appeared and claimed attention as crystals will do by their bizarre and unexpected shapes. One fell to musing before the phenomenon—even of the past: of South America, a continent of crude sunshine and brutal revolutions, of the sea, the vast expanse of salt waters, the mirror of heaven's frowns and smiles, the reflector of the world's light. Then the vision of an enormous town presented itself, of a monstrous town more populous than some continents and in its man-made might as if indifferent to heaven's frowns and smiles; a cruel devourer

of the world's light. There was room enough there to place any story, depth enough there for any passion, variety enough there for any setting, darkness enough to bury five millions of lives.

Irresistibly the town became the background for the ensuing period of deep and tentative meditations. Endless vistas opened before me in various directions. It would take years to find the right way! It seemed to take years! . . . Slowly the dawning conviction of Mrs Verloc's maternal passion grew up to a flame between me and that background, tinging it with its secret ardour and receiving from it in exchange some of its own sombre colouring. At last the story of Winnie Verloc stood out complete from the days of her childhood to the end, unproportioned as yet, with everything still on the first plan, as it were; but ready now to be dealt with. It was a matter of about three days.

This book is *that* story, reduced to manageable proportions, its whole course suggested and centred round the absurd cruelty of the Greenwich Park explosion. I had there a task I will not say arduous but of the most absorbing difficulty. But it had to be done. It was a necessity. The figures grouped about Mrs Verloc and related directly or indirectly to her tragic suspicion that 'life doesn't stand much looking into' are the outcome of that very necessity. Personally, I have never had any doubt of the reality of Mrs Verloc's story; but it had to be disengaged from its obscurity in that immense town, it had to be made credible, I don't mean so much as to her soul but as to her surroundings, not so much as to her psychology but as to her humanity. For the surrounding hints were not lacking. I had to fight hard to keep at arm's-length the memories of my solitary and nocturnal walks all over London in my early days, lest they should rush in and overwhelm each page of the story as these emerged one after another from a mood, as serious in feeling and thought as any in which I ever wrote a line. In that respect I really think that *The Secret Agent* is a perfectly genuine piece of work. Even the purely artistic purpose, that of applying an ironic method to a subject of that kind, was formulated with deliberation and in the earnest belief that ironic treatment alone would enable me to say all that I felt I would have to say in scorn as well as in pity. It is one of

the minor satisfactions of my writing life that having taken that resolve I did manage, it seems to me, to carry it right through to the end. As to the personages whom the absolute necessity of the case—Mrs Verloc's case—brings out in front of the London background, from these, too, I obtained those little satisfactions which really count for so much against the mass of oppressive doubts that haunt so persistently every attempt at creative work. For instance, of Mr Vladimir himself (who was fair game for a caricatural presentation) I was gratified to hear that an experienced man of the world had said 'that Conrad must have been in touch with that sphere or else has an excellent intuition of things', because Mr Vladimir was 'not only possible in detail but quite right in essentials'. Then a visitor from America informed me that all sorts of revolutionary refugees in New York would have it that the book was written by somebody who knew a lot about them. This seemed to me a very high compliment, considering that, as a matter of hard fact, I had seen even less of their kind than the omniscient friend who gave me the first suggestion for the novel. I have no doubt, however, that there had been moments during the writing of the book when I was an extreme revolutionist, I won't say more convinced than they but certainly cherishing a more concentrated purpose than any of them had ever done in the whole course of his life. I don't say this to boast. I was simply attending to my business. In the matter of all my books I have always attended to my business. I have attended to it with complete self-surrender. And this statement, too, is not a boast. I could not have done otherwise. It would have bored me too much to make-believe.

The suggestions for certain personages of the tale, both law-abiding and lawless, came from various sources which, perhaps, here and there, some reader may have recognized. They are not very recondite. But I am not concerned here to legitimize any of those people, and even as to my general view of the moral reactions as between the criminal and the police all I will venture to say is that it seems to me to be at least arguable.

The twelve years that have elapsed since the publication of the book have not changed my attitude. I do not regret having writ-

ten it. Lately, circumstances, which have nothing to do with the general tenor of this preface, have compelled me to strip this tale of the literary robe of indignant scorn it has cost me so much to fit on it decently, years ago. I have been forced, so to speak, to look upon its bare bones. I confess that it makes a grisly skeleton. But still I will submit that telling Winnie Verloc's story to its anarchistic end of utter desolation, madness and despair, and telling it as I have told it here, I have not intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind.

JOSEPH CONRAD: Preface to *The Secret Agent*

PREPARATIONS I may—and quite frequently do—plan out every scene, sometimes even every conversation, in a novel before I sit down to write it. But unless I know the history back to the remotest times of any place of which I am going to write, I cannot begin the work. And I must know—from personal observation, not reading—the shapes of windows, the nature of doorknobs, the aspects of kitchens, the material of which dresses are made, the leather used in shoes, the method used in manuring fields, the nature of bus tickets. I shall never use any of these things in the book. But unless I know what sort of doorknob his fingers closed on, how shall I—satisfactorily to myself—get my character out of doors?

FORD MADOX FORD: *It Was the Nightingale*

Before I start writing a novel I read Candide over again so that I may have in the back of my mind the touch-stone of that lucidity, grace and wit.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

I always say, my motto is 'Art for my sake'. If I *want* to write, I write—and if I don't want to, I won't. The difficulty is to find exactly the form one's passion—work is produced by passion with me, like kisses—is it with you?—wants to take.

D. H. LAWRENCE to Ernest Collins, *Letters of D. H. Lawrence*

When I sit down to write a novel I do not at all know, and I do not very much care, how it is to end.

A plan for *myself*, as copious and developed as possible, I always do draw up—that is the two documents I speak of were based upon, and extracted from, such a preliminary *private* outpouring. But this latter voluminous effusion is, ever, so extremely familiar, confidential and intimate—in the form of an interminable garrulous letter addressed to my own fond fancy—that, though I always, for easy reference, have it carefully typed, it isn't a thing I would willingly expose to any eye but my own. And even *then*, sometimes, I shrink!

HENRY JAMES to H. G. Wells, *Letters of Henry James*

THE NOVELIST AT THE DESK As I journeyed across France to Marseilles, and made thence a terribly rough voyage to Alexandria, I wrote my allotted number of pages every day. On this occasion more than once I left my paper on the cabin table, rushing away to be sick in the privacy of my state-room. It was February, and the weather was miserable; but still I did my work. *Labor omnia vincit improbus.* I do not say that to all men has been given physical strength sufficient for such exertion as this, but I do believe that real exertion will enable most men to work at almost any season. I had previously to this arranged a system of task-work for myself, which I would strongly recommend to those who feel as I have felt, that labour, when not made absolutely obligatory by the circumstances of the hour, should never be allowed to become spasmodic. There was no day on which it was my positive duty to write for the publishers, as it was my duty to write reports for the Post Office. I was free to be idle if I pleased. But as I had made up my mind to undertake this second profession, I found it to be expedient to bind myself by certain self-imposed laws. When I have commenced a new book, I have always prepared a diary, divided into weeks, and carried it on for the period which I have allowed myself for the completion of the work. In this I have entered, day by day, the number of pages I have written, so that if at any

time I have slipped into idleness for a day or two, the record of that idleness has been there, staring me in the face, and demanding of me increased labour, so that the deficiency might be supplied. According to the circumstances of the time—whether my other business might be then heavy or light, or whether the book which I was writing was or was not wanted with speed—I have allotted myself so many pages a week. The average number has been about forty. It has been placed as low as twenty, and has risen to one hundred and twelve. And as a page is an ambiguous term, my page has been made to contain two hundred and fifty words; and as words, if not watched, will have a tendency to straggle, I have had every word counted as I went. In the bargains I have made with publishers I have—not, of course, with their knowledge, but in my own mind—undertaken always to supply them with so many words, and I have never put a book out of hand short of the number by a single word. I may also say that the excess has been very small. I have prided myself on completing it within the proposed time—and I have always done so. There has ever been the record before me, and a week passed with an insufficient number of pages has been a blister to my eye, and a month so disgraced would have been a sorrow to my heart.

I have been told that such appliances are beneath the notice of a man of genius. I have never fancied myself to be a man of genius, but had I been so I think I might well have subjected myself to these trammels. Nothing surely is so potent as a law that may not be disobeyed. It has the force of the water-drop that hollows the stone. A small daily task, if it be really daily, will beat the labours of a spasmodic Hercules. It is the tortoise which always catches the hare. The hare has no chance. He loses more time in glorifying himself for a quick spurt than suffices for the tortoise to make half his journey. . . .

All those I think who have lived as literary men—working daily as literary labourers—will agree with me that three hours a day will produce as much as a man ought to write. But then he should so have trained himself that he shall be able to work continuously during those three hours—so have tutored his mind that

it shall not be necessary for him to sit nibbling his pen, and gazing at the wall before him, till he shall have found the words with which he wants to express his ideas. It had at this time become my custom—and it still is my custom, though of late I have become a little lenient to myself—to write with my watch before me, and to require from myself two hundred and fifty words every quarter of an hour. I have found that the two hundred and fifty words have been forthcoming as regularly as my watch went. But my three hours were not devoted entirely to writing. I always began my task by reading the work of the day before, an operation which would take me half an hour, and which consisted chiefly in weighing with my ear the sound of the words and phrases. I would strongly recommend this practice to all tyros in writing. That their work should be read after it has been written is a matter of course—that it should be read twice at least before it goes to the printers, I take to be a matter of course. But by reading what he has last written, just before he recommences his task, the writer will catch the tone and spirit of what he is then saying, and will avoid the fault of seeming to be unlike himself. This division of time allowed me to produce over ten pages of an ordinary novel volume a day, and if kept up through ten months, would have given as its results three novels of three volumes each in the year —the precise amount which so greatly acerbated the publisher in Paternoster Row, and which must at any rate be felt to be quite as much as the novel-readers of the world can want from the hands of one man.

ANTHONY TROLLOPE: *Autobiography*

FLAUBERT I should like some scientific words designating the different parts of the damaged eye (or eyelids). The whole is damaged, and is a mere squash, in which nothing can be distinguished.

FLAUBERT to Bouilhet

TOLSTOI 'I always write in the morning. I was pleased to hear lately that Rousseau too, after he got up in the morning, went for a short walk and sat down to work. In the morning one's head is

particularly fresh. The best thoughts most often come in the morning after waking, while still in bed or during the walk. Many writers work at night. Dostoevsky always wrote at night. In a writer there must always be two people—the writer and the critic. And, if one works at night, with a cigarette in one's mouth, although the work of creation goes on briskly, the critic is for the most part in abeyance, and this is very dangerous.'

During work, especially if he found some difficulty, Tolstoi used to play patience. This was his habit throughout his life. When he was writing Part III of *Resurrection*, Tolstoi was undecided for a long time about the fate of Katyusha Maslov. Now he decided that Nekhlyudov should marry her, now that he should not. At last he decided to play a game of patience: if the patience came out, Nekhlyudov should marry her; if not, then he should not marry her. The patience did not come out. Once Tolstoi told me that he had found a passage in a book, which he was writing, very difficult. He hesitated for a long time what to do, but made up his mind and wrote it. Then he decided to test it by means of a game of patience; if the patience came out, that meant that what he had written was good; if it did not come out, then it was bad. The patience did not come out, and Tolstoi said to himself: 'Never mind, it is good as it is!' and he left it as he had written it.

LEO TOLSTOI: *Talks With Tolstoi it.*

DELIVERED UP WHOLLY A necessity is upon me now—as at most times—of wandering about in my old wild way, to think. I could no more resist this on Sunday or yesterday than a man can dispense with food, or a horse can help himself from being driven. I hold my inventive capacity on the stern condition that it must master my whole life, often have complete possession of me, make its own demands upon me, and sometimes, for months together, put everything else away from me. If I had not known long ago that my place could never be held, unless I were at any moment ready to devote myself to it entirely, I should have dropped out of it very soon. All this I can hardly expect you to understand—

or the restlessness and waywardness of an author's mind. You have never seen it before you, or lived with it, or had occasion to think or care about it, and you cannot have the necessary consideration for it. 'It is only half-an-hour'—'It is only an afternoon'—'It is only an evening', people say to me over and over again; but they don't know that it is impossible to command one's self sometimes to any stipulated and set disposal of five minutes —or that the mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day. These are the penalties paid for writing books. Who ever is devoted to an art must be content to deliver himself wholly up to it, and to find his recompense in it. I am grieved if you suspect me of not wanting to see you, but I can't help it; I must go my way whether or no.

CHARLES DICKENS to Mrs Winter, *Letters*

AGONY You don't know what it is to stay a whole day with your head in your hands trying to squeeze your unfortunate brain so as to find a word. Ideas come very easily with you, incessantly, like a stream. With me it is a tiny thread of water. Hard labour at art is necessary for me before obtaining a waterfall. Ah! I certainly know *the agonies of style.*

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to George Sand

THE MANIA FOR PHRASES I am going on very slowly. I give myself an accursed lot of trouble. I have just suppressed phrases at the end of five or six pages, which have cost me the work of entire days. It is impossible for me to see the effect of any one of them before it is finished, re-finished and polished. It is an insane way of writing, but what can I do? I have a conviction that the things best in themselves are those that I cut out. One only succeeds in producing an effect by the negation of exuberance; and exuberance is precisely what charms me.

Do you know that my mother about six weeks ago said a splendid thing to me (a thing to make the muse hang herself for

jealousy for not having invented it). Here it is: 'The mania for phrases has dried up your heart.'

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to Louis Bouilhet

PROGRESS I have just spent a good week, alone like a hermit, and as calm as a god. I abandoned myself to a frenzy of literature; I got up at midday, I went to bed at four in the morning. I dined with Dakno; I smoked fifteen pipes in a day; I have written *eight pages.*

GUSTAVE FLAUBERT to Louis Bouilhet

HELLISH TORTURE And, as for me, this is my story: *I worked and was tortured.* You know what it means to compose? No, thank God, you do not! I believe you have never written to order, by the yard, and have never experienced that hellish torture. Having received in advance from the *Russky Viestnik* so much money (Horror! 4,500 roubles). I fully hoped in the beginning of the year that poesy would not desert me, that the poetical idea would flash out and develop artistically towards the end of the year, and that I should succeed in satisfying every one. Moreover, this seemed to me the more likely inasmuch as many creative ideas are always flashing through my brain and my soul, and being conceived. But then these are only flashes, and they need a complete realization, which invariably comes unexpectedly and all of a sudden. It is impossible, however, to calculate when it is going to come. Only afterwards when one has received a complete image in one's heart can one start artistic composition. And then one may even calculate without mistake. Well, all through the summer and all through the autumn I selected various ideas (some of them most ingenious), but my experience enabled me always to feel beforehand the falsity, difficulty, or ephemerality of this or that idea. At last I fixed on one and began working, I wrote a great deal; but on the 4th of December (new style) I threw it all to the devil. I assure you that the novel might have been tolerable; bu I got incredibly sick of it just because it was tolerable, and not *positively good*—I did not want that.

DOSTOEVSKY: *Letters and Reminiscences*

TURGENEV REGRETS Sophie Andreevna said:

'It was the last time Turgenev stayed at Yasnaya, not long before his death. I asked him: "Ivan Sergeevich, why don't you write now?" He answered: "In order to write I had always to be a little in love. Now I am old I can't fall in love any more, and that is why I have stopped writing." '

Talks With Tolstoi

POINT OF DEPARTURE Yesterday L.N. spoke of the process of creative work:

'I can't understand how anyone can write without rewriting everything over and over again. I scarcely ever re-read my published writings, but if by chance I come across a page, it always strikes me: All this must be rewritten; this is how I should have written it. . . .

'I am always interested to trace the moment, which comes quite early, when the public is satisfied; and the artist thinks: They say it is good; but it is just at this point that the real work begins!'

BOREDOM Usually when I begin a new book I am very pleased with it and work with great interest. But as the book work goes on, I become more and more bored, and often in rewriting it I omit things, substitute others, not because the new idea is better, but because I get tired of the old. Often I strike out what is vivid and replace it by something dull.

TOLSTOI EXASPERATED Tolstoi spoke on 28th August (1904) with exasperation about writing as a profession. I have rarely seen him so agitated.

He said: 'One ought only to write when one leaves a piece of one's flesh in the ink-pot each time one dips one's pen.'

LEO TOLSTOI: *Talks With Tolstoi*

THE ULTIMATE COMPENSATION The disadvantages and dangers of the author's calling are offset by an advantage so great as to make all its difficulties, disappointments, and maybe hardships,

unimportant. It gives him spiritual freedom. To him life is a tragedy and by his gift of creation he enjoys the catharsis, the purging of pity and terror, which Aristotle tells us is the object of art. For his sins and his follies, the unhappiness that befalls him, his unrequited love, his physical defects, illness, privation, his hopes abandoned, his griefs, humiliations, everything is transformed by his power into material and by writing it he can overcome it. Everything is grist to his mill, from the glimpse of a face in the street to a war that convulses the civilized world, from the scent of a rose to the death of a friend. Nothing befalls him that he cannot transmute into a stanza, a song or a story, and having done this be rid of it. The artist is the only free man.

W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM: *The Summing Up*

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IN DEFENCE OF FICTION

FIELDING Reader, it is impossible we should know what sort of person thou wilt be; for, perhaps, thou may'st be as learned in human nature as Shakespear himself was, and, perhaps, thou may'st be no wiser than some of his editors. Now, lest this latter should be the case, we think proper, before we go any farther together, to give thee a few wholesome admonitions; that thou may'st not as grossly misunderstand and misrepresent us, as some of the said editors have misunderstood and misrepresented their author.

First, then, we warn thee not too hastily to condemn any of the incidents in this our history as impertinent and foreign to our main design, because thou dost not immediately conceive in what manner such incident may conduce to that design. This work may, indeed, be considered as a great creation of our own; and for a little reptile of a critic to presume to find fault with any of its parts, without knowing the manner in which the whole is connected, and before he comes to the final catastrophe, is a most presumptuous absurdity. The allusion and metaphor we have made use of, we must acknowledge to be infinitely too great for our occasion; but there is, indeed, no other, which is at all adequate to express the difference between an author of the first rate and a critic of the lowest.

Another caution we would give thee, my good reptile, is, that thou dost not find out too near a resemblance between certain characters here introduced; as, for instance, between the landlady who appears in the seventh book and her in the ninth. Thou art to know, friend, that there are certain characteristics in which most individuals of every profession and occupation agree. To be able to preserve these characteristics, and at the same time to diversify their operations, is one talent of a good writer. Again, to mark the nice distinction between two persons actuated by the same vice or folly is another; and, as this last talent is found in very few writers, so is the true discernment of it found in as few readers; though, I believe, the observation of this forms a very

principal pleasure in those who are capable of the discovery; every person, for instance, can distinguish between Sir Epicure Mammon and Sir Fopling Flutter; but to note the difference between Sir Fopling Flutter and Sir Courtly Nice requires a more exquisite judgment: for want of which, vulgar spectators of plays very often do great injustice in the theatre; where I have sometimes known a poet in danger of being convicted as a thief, upon much worse evidence than the resemblance of hands hath been held to be in the law. In reality, I apprehend every amorous widow on the stage would run the hazard of being condemned as a servile imitation of Dido, but that happily a very few of our play-house critics understand enough Latin to read Virgil.

In the next place, we must admonish thee, my worthy friend (for, perhaps, thy heart may be better than thy head), not to condemn a character as a bad one, because it is not perfectly a good one. If thou dost delight in these models of perfection, there are books enow written to gratify thy taste; but, as we have not, in the course of our conversation, ever happened to meet with any such person, we have not chosen to introduce any such here. To say the truth, I a little question whether mere man ever arrived at this consummate degree of excellence, as well as whether there hath ever existed a monster bad enough to verify that

> —nulla virtute redemptum
> A vitiis—

in Juvenal; nor do I, indeed, conceive the good purposes served by inserting characters of such angelic perfection, or such diabolical depravity, in any work of invention; since, from contemplating either, the mind of man is more likely to be overwhelmed with sorrow and shame than to draw any good uses from such patterns; for in the former instance he may be both concerned and ashamed to see a pattern of excellence in his nature, which he may reasonably despair of ever arriving at; and in contemplating the latter he may be no less affected with those uneasy sensations, at seeing the nature of which he is a partaker degraded into so odious and detestable a creature.

In fact, if there be enough of goodness in a character to engage

the admiration and affection of a well-disposed mind, though there should appear some little blemishes *quas humana parum cavit natura*, they will raise our compassion rather than our abhorrence. Indeed, nothing can be of more moral use than the imperfections which are seen in examples of this kind; since such form a kind of surprise, more apt to affect and dwell upon our minds than the faults of very vicious and wicked persons. The foibles and vices of men, in whom there is great mixture of good, become more glaring objects from the virtues which contrast them and shew their deformity; and when we find such vices attended with their evil consequences to our favourite characters, we are not only taught to shun them for our own sake, but to hate them for the mischiefs they have already brought on those we love.

HENRY FIELDING: *The History of Tom Jones*

JANE AUSTEN They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm-in-arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and, if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up to read novels together. Yes, novels; for I will not adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom, so common with novel-writers, of degrading, by their contemptuous censure, the very performances to the number of which they are themselves adding: joining with their greatest enemies in bestowing the harshest epithets on such works, and scarcely ever permitting them to be read by their own heroine, who, if she accidentally take up a novel, is sure to turn over its insipid pages with disgust. Alas! if the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? I cannot approve of it. Let us leave it to the Reviewers to abuse such effusions of fancy at their leisure, and over every new novel to talk in threadbare strains of the trash with which the press now groans. Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body. Although our productions have afforded more extensive and unaffected pleasure than those of any other literary corporation in

the world, no species of composition has been so much decried. From pride, ignorance, or fashion, our foes are almost as many as our readers; and while the abilities of the nine-hundredth abridger of the *History of England*, or of the man who collects and publishes in a volume some dozen lines of Milton, Pope, and Prior, with a paper from the *Spectator*, and a chapter from Sterne, are eulogized by a thousand pens, there seems almost a general wish of decrying the capacity and under-valuing the labour of the novelist, and of slighting the performances which have only genius, wit, and taste to recommend them. 'I am no novel reader; I seldom look into novels; do not imagine that *I* often read novels; it is really very well for a novel.' Such is the common cant. 'And what are you reading, Miss——?' 'Oh! It is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference, or momentary shame. 'It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda,' or, in short, only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour, are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language. Now, had the same young lady been engaged with a volume of the *Spectator*, instead of such a work, how proudly would she have produced the book, and told its name! Though the chances must be against her being occupied by any part of that voluminous publication, of which either the matter or manner would not disgust a young person of taste; the substance of its papers so often consisting in the statement of improbable circumstances, unnatural characters, and topics of conversation, which no longer concern anyone living; and their language, too, frequently so coarse as to give no very favourable idea of the age that could endure it.

JANE AUSTEN: *Northanger Abbey*

CHARLOTTE BRONTË Whether it is right or advisable to create beings like Heathcliff, I do not know: I scarcely think it is. But this I know: the writer who possesses the creative gift owns something of which he is not always master—something that, at times, strangely wills and works for itself. He may lay down rules

and devise principles, and to rules and principles it will perhaps for years lie in subjection; and then, haply without any warning of revolt, there comes a time when it will no longer consent to 'harrow the valleys, or be bound with a band in the furrow'—when it 'laughs at the multitude of the city, and regards not the crying of the driver'—when, refusing absolutely to make ropes out of sea-sand any longer, it sets to work on statue-hewing, and you have a Pluto or a Jove, a Tisiphone or a Psyche, a Mermaid or a Madonna, as Fate or Inspiration direct. Be the work grim or glorious, dread or divine, you have little choice left but quiescent adoption. As for you—the nominal artist—your share in it has been to work passively under dictates you neither delivered nor could question—that would not be uttered at your prayer, nor suppressed nor changed at your caprice. If the result be attractive, the World will praise you; if it be repulsive, the same World will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame.

CHARLOTTE BRONTË: Editor's preface to *Wuthering Heights*

GEORGE ELIOT 'This Rector of Broxton is little better than a pagan!' I hear one of my readers exclaim. 'How much more edifying it would have been if you had made him give Arthur some truly spiritual advice. You might have put into his mouth the most beautiful things—quite as good as reading a sermon!'

Certainly I could, if I held it the highest vocation of the novelist to represent things as they never have been and never will be. Then, of course, I might refashion life and character entirely after my own thinking; I might select the most unexceptional type of clergyman and put my own admirable opinions into his mouth on all occasions. But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.

GEORGE ELIOT: *Adam Bede*

The Novelist's Responsibility

For many writers this question does not so much as arise. If there is one dogma which has gained the support of the majority of writers in this century and the last, it is the dogma of the absolute independence of the artist. It seems to be agreed, once and for all, that a work of art has no object outside itself. It only counts in so far as it is gratuitous or useless: anything written to prove a point or to be of use is disqualified from the realm of art. Gide says that 'the moral issue for the artist is not that he should present an idea that is useful but that he should present an idea well'.

But we can be sure that this would not have to be said so persistently and so often by some writers if it were not vigorously contradicted by others. In fact, from the other end of the literary world comes a ceaseless protest against the pretensions to absolute independence on the part of the artist. For example, when Ernest Psichari proclaims that one must write with fear and trembling under the eye of the Trinity, he is being the mouthpiece of all those who believe in the immortality of each individual soul, and therefore believe in the extreme importance of their writings as affecting each immortal destiny.

Then, between these two opposing camps, there is the huge crowd of novelists who fluctuate and hesitate. On the one hand they admit that their work is valuable only inasmuch as it apprehends living men in their completeness, in their heights and in their depths—the human creature as he is. They feel that any intervention in the unfolding of their characters—even to prove the truth of what they believe—is an abuse. They feel a sincere revulsion against falsifying life. On the other hand, they know that they are treading on dangerous ground, and that their intense desire to depict human emotions and passions may have an incalculable and permanent effect on the lives of many people.

Every novelist worthy of the name and every playwright who is a born Christian suffers from the torment of this dilemma. . . .

Actually, all the best writers are tugging at one rope. At one end of the rope there are those who are convinced that their work will be valuable only if it is disinterested and does not tamper with reality for reasons of modesty or edification, and at the other end there are those who have a feeling of responsibility towards their readers, of whom, in spite of their scruples, they want as large a number as possible. At one end there is the certainty that there cannot be a work in novel-form which has value outside absolute submission to its object—the human heart: there must be progress in knowledge of mankind, but whatever depths are found there must be no dizziness or disgust or horror. This is a certainty. At the other end there is only a sentiment, a feeling—at any rate for those who do not belong to a religious faith. For a Christian, eternity hangs in the balance if one soul is troubled or in danger of being lost. But while non-Christians are unable to stop themselves feeling a responsiblity, in a dim way they have no difficulty at all in inventing sophisms to persuade themselves that their fear of scandalizing others has no connection with reality. I should like to assure them, at this point, that their nebulous feeling corresponds with a very deep reality. We can say this: that although the whole matter seems more serious for writers with faith, it certainly does interest the sceptics—and this, precisely because they only believe in man and know no reality in the world other than human reality.

A few years ago a review posed the question: 'Why do you write?' to the literary world. The majority of those who answered merely tried to be witty; Paul Morand, for instance, said: 'To be rich and esteemed.' He was making fun of the whole thing by confusing immediate motives with deep motives.

The deep motive seems to me to lie in the instinct which urges us not to be alone. A writer is essentially a man who will not be resigned to solitude. Each of us is like a desert, and a literary work is like a cry from the desert, or like a pigeon let loose with a message in its claws, or like a bottle thrown into the sea. The point is: to be heard—even if by one single person. And the point is that our thoughts and, if we are novelists, our characters should be understood and loved and welcomed by other intelligences and

other hearts. An author who assures you that he writes for himself alone and that he does not care whether he is heard or not is a boaster and is deceiving either himself or you. Every man suffers if he is alone, and the artist is the man for whom and in whom this suffering takes a physical form. Baudelaire was right when he called artists *beacons*. They light a great fire in the darkness, and they set light to themselves so as to attract the greatest number of their fellow-beings to them.

Artists, and particularly writers, are the most squeamish people in the world, and at the same time the most hungry for praise. Indeed it is impossible for writers to be sated with compliments —and they must not be despised for this because, as often as not, their great need of praise is due to a lack of confidence in themselves, and their longing for reassurance is due to a feeling that their work is worthless.

Of all the compliments that can be paid to a writer, there is one especially that will make him glow with pleasure, namely: 'You are admired so much among the younger generation.' Then his head positively swells, for though he may seem to be detached, what he wants above all things is to get the attention of the younger generation, and if he does not do this he considers he has failed in his mission. Nothing matters to him except that. He has got to reach others, and particularly he has got to reach those who are still capable of being influenced and dominated, the younger mentalities which are hesitating and unformed. He wants to leave his mark on this living wax and imprint all that is best in him on those who are going to survive him. It is not enough for the writer who writes so as not to be alone merely to reach other people; he wants to make them replicas of himself: he wants his own image and likeness to be resurrected in them when he himself is in the grave.

We must not believe in a writer's false humility. The humblest writer aspires to nothing short of immortality, and the least pretentious clings to the hope that he will not perish altogether. Those who pretend that they do not care about what they write and only scribble their poems on cigarette papers do so with a secret hope that because these are lighter they will be carried by the wind to distant shores. The artist wants to escape from his

desert during his life, but he also wants to escape from the solitude of death, and thus he hopes that something of what he has written —if only one line—should live, and that some youth—if only one —should hum a song he has invented, to the end of the world. The ambition of an artist is not confined to wanting himself to live, but he wants his love to live too. He is audacious enough to impose on men of the future the vision of the face he has loved:

> Je te donne ces vers afin que si mon nom
> Aborde heureusement aux époques lointaines
> Et fait rêver un soir les cervelles humaines
> Vaisseau favorisé par un grand aquilon. . . .

But if the writer has so great a desire to reach and affect the largest possible quantity of people both in his own time and after it, surely he ought to feel a responsibility towards those he influences, even if he is not a Christian. And even if we abandon the word *responsibility*—which cannot have the same meaning for a sceptic as for a Christian—he still must feel *concerned* for those whose destiny he has perhaps altered.

Actually I know of no writers worthy of the name who are really not concerned—however non-religious they may be. I do not mean that this consideration has an influence on their work or moves them to control either their curiosity or the boldness of their depiction, for they always persuade themselves that a work which is true and in conformity with reality must necessarily be good. Flaubert had no desire for a title to fame other than that of demoralizer, and André Gide, nowadays, would not disown that same title. This does not mean that these writers intend to do evil; not at all, but they do not agree with us about the nature of good and evil. According to them a work which scandalizes is nearly always a work which sets people free. They see a writer as a sort of satanic benefactor who breaks the bondage of morality in which people are wrapped and restores liberty and ease to their movements. However, this is not the place to point out how these authors are wrong from the Christian point of view—how they do not take the dogma of the Fall of Man into account, nor the fact that man is born defiled, nor the virulent and terribly con-

tagious element in the sores which literature is unveiling with increasing brazenness.

This does not take away from the fact that a novel is nothing if it is not a study of human nature, and that it loses all its reason for existing if it does not increase our knowledge of the human heart. Thus, should a novelist, however scrupulous he may be, falsify the facts of life and change the very object of his study in order not to offend or unsettle his readers?

I know that the question can be evaded in more ways than one; but we must not reassure ourselves with the hypocritical excuse that we are not writing for little girls, and are not bound to compete with Mme de Ségur or Mrs Molesworth. Unfortunately, readers who have attained the age of reason are often more dangerously disturbed by books than other readers. It is probably better to be read by little girls who have tea in the nursery and who do not know what evil is than by young people in full flush of youth. It would be difficult to imagine the sort of letters a writer can receive. After reading a book of mine called *Genetrix*, a boy once sent me a photograph with the words: 'To the man who nearly made me kill my grandmother.' In an accompanying letter he explained that the old lady resembled the heroine of *Genetrix* to such an extent that he had been on the very verge of strangling her during her sleep. How can readers like that be protected? Father Bethleem himself cannot do anything. The reading of imaginative literature should be forbidden to adults rather than to children.

It is seldom that writers who distort reality and depict untrue characters so as to be sure of not being immoral attain their object. For it must be remembered that they are not the only authors of their novels; the reader himself collaborates with them and often adds horrors without their knowing it. We should be amazed if we knew exactly what happened to our characters in the imagination of this or that reader who talks to us about our books. I think I can say with truth that no book has moved me more deeply than a simple and innocent novel called *Feet of Clay* which I adored when I was fourteen. It was the work of an old and virtuous woman called Zénaide Fleuriot, and it was full of imagination and sensibility. The heroine had the lovely name of

Armelle Trahec. She was young and red-haired with freckles on her face, and since reading about her I have distributed these freckles generously on the faces of my own heroines. Yet when a journalist asks me the names of the writers who have influenced me most, I quote Balzac and Dostoevsky, but I never dare mention Mlle Zénaide Fleuriot.

This is a reminder that the devil never loses his rights, and it can well be imagined that on the Day of Judgement, though some writers will have to answer for the souls they have upset, others will be surprised by the unforeseen echo which their simplest works have had in other souls.

The collaboration between the reader and the writer, varying as it does with each individual, makes the question of good and bad books an almost insoluble one. I think that only a novelist is in the position to judge of it. For my own part I know by experience and by confidential admission that the book in which an excessive outspokenness has been detected—and doubtless rightly—and which has been most severely censured is also the very book which has had the greatest effect on people from the religious point of view. We must not forget that the worst books as well as the best are double-edged weapons which the unknown reader plays with in a way we can never foresee. We cannot foresee whether the libertine and debauched element in the reader will be wounded or the good and pious one. Every human being makes honey according to his recipe; he passes from book to book and from doctrine to doctrine, taking what is good for him. The young men who committed suicide after reading Goethe's *Werther* would have finished up by finding somewhere else an excuse for abandoning this mortal dizziness. Goethe cannot be held responsible for their death. Everybody recreates what he reads after his own heart's-image, and moulds an idea of it which is valid for himself alone. I suppose it is my own peculiar feeling, but what stands out most vividly for me in the colossal and putrescent work of Proust is the image of a gaping hole, the sensation of infinite absence, and it is this chasm and emptiness—the absence of God in fact—which strikes me most about mankind according to Proust. I see this because I am a Christian; others may very well

find satisfaction in these gloomiest of pictures. And that is why wretched literary people can still hope that the evil they have done will be forgiven because of the good which—often unknowingly—they have also done.

That is how I reassured myself. But sincerity with regard to oneself is the virtue of our generation, so we should be bold to face up to our vices. All I have said does not prevent our consenting to the professional depicting of human passions. Human passions are the object of our study, and we sell our books solely because thousands of people experience a kind of uneasy delight in this depiction of them. St Augustine confesses that he found in plays 'the image of his miseries, the love and the food of his fire'. . . . However, there is absolutely no need to write about obscenity in order to spread fire in the world. Bossuet said: 'Do you not feel that there are things which have no very specific effect, but which, without seeming harmful at first, put evil tendencies and dispositions into people's minds? Everything that provides food for the passions is of this dim origin. There would be only too much to confess if one examined oneself to find the causes of sin.' And he adds: 'If anyone could discern in a man a certain depth of sensual joy, and a certain restless vague disposition for indulging the pleasure of the sense—tending nowhere and yet tending everywhere—he would know the secret source of the greatest sins.'

Can we honestly deny that it is nearly always this 'secret source of the greatest sins' which is probed by the writer? I am not saying he does it on purpose or as the result of long premeditation. But in the light of this quotation from Bossuet we can understand better what André Gide means when he says that no work of art can come into being without the collaboration of the devil. The writer depends on this 'depth of sensual joy' in order to absorb and move his readers; he depends on this 'vague and restless disposition for indulging the pleasures of the senses—tending nowhere and yet tending everywhere'. The writer keeps up collusion with his adversary, the reader, whereas he ought to conquer him at any price. In every man—especially in every young man—and in every woman he has an accomplice personifying a desire for

languor, a taste for emotion and a thirst for tears. Once again, I do not think there is a single novelist worthy of the name who thinks of that while he is writing and who deliberately sets out to upset people, but he is spurred on by sure instinct. All his art is concentrated on reaching the secret source of the greatest sins, and the more genius he has the more surely he will reach his end.

This question then emerges: Must one stop writing even if one feels deeply that writing is one's vocation and that literary creation is as natural as breathing? Perhaps some doctor holds the key to the enigma; perhaps somebody somewhere knows the way in which a scrupulous novelist can escape from these choices—these three choices of either changing the object of his observation or falsifying life or running the risk of spreading scandal and misery among his fellow-creatures.

We may as well admit that a writer who is torn by this problem is hardly ever taken seriously. On his left there is only mockery and shrugging of shoulders—a refusal to admit that such a problem really exists. People deny that an artist has any other duty than to realize and achieve a beautiful piece of work, or that he can have any other care than to approach as near as possible to psychological truth. On his right there is an even greater misunderstanding. There is a total ignorance of the fact that he has scruples or high motives at all. It is difficult not to have a choking feeling the first time pious reviewers treat you as pornographer and accuse you of writing obscenity for the sake of making money. When I was young and naïve I felt an insuperable desire to pour out my heart to some distinguished and holy people about all these difficulties, but as soon as I had begun I realized that they made no essential distinction between me and, for instance, the author of the *Revue des Folies Bergères*. I am not really shocked by their attitude, for I can understand perfectly well that people who are specifically in charge of souls are faced with an infinite number of problems which are far more urgent to them than the aesthetic problem, and it would be ludicrous for me to feel indignant with them on the grounds that they do not consider aesthetics to be as important as I do.

One Catholic writer has realized the importance of this prob-

lem and made a real effort to solve it. I could not follow Jacques Maritain's train of thought in all its complexity, but I shall quote a few lines taken from *Art and Scholasticism* in which he delimits very exactly the sphere of the novelist who is worried by his responsibility. 'The essential point', he says, 'is not to know whether a novelist may or may not portray a given aspect of evil. The essential point is to know at what altitude he is when he makes this portrayal and whether his art and his soul are pure enough and strong enough to make it without conniving at it. The more the modern novel plunges into human misery, the more are superhuman virtues demanded from the novelist. For example, to write the work of a Proust as it should be written would require the interior light of a Saint Augustine. Unfortunately, it is just the opposite that has happened, and we see the observer and the thing observed—the novelist and his subject—rivalling one another in degradation.'

This is what Jacques Maritain says, and everyone will agree that he puts the question very well: everyone, that is, except the novelist. However, he does not take into account the real point, since he neglects to consider the fundamental laws of novel-creation. He mentions the 'observer and the thing observed'. In fact he compares a novelist bending over the human heart with a physiologist over a frog or a guinea-pig. According to Maritain, the novelist is detached from his subject in the way the man in the laboratory is detached from the animal whose stomach he is deliberately dissecting. I, however, hold that the operation of the novelist is utterly different from that of the experimentalist. As far as the novel is concerned, Jacques Maritain has stopped at the old naturalistic ideas. It is a condition of art that the novelist should connive at the subject of his creation, in spite of Maritain's warning, for the real novelist is not an observer, but a creator of fictitious life. It is not his function to observe life, but to create it. He brings living people into the world; he does not observe them from some lofty vantage point. He even confuses and, in a way, loses his own personality in the subject of his creation, and his identification with it is pushed so far that he actually becomes his creation.

It could easily be argued that if a novelist keeps the superhuman virtues that Maritain would have him keep he could never write about evil people. His characters could not be wicked if they came from a creator who was good and pure. A good tree does not yield bad fruit. Let the novelist busy himself with his personal sanctification and nothing scandalous can emerge from his mind. True though this may be, it is worth mentioning in passing that the practice of superhuman virtue is not easy for mankind in general nor for novelists in particular. In that case, would not a deeply virtuous man refrain from writing novels? For if he is a real artist he will not feel capable of producing insipid though edifying stories without a trace of human truth in them, and at the same time he will know very well that a living piece of work is bound to cause trouble. It is probably true that a novelist subconsciously resurrects in his characters the desires which he himself has repressed, and the temptations which he himself has overcome; thus, just as admirable men often have unworthy sons, the best novelist may find that he has reincarnated his own worst elements in the sons and daughters of his brain. That is why a fervent Christian feels justified in describing passions from 'on high'—for example in a sermon or a treatise—whereas he does not in a novel where it is not so much a question of judging and condemning them as of giving them flesh and blood. Nothing, as we know, can prevent a fire from burning. Henri Perreyve, when he had just left school, wrote a letter to Charles Perraud in which he referred to 'this vice of lustfulness which word alone makes our seventeen-year-old hearts grow weak and faint'. If the mere mention of the word makes these young people grow faint and weak, what can be the effect of descriptions of the word—even if they are restrained descriptions?

Somebody may say that vice is not the only thing to write about, and that though man has his rottenness he also has his greatness; there are beautiful characters whose history can be written. Indeed, I am far from sharing Gide's opinion that good literature cannot be made out of fine sentiments, and that the worse the characters are the better the book. Nevertheless, it certainly is not easy to make good literature with only good sentiments, and

it is almost impossible to isolate the good from the bad so as to make an edifying portrayal. The ambition of the modern novelist is to apprehend the whole of human nature, including its shifting contradictions. In the world of reality you do not find beautiful souls in the pure state—these are only to be found in novels and in bad novels at that. What we call a beautiful character has become beautiful at the cost of a struggle against itself, and this struggle should not stop until the bitter end. The evil which the beautiful character has to overcome in itself and from which it has to sever itself, is a reality which the novelist must account for. If there is a reason for the existence of the novelist on earth it is this: to show the element which holds out against God in the highest and noblest characters—the innermost evils and dissimulations; and also to light up the secret source of sanctity in creatures who seem to us to have failed.

Some people, however, have succeeded in overcoming their natures. The saints form material for novelists as much as any other living people. Why should not we portray saints just as Benson, Foggazaro, Boumann and Bernanos did—or tried to do? On the other hand it could be maintained that on this very point of sanctity the novelist loses his rights, for if he tries to write a novel about sanctity he is no longer dealing purely with men, but with the action of God on men—and this may be an extremely unwise thing to try to do. On this point it seems that the novelist will always be beaten by reality, by the saints who really have lived. St Francis of Assisi, St Catherine of Siena, the big and little St Teresa and all the great mystics, are witnesses to a reality and an experience which is infinitely beyond the power of a novelist.

Whenever a novelist has tried to re-create the way of grace, with all its struggles and its ultimate victory, he has left an impression of arbitrariness and misrepresentation. Nothing is more elusive in human life than the finger of God. It is not that it is not visible, but its imprint is so delicate that it disappears as soon as we try to capture it. God is inimitable, and He escapes the novelist's grasp. I am sure that the exceptional success of Bernanos's novel, *Sous le Soleil de Satan*, is due precisely to the

fact that its saint is not a real saint: this tormented and agonized hero wanders too near the edge of despair. Or suppose, if you like, that the hero, Abbé Donissan, is a real saint; then Bernanos, with a novelist's instinct, meets that supposition by finally discovering in him the secret failure and deviation which, in spite of his heroic virtues, relates him to sinful humanity. The reason why most novelists have failed in their portrayal of saints may be due to the fact that they have drawn creatures who are sublime and angelic but not human, whereas their sole chance of success would have lain in concentrating on the wretched and human elements in their characters that sanctity allows to subsist. And this is the special realm of the novelist.

When I read the lives of the great saints I was always worried by their manifestations of humility, which seemed to me excessive. It seemed to me that people at such a height of perfection and practising such heroic virtues strove to debase themselves below everyone else. But now I am convinced that sanctity means, above all, lucidity. 'One must know oneself to the pitch of being horrified,' Bossuet wrote to the Marechal de Bellefonds. As the saints advance in the double knowledge of God and of their own souls, they get such a piercing vision of their unworthiness that they abase themselves and annihilate themselves by the most natural of instincts. It is not enough to say that they believe themselves to be wretched: in fact they *are* wretched, and it is precisely their sanctity that makes them see it so lucidly. They see what man, as compared with the light of God, really is even when sanctified, and they are horrified.

Thus even if a novelist devoted himself entirely to depicting the souls of saints, he would finally get back to the human—that is, the dangerous—element in man. He could not avoid the abysses lying in his way. There is often a sort of vanquished and frustrated viciousness at the source of people's lives. This has been said about some great revolutionaries and some great heretics,but it is equally true of very good and holy men.

Thus it happens that the novelist, caught between two fires as he is with all these difficulties, sometimes experiences a temptation to which, I must admit, he very rarely yields: the temptation

to be silent—to be silent, to finish with these heavy and gloomy disclosures, to refrain from presenting the world with creatures who are diseased and who spread their disease, to make the sacrifice that Jean Racine made and which we admire so much.

Bossuet said that there was no greater difference than the difference between living according to nature and living according to grace. If the novelist is religious he suffers from this divergence, which upsets all Christians, in an especially sharp and tragic way. How could he consent to silence? And if he cannot come to a solution on this point we must remember to take into account the poor and sordid motives which attach a man to his job—especially when his job, as with the job of literature, flatters his vanity and his liking for a halo and at the same time brings him various sorts of advantages. But the necessity which obliges a genuine man of letters to write must not be forgotten. He cannot not write. He follows a deep and imperative need. We cannot smother the restless and importunate germs inside us; they demand life and we cannot know beforehand what sort of souls they will have. Our sincerest critics ought to ponder and try to understand Goncourt's affirmation: 'One does not write the book one wants to.' No, we do not write the book we want to write; alas, we write the book we deserve to write. Our judges come down on us as though our work were entirely dependent on our own free will, as if we made a deliberate decision to write a good or a bad book, tell an edifying story or a scandalous one. They do not seem to have the remotest idea of the mysterious, unforeseeable and inevitable elements in all creative novel-writing. The urge to write in a man of letters ends up by becoming a monster-like necessity which cannot be frustrated. Some time ago there was an amusing drawing that a hat manufacturer used as an advertisement: it consisted of a machine with a live rabbit going into it at one end and hats coming out of it at the other. It is in this way that life, with all its hopes and sorrows, is engulfed by the novelist, and nothing can prevent a book emerging from this perpetual receiving of impressions. Even if he withdraws from the world and shuts his eyes and stops up his ears, his most distant past will begin to ferment. His childhood and youth alone is enough to provide a born novelist with an

immense amount of literary nourishment. Nobody can stop the flow of the river which flows from us.

There is no doubt that our books have a deep resemblance to ourselves, and we can quite rightly be judged and condemned by them. Novalis' axiom, 'Character is destiny', has often been repeated. And so, just as there is a close bond between a man's character and what happens to him during his life, so there is a similar relationship between a novelist's character and the creatures and events brought into being by his imagination. This is not to say that he is any more the absolute master of these creatures and events than he is of the course of his own fate.

People of my calibre complicate the 'drama of the Catholic novelist'. The humblest priest would tell me, like Maritain: 'Be pure, become pure, and your work too will have a reflection in heaven. Begin by purifying the source and those who drink of the water cannot be sick. . . .' And I give the last word to the priest.

FRANÇOIS MAURIAC: *God and Mammon*

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