

The Writer as Artist

Steven Earnshaw

For I know very well what the temptations of the Devil are, and that one of his greatest is to put it into a man's head that he can write and print a book, and gain both money and fame by it . . . (Cervantes 1986: 468)

It's 1940 and Gomez is visiting the Museum of Modern Art in New York. His life as a revolutionary in the Spanish Civil War has been overtaken by global events, and his wife and daughter remain in France, fleeing a Paris that is now ablaze. Gomez is given a job as an art critic and his first assignment is to write a piece on Mondrian, who is all the rage. But Gomez can see no point to Abstract Expressionism – it does not ask 'awkward questions', the kind of questions that a Europe coping with the rise of Fascism has to ask itself, the kind of questions Rouault, Picasso and Klee ask. His guide at MOMA is Ritchie, an American who counters that art is a chance to rise above these horrors – Ritchie goes to MOMA to *escape* the world (Sartre 2002: 26–32).

What, exactly, are the motivations for making art? The quotation from *Don Quixote* ironically suggests fame and fortune, but by its own artistic endeavour the novel hints that the real reason is elsewhere, whilst the scenario from Sartre's novel *Iron in the Soul* prods the reader in the direction of political seriousness over and above mere entertainment. There are assumptions in both which inform an understanding of the making of art. For one kind of artist, art has something to say about the world in order that it might be changed. Simultaneously, and sometimes in opposition, art is a means of transcending or removing oneself from reality, as if the world as we comprehend it is too much: Cervantes' novel plays on a confusion between the two as it lays before us his knight's attempt to transport chivalric texts into real life and thereby transform life itself. Whether as critique, mirror or escape, art exists within culture at the most profound levels. Which would seem to suggest that the artist, too, is a significant being. Yet it is more often the case than not that artists struggle to make a living out of their art. Is it only bad artists who suffer? A market interpretation would suggest so, but few, I suspect, would subscribe wholeheartedly to that. How do and should artists view themselves, and what language best describes what an artist does, the process of creativity the artist is engaged in, the role the artist finds him- or herself in? Or is it wrong to see the artist as engaged in a tussle with art and life; should we instead see the artist as a worker no different from any other who must find his or her way in the world, as a plumber, nurse or stockbroker has to do? Is

being an 'artist' a vocation? Is being a 'stockbroker'? Is the artist simply another member of the audience?

You may have noticed that I have been talking of 'artists' rather than 'writers'. Are writers artists? Or has the notion of 'artist' been narrowed to the field of fine arts, leaving writers to assign to themselves the moniker of 'poet', 'novelist' or 'screenwriter'? For writers to call themselves 'artists' these days might seem pretentious, or foolhardy given the criticism modern art attracts (see below), or pointless since being a 'poet' or 'novelist' speaks to all these concerns in any case. However, part of the idea behind this chapter is that writers might think of their roles as working within the broader field of art, and that they are 'artists' whose concerns are broader than those of 'writing' only.

Such a distinction between 'writers' and 'artists' would certainly not have been a point of dispute in the first half of the twentieth century, as the title of Joyce's novel about the growth of a writer, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), indicates. The hero of the title, Stephen Dedalus, is steeped in aesthetics and couches his future life in terms of vocation and ambition from within the domain of art, not just writing. When Virginia Woolf advises readers how to approach the strange new works we now term 'modernist', she writes: 'You must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist – the great artist – gives you' (Woolf 1966: 3). Modernist writers assumed that they were part of a general artistic endeavour – to contribute to the possibilities of art in the making of art, to take it upon themselves to challenge themselves and the world. Joyce's novel ends on a note of high artistic seriousness: 'Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race' (Joyce 1993: 218). However, a grand statement like this is likely to make today's writer unhappy, even though we know that it comes from the mouth of a self-consciously callow youth who might conceivably be forgiven for so blatantly reaching so high.

Why write? The Romantics

Even though Joyce's work is from the age of Modernism, Stephen is declaiming in the language of the Romantics. It is them we have to thank for the notion that the writer or artist is a different type of being from the rest of the world, someone who has a privileged vision and to whom the nature of the world is revealed: it is the artist who is inspired and has the ability to pass on such insights to mere mortals. There is no question here of *not* writing – the artist only has to be inspired, touched by the muse, to create. For Shelley, writing in 1821, the artist is an exceptional being, uniting the characters of legislator and prophet: '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 the latest time' (Shelley 1995: 958). But not only is the poet exceptional, the effects and scope of his work on society are virtually incalculable: 'Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and the circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred' (965). An artist making such claims now would be regarded as a deluded egomaniac, deluded about his or her own abilities and (possibly) about the power of art. Nevertheless, the language of the Romantics has continued to dominate ideas about the artist. In the twentieth century the sculptor Jacob Epstein said: 'A wife, a lover, can perhaps never see what the artist sees. They rarely ever do. Perhaps a really mediocre artist

has more chance of success' (Epstein, quoted in Simpson 1988). Epstein's view is a direct descendant of the Romantics' view, and echoes the idea that because the (better) artist has a special insight, it may be that the general audience will have difficulty understanding the art on offer: art that is rejected or misunderstood may simply be an art that is beyond its audience. And so with the notion of inspiration inevitably comes a notion of hierarchy – the artist's heightened perceptivity places him or her not just outside the audience, but above it. No wonder then that many artists can be uncomfortable with the language of art when it is phrased in Romantic terms; they may want to use the term 'inspired' to indicate a very real, bodily feeling in the process of creation, yet will not want to lay claim to any special powers. Yet, rather oddly, the Romantic notion, at the same time as it appears to make the individual something of a unique case, denies the notion of the artist as the origin of his or her creation, since the artist is merely the medium through which the work of art comes. It places artists in a paradoxical position: wanting to lay claim to possession of the fruits of their labour, yet avowing that the driving force is not theirs at all. Whilst the Romantic notion of the artist continues to permeate contemporary culture, eighty or so years later a new grouping of artists advanced the idea that the artist was an irrelevance and that the work of art itself was what was most important. This too has had a forceful legacy in our understanding of the role of the artist.

Why write?: the modernist aesthetic

Modern artists do not necessarily want to be identified too closely with the 'content' of their work when it comes to interpretation and appreciation, certainly not so closely that the work is seen to wholly embody who they are; they would mostly want to reject the idea that artists and the work they produce are interchangeable. There is a horror that an audience (or interviewer) will crudely assume that the central character, theme or emotion is the pure expression of the life experience of the artist. This contemporary separation of the work of art from the artist derives mainly from the modernists.

The modernists saw a different world from their immediate forebears, one that placed greater emphasis on subjective experience, on the workings of the mind, and on the building blocks of art itself: language, narrative, form, colour, sound. To get at the newly perceived reality demanded attention to inner worlds and the artistic tools at hand to represent those worlds. One consequence was that art from the modernists moved away from an art that always had its audience in mind. Joseph Conrad wanted to make the reader 'see' (Conrad [1897] 1997: 128–31), but not in the same way as Dickens had wanted to open his readers' eyes to the appalling social conditions of the day which they lived next door to but could not 'see', or chose to ignore; Conrad's understanding of 'seeing' is that it is constructed through language, narrative, and cultural and social convention, not simply revealed or obscured by social upbringing or status. The emphasis is on the work of art itself. The modernist aesthetic is determined to make the work of art stand alone, to be autonomous. The young man in Joyce's novel argues that the artist should remain incognito: 'The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails' (Joyce 1993: 187). The work of art remains a law unto itself, each piece unique and with it its own set of rules, completely independent of the writer and its audience, self-directed, 'autotelic'. Another famous declaration from the modernist period is T. S. Eliot's essay 'Tradition and the individual talent' (1922), which also wishes to remove the writer from the equation by calling for an 'impersonality' of

art, where the writer has to somehow be capable of excising what is personal from his or her artistic endeavour:

There are many people who appreciate the expression of sincere emotion in verse, and there is a smaller number of people who can appreciate technical excellence. But very few know when there is expression of *significant* emotion, emotion which has its life in the poem and not in the history of the poet. The emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done. (Eliot 2005: 18)

This is both a theory of how art should be appreciated (non-biographically) and how it should be written (objectively). The artist is removed both from the process of creativity and from the creation. It is possible then to see that one of the modern difficulties for the artist is that there is a strong aesthetic derived from modernism, from modernist artists themselves, which demands a sidelining of the artist as important. We can have the art, but not the artist. This may explain the diffidence of many contemporary artists in talking about themselves and their works – although not all, of course.

Why write?: truth, politics, art

While modern artists might wish to distance themselves from the Romantic notion of the artist as hierophant, and also remain distanced from their work after the modernist fashion, it is also the case that it is rare for contemporary artists to assert that their work is primarily about raising social awareness in the manner that the novels of the nineteenth century did, in the way that the work of Dickens and Gaskell, for instance, did. Documentaries and investigative journalism would appear to be much better situated for this kind of work. It is not that modern artists refuse to comment on the modern world, it is that openly 'social' art – where the drive is primarily 'political' rather than 'artistic' – is categorised as 'propaganda' and therefore not good art.

It is not always the case. George Orwell gave four reasons for writing: 'Sheer Egoism', 'Aesthetic Enthusiasm', 'Historical Impulse' (the desire to see things as they are and record them) and 'Political Purpose' ('desire to push the world in a certain direction') (Orwell 1968: 3–4). Initially mainly motivated by the first three reasons, the Spanish Civil War 'and other events in 1936–7 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic socialism, as I understand it' (5). Dorothy Allison in a piece entitled 'Believing in literature' says that the reason for her writing is the desire to tell the truth in a publishing world which has difficulty appreciating her particular social, sexual and political context: poor, lesbian and Southern. She aims to tell the truth because mainstream publishing only reflects its own prejudices (Allison 1995: 178–93). On the other hand, we have a writer like John Banville who sees no overt moral or social intent in art. If there is anything moral to emerge it is just that 'the work of art represents the absolute best that a particular human being could do – perhaps even a little more than he could do' (Banville 2005: 51). E. A. Markham has this to say:

Once, when asked why he wrote, John La Rose said: 'Because they lie about you. They pretend to speak for you and they lie about you.' I was encouraged by this, for I thought if anyone should

lie about me, I should be accorded that privilege. Though I would aim, naturally, to tell the truth. (Markham 2002: 94)

The problem is that 'truth' is not what it used to be (as Markham recognises), and again, from the modernists onwards, it has been difficult to lay claim to 'truth' in the way that the Victorians, for instance, did, or to share the kind of absolute political faith Orwell evinces at a time of political crisis. And the 'truth' about what? Subjective, experiential truth, vouchsafed for by artists themselves, is one thing; social or political truths are another.

It is a commonplace that bringing politics into art is the quickest way to bad writing. It will replace any artistry with vulgar preaching, replace entertainment with the didactic. Yet, if politics is taken in the broader sense of wanting to make some kind of intervention in the order of things, as Orwell takes it, in what sense could any serious work of art not be political? The Banville quotation might be the counter-argument, an argument that rests on aesthetics, a version of art-for-art's sake. But even here, surely, the intervention is in the possibilities of art, that the best art will expand art's horizons, and as such have significance in that way. But is that politics? Isn't that precisely the retreat from politics, the visit to MOMA to *escape* the world. Turning to John Burnside, here talking about his volume *The Asylum Dance* and its interest in 'dwelling', suggests that there is simply a reluctance for the writer to say what he is writing 'about', as if this is to betray oneself as unsophisticated, or not an 'artist', underlying which is no doubt a sense that what the writer does is work on his or her materials in order to create something that is not reducible to paraphrase:

I have no desire – and do not presume – to write openly polemical poetry 'about' the environment, first because I tend to dislike, as a matter of personal taste, poetry that is 'about' anything (no matter how worthwhile the subject matter); second, because the poetry I most value tells, as it were, in an oblique way, rather than directly.

Yet he concludes: 'Nevertheless, I do consider the poetry in this book meaningfully political (amongst other things), in that it tells – obliquely – some stories about dwelling, and about estrangement – which are, I believe, vital questions with regard to our participation in the life-world as a whole' (Burnside 2003: 24).

Burnside's predicament would seem typical of the contemporary artist: he wants to validate the importance of the artist whilst at the same time subscribing to the modernist aesthetic, Joyce's artist 'paring his fingernails' or T. S. Eliot's 'impersonality'. He wants to say something but not be caught doing it; he doesn't want to say anything but wants to say it well, since anybody can 'say' something, since anybody can have an opinion. It is the artist's 'purist' dream, perhaps, the novel that is all blank pages, the piece of music that is silence, the film that is one long unedited shot, the show that is a 'show about nothing'. Ian McEwan, in conversation with Zadie Smith, puts it like this: 'The dream surely, Zadie, that we all have, is to write this beautiful paragraph that actually is describing something but at the same time in another voice is writing a commentary on its own creation, without having to be a story about a writer' (Vida 2005: 225).

The desire to say things in such a way that they are not reducible to paraphrase, court- ing the charge of 'difficulty', 'inaccessibility' and 'elitism', is the modernist attitude of the artist, and, like the Romantic stance, can appear arrogant and anti-democratic. On the other hand, a modern artist who gives interviews, who is accessible to the public through readings, is faced, as we have seen, with the conflation of themselves with their works of art in a way which detracts from the art. Here is an example of a writer experiencing this very

difficulty, of trying to be open to an audience yet struggling with its ‘misapprehension’, its desire to ascribe both a biographical connection and a social imperative:

I did a reading a couple of months ago that was opened for questions from the audience at the end. One man asked if I’d had a particular set of tower blocks in mind when writing a poem that talks about tower blocks. I said yes, and explained which ones. He then asked me if I had been trying to ‘draw our attention to something’ by writing the poem, and burred something about social problems. It wasn’t so much steely incomprehension as cheerful misapprehension. I didn’t really know how to respond, so I just laughed and said that if you’re trying to draw attention to something then a poem probably isn’t the best way to go about it. But it was disheartening to be confronted with the idea that people might read this particular poem and try and ascribe some kind of crude sociological agenda to it – ‘Look at these poor people, look at how they live’ – rather than the slightly subtler, less dogmatic treatment I had deluded myself into thinking I’d achieved. (Leviston 2006)

The public perception of modern art

Modern art itself is open to charges of elitism that brings it, and by natural association, artists, into disrepute. ‘Is modern art off its head?’ is a typical headline (Lawson 2006: 30), but this particular debate and perception about ‘modern’ art is at least a century old. Tolstoy in *What is Art?* (1898) fumed against the new art of his time – particularly the decadents and aesthetes – and the argument that it takes a cultured person to understand this kind of art, an art which is inaccessible to the majority of the population:

Nothing is more common than to hear said of alleged works of art that they are very good but very difficult to understand. We are used to the assertion, and yet to say that a work of art is good but incomprehensible is the same as saying of some kind of food that it is very good but people cannot eat it. (Tolstoy 1995: 80)

More recently, John Carey’s *What Good are the Arts?*, from which the Lawson commentary takes its cue, detects a similar disaffection amongst ‘the masses’ for

various kinds of conceptual art, performance art, body art, installations, happenings, videos and computer programmes. They arouse fury in many because they seem . . . to be deliberate insults to people of conventional taste (as, indeed, they often are). By implication such artworks categorize those who fail to appreciate them as a lesser kind of human being, lacking the special faculties that art requires and fosters in its adherents. In retaliation, those who dislike the new art forms denounce them as not just inauthentic but dishonest, false claimants seeking to enter the sacred portals of true art. (Carey 2005: x)

Carey locates the decline in the appreciation of ‘new’ art in the 1960s, with the demise of painting, rather than with the emergent modernism so detested by Tolstoy. He identifies the role of the artist to be a fairly useless one, since art in itself is relatively useless. Many of the claims of importance that art often makes for itself are thoroughly demolished in his book: art does not represent a unique realm of culture; there is no work of art which can be said to have universal greatness; it does not make you a better person; there is no objective distinction between ‘high’ art and ‘low’ art – it is simply a matter of cultural

construction; art's value in education is unprovable; experiencing art may lead to feelings of ecstasy, but then so might football violence. He comes to a conclusion at the end of the first section that rather than being an activity confined to social or class elites, art needs to be democratised:

Perhaps if more money had been spent on, more imagination and effort devoted to, more government initiative directed towards art in schools and art in the community, Britain's prisons would not now be so overcrowded . . . It is time we gave active art a chance to make us better. (Carey 2005: 167)

It may seem that what we are talking about here has no relation to writing, it is about the use of art as a social panacea in opposition to the kind of modern art that is 'off its head'. However, it is related in two ways. First, writing falls within the realm of art, even if it is not (on the face of it) the kind of 'expensive' art Carey is discussing (paintings and sculptures, for instance). Secondly, the arguments in defence of modern art that he trashes are precisely the same arguments that are often used in defence of 'literary fiction', poetry and theatre. Interestingly, and bizarrely, in the second half of the book Carey advances writing and literature as the very cure-all for the ills of contemporary society he says is needed, whilst acknowledging he has no basis for his argument other than his own subjective taste and the benefits he has seen of introducing writing programmes into prisons, and the (unsupported) argument that providing an accessible, social art in schools will prevent the need for prisons in any case. The stakes for valuing art would appear to be extremely high, whilst at the same time there would appear to be no basis for identifying what counts as art, and if we were to know it when we saw it, it would have to be readily accessible to a general public in the manner that Tolstoy once argued. The modern-day writer wishing to take his or her art seriously does not have an easy time of it with a general audience or with certain critics. It should also be noted that Carey talks of 'the arts' and not of artists, again accentuating a modernist aesthetic that validates the work of art (after a fashion) but not its creator.

The Author in criticism and literary theory

Scott McCracken (in this book) remarks that when student writers are presented with literary theory and criticism they can often seem hostile to it:

Ideas such as the 'death of the author', which can seem fresh and exciting in a third year undergraduate seminar on a traditional English degree, can appear absurd in a room full of struggling novelists; and their derision is hardly likely to be contradicted by a creative writing tutor who writes to live.

The response is not surprising, either from student writers or, indeed, from published authors. The history of twentieth-century literary criticism is one where the text itself has become all-important (mirroring the importance of the work of art at the expense of the artist), and the writer as an existing or once existing living person disappears from critical or theoretical attention. This is broadly the case throughout the twentieth century, although from about the 1960s onwards the reasons for dismissing the author change from those reasons advanced earlier in the century. More recently there has been work to reintegrate the author into literary theory and thus critical practice, complicated

or smoothed by the increasing amount of interest in creative writing as an activity within the academy, from writers themselves and from academics. There is now a body of writers within the academy which is itself cognisant of what literary critics and theorists do and say about them, although this in itself does not necessarily negate what hostility there may be.

We have already seen that the separation of the work of art from the artist is initiated by writers and artists themselves at the beginning of the twentieth century. Once the work of art is finished and in the public domain the artist is no longer required either by the work of art, the artist or its audience. Following on from this, literary criticism from the 1920s onwards appeared to take the writers at their own words and argued that yes, indeed, writers were of no importance when it came to evaluating or interpreting literature. In practice 'Practical Criticism' in the UK and 'New Criticism' in the US became an ideal model for teaching and scholarship – the critic approaches the text as a verbal construct full of ambiguity, linguistic balance, and nuanced meaning organically organised, which then requires the wit of a trained academic to uncover and explicate. Students are given texts with no contextual information – everything they need is present in the 'well-wrought urn'. The killer blow to the writer came with Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay 'The Intentional Fallacy' (1946) in which they claimed that the reader can never know what the author's intentions were, and in fact, the authors themselves might have difficulty telling you. The intentional fallacy still holds strong today in theory and criticism, as Carey illustrates: 'Literary theorists effectively disposed of intentionalism as an evaluative procedure in the mid-twentieth century' (Carey 2005: 22).

What people are no doubt most familiar with, however, is the phrase 'the death of the author'. Rather than just an extension of what has already been said about the modernist aesthetic and the intentional fallacy, the arguments for killing off the author in literary theory and practice change in the second half of the twentieth century. 'The death of the author' derives from a Roland Barthes essay of that name (1968). Here is a passage from its opening.

In his story *Sarrasine* Balzac, describing a castrato disguised as a woman, writes the following sentence: '*This was woman herself, with her sudden fears, her irrational whims, her instinctive worries, her impetuous boldness, her fussings, and her delicious sensibility.*' Who is speaking thus? Is it the hero of the story bent on remaining ignorant of the castrato hidden beneath the woman? Is it Balzac the individual, furnished by his personal experience with a philosophy of Woman? Is it Balzac the author professing 'literary' ideas on femininity? Is it universal wisdom? Romantic psychology? We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (Barthes 1994: 114)

We cannot know 'who is speaking', or, put another way, we cannot identify 'an author', because writing itself, or text, or textuality, has a certain characteristic which removes 'voice' and 'origin'. This is a poststructural viewpoint, that everything exists as an inter-related text, unpickable, everything is text, including the world (pretty much). There is no such thing as individual identity, either for writers or for texts. In the poststructural view we, you and I, are 'subjects', constructed out of a myriad of historical and cultural forces. There is nothing unique about any of us, therefore there can be no unique individual called 'an author' to which or to whom we can refer if we want to understand what a text is saying. All of these notions – Romantic inspiration, the modernist aesthetic, the intentional

fallacy, and the death of the author – remain potent forces in contemporary culture, and certainly do contribute to an overriding feeling that the artist has little to offer in terms of insight with respect to their own work. Comments they might make have no greater weight than comments by any other member of the public. To take the opposite point of view – that the artist naturally has the greatest insight into his or her work – has the tendency to move the discussion back onto the grounds of biographical understanding, towards which, as we have seen, artists themselves often have a great antipathy.

‘The death of the author’ view was in the ascendancy until the 1990s. In theory and criticism it probably still is the norm – somebody would have to do a lot of special pleading for proposing or assuming that his or her critical work could be based on something like authorial intention. However, there has been some renewed interest in the role of the author, although with certain caveats. The main proponent of returning attention back to the author is Seán Burke:

When one also takes into account the sheer incomprehensibility of ‘the death of the author’ to even the finest minds outside the institution, it is clear that the concept functioned to keep the non-academic at bay: thereby, one more obstacle to the re-emergence of a culture of letters was put in place. (Burke 1998: ix)

Burke wants to return the author to theory using a language that does not have the difficulty of much of literary theory. However, the book is subtitled *Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* and so most of the book is engaged with close readings of these theorists. If ever you wanted to maintain the barrier between a culture of letters and a rarefied academic environment this is surely the way to do it. Undoubtedly there is something odd about telling a world of writers that ‘the author is dead’, but having to return the author to the living via Derrida is equally alienating, and it may be some time yet before the author is restored to both theory and a culture of letters.

The (self)-manipulating author: the writing ‘I’

Nevertheless, Burke’s path to the return of the author more generally might be quite helpful: ‘This issue . . . is the need to arrive at a model of situated subjectivity. We are a long way off any such model, but the spectre of the inconceivable should not deter us from its adventure’ (Burke 1998: ix). The problem then, as Burke sees it, is that the postmodern notion of subjectivity predominates and that any new theory would have to take this into account. (It could be argued that ‘postmodern subjectivity’ – the concept that we are not autonomous beings at all, but are merely the sum total of our historical and genetic circumstances – may appear just as counter-intuitive to ‘the finest minds outside the institution’ as does the argument about ‘the death of the author’, and therefore just as jargon-ridden.)

There are a number of authors who have agreed with the postmodern view of subjectivity, or pretended to agree, so that just as there was a meshing of modernist aesthetics and the critical and theoretical work that followed, there has been a similar meshing in postmodern art and postmodern criticism and theory. Not only have they agreed with it, but used it to their advantage in creating art and a complex authorial persona that infects and informs the art itself. For example, here is Jorge Luis Borges toying with our view of ‘him’:

The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically now, to look at the arch of an

entrance hall and the grillwork on the gate; I know of Borges from the mail and see his name on a list of professors or in a biographical dictionary. I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. (Borges 1964: 282)

Borges is making capital out of the distance between the author in the public domain and the living, psychological entity, the writer writing. The writer only recognises his existence as a definable author in an amused, affected manner. The public can only know the writer as a public construct, an 'author', which the writer himself may have had a hand in manipulating. The situation is further complicated because the status of the piece 'Borges and I' is unclear: is it an autobiographical note or a short story (in my copy it is actually in a section headed 'Parables', which creates further difficulties)? 'Borges and I' ends: 'I do not know which of us has written this page' (283). Roy Fisher's poem 'Of the Empirical Self and for Me' begins: 'In my poems there's seldom / any I or you –' followed by an indented 'you know me, Mary; / you wouldn't expect it of me –' only for the remainder of the poem to veer off into a landscape which appears impersonal and disconnected from the opening gambit, disappointing the reader who has been led to believe that there will either be some kind of 'I' revelation, or at least a further disquisition on this very subject matter. The poem itself is dedicated 'for M.E.', which could either be Mary or a split self, m/e (Fisher 2005: 239). Without actually delving into Roy Fisher's life, or phoning him up, I have no way of knowing, and even then both interpretations might remain open.

This kind of writing foregrounds the issue of authorship and subjectivity: the gaps between writer (the living, psychological and physical human being), the author (public perception and construct attached to the name of the writer), the artist (the wider, public role). The very fact that we have the works of the writer/author/artist before us as an index of these three elements makes the network virtually intractable in terms of understanding it (and see Aaron Kunin's chapter in this book for more discussion on the 'I' in literature). Alice Munro's collection *The Moons of Jupiter* has a number of writers as narrators, and in the story 'The Moons of Jupiter' we are presented with this interesting scenario:

I was tired from the drive – all the way up to Dalglish, to get him, and back to Toronto since noon – and worried about getting the rented car back on time, and irritated by an article I had been reading in a magazine in the waiting room. It was about another writer, a woman younger, better-looking, probably more talented than I am. I had been in England for two months and so I had not seen this article before, but it crossed my mind while I was reading that my father would have. I could hear him saying, Well, I didn't see anything about you in *Maclean's*. And if he read something about me he would say, Well, I didn't think too much of that writeup. His tone would be humorous and indulgent but would produce in me a familiar dreariness of spirit. The message I got from him was simple: Fame must be striven for, then apologized for. Getting or not getting it, you will be to blame. (Munro 2004: 218–19)

Within the passage many of the concerns of a contemporary writer are apparent: other writers, the public perception, the writer's own status, the double-edged sword of fame, the varying degrees of 'recognition', of being validated as a 'writer'. But at the same time the reader cannot but help wonder about 'Alice Munro', the writer behind the author of a piece of writing concerned about being a writer/author. Is the writer in the story like Alice Munro in any way? But the writer in the story feels second-rate to another author. Does Alice Munro seriously suffer such an inferiority complex? Given her reputation that

would seem unlikely? But then I check the date of publication – 1978 – when I suspect Alice Munro didn't then quite have the reputation as one of the world's greatest short story writers (but I may be wrong – how will I find out?). Or perhaps the joke is that it is the *other* writer – the more talented one – who is closer to the real Alice Munro? All futile speculation, of course, cleverly set off by the story's craft, but again, like the Borges and the Fisher, exploiting to the full the contemporary cultural position of the writer/author/artist. There is nothing new about writers appearing as characters in writing – Cervantes 'the author' appears in *Don Quixote* – but the relation between the work of art and its creator would seem more complicated than ever within this 'crisis of subjectivity'. If there is nothing 'centred' or 'autonomous' about individuals, it makes it doubly difficult to discuss 'the author' or 'the writer' as something or someone singly identifiable within contemporary culture.

Timothy Clark's *The Theory of Inspiration* (1997) quotes from a number of writers showing how the very act of writing is itself a split in subjectivity, with at least two 'I's involved: 'Derrida quotes Merleau-Ponty: "My own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think"' (18), and Brewster Ghiselin on the process of writing: "Now I began to see more clearly and fully what I was trying to say"', with Clark noting 'an unacknowledged disjunction here between the first and second "I," (Compare Virginia Woolf's diary entry: "I begin to see what I had in my mind")' (19). It is as if in the process of writing, it is what is written which doubles back on writers to confirm them and clarify what it is they are really thinking: there is a writing 'I' and a writer 'I' who, through the writing, comes to understand what the writing 'I' was doing all along. Clark takes this even further by showing how some times what we might call the writer-I only emerges at the time when writing occurs, and that calling up this writer-I can be a surprise to the everyday-I. That might account for the disjunction between the public's awareness and expectations of an author, and the ability of the author in the public arena to fulfil those expectations.

Although 'inspiration' is a somewhat discredited term in literary theory and criticism, it is clearly of interest to writers themselves, and in the way it is framed by Clark perhaps offers some kind of rapprochement between contemporary ideas of subjectivity and writing. Along the same lines, 'creativity' might be of interest as a subject for artists, and there is a lot of research ranging from the cultural to the neuroscientific (Sternberg 1999; Pfenninger and Shubik 2001; Pope 2005), but it remains outside the remit of much work in literary theory. Nevertheless, a book like Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson's *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* (2006) is a sustained attempt to integrate awareness of these theoretical issues with advice about creative writing for the writer (and see Sampson's chapter in this volume), and Lauri Ramey (this volume) shows how literary theory can be positively used in the teaching of creative writing. Perhaps one should bear in mind the dangers of not being able to articulate the disjunctions apparent between the everyday 'I', the writing 'I' and the writer 'I'. In Muriel Spark's first novel *The Comforters* (1957), the central character 'hears' the tapping out of the novel she is writing, literally, leading her to wonder about her own sanity. It parodies Romantic theories of inspiration, conflated with the religious 'hearing' the voice of God, and yet at the same time provides an accommodation of the modernist distancing of the work from the artist producing it which itself seems open to question.

The role of the artist

The language of the artist is not often that of literary criticism or literary theory. Nor, as we have seen, is it often the language of its audience, an audience that wants to identify the

writer with the works as closely as possible in terms of biography. When nineteenth-century writers addressed their 'dear reader' there was a context of intimacy, of an author speaking to his or her public, even if the possibility of there ever being such a direct, uncomplicated connection is now disputed. A 'dear reader' address now might have the appearance of unadorned communication, but it would be difficult to take at face value. The contemporary artist wants a knowing public, wants an audience that is aware of the sophistication of his or her art, a sophistication that is obviously felt to be lacking when the art is understood biographically. It is not easy to navigate through the demands of self, writing, being 'an author', the desire for a public that wants the art and not the artist (well, not all the artist), indeed the artist's desire for a public that wants 'art' rather than 'comfort', and the artist's desire for a critical acclaim that is not necessarily written in the language of criticism.

References

- Allison, Dorothy (1995), 'Believing in literature', from 'Skin: talking about sex, class and literature', in Jack Heffron (ed.), *The Best of Writing on Writing*, vol. 2, Cincinnati: Story Press, pp. 178–93.
- Banville, John (2005), in conversation with Ben Ehrenreich, in Vendela Vida (ed.), *Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*, San Francisco: Believer Books, pp. 43–58.
- Barthes, Roland (1994), 'The death of the author', in Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (eds), *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, 2nd edn, London: Edward Arnold, pp. 114–18.
- Borges, Jorge Luis (1964), *Labyrinths*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Burke, Seán (1998), *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*, 2nd edn, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Burnside, John (2003), in Clare Brown and Don Paterson (eds), *Don't Ask Me What I Mean*, London: Picador, pp. 23–4.
- Carey, John (2005), *What Good are the Arts?* London: Faber.
- Cervantes (1986), *Don Quixote*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Clark, Timothy (1997), *The Theory of Inspiration*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Conrad, Joseph [1897] (1997), 'Author's note' to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, London: Everyman.
- Eliot, T. S. (1922), 'Tradition and the individual talent', www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html (accessed 12 July 2006).
- Epstein, Jacob, in *Simpson's Contemporary Quotations* (1988), www.bartleby.com/63/11/5711.html (accessed 12 July 2006).
- Fisher, Roy (2005), *The Long and the Short of It. Poems 1955–2005*, Tarsset: Bloodaxe.
- Hunt, Celia and Fiona Sampson (2006), *Writing: Self and Reflexivity*, 3rd edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Joyce, James (1993), *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, R. B. Kershner (ed.), Boston: Bedford Books.
- Lawson, Mark (2006), 'Is modern art off its head?', *The Guardian* 16 June, p. 30.
- Leviston, Frances (2006), post to Hallam Poets Forum, www.poetburo.org, 10 June.
- Markham, E. A. (2002), *A Rough Climate*, London: Anvil Press.
- McCracken, Scott (2007), 'The role of the critical essay', this volume.
- Munro, Alice (2004), *The Moons of Jupiter*, London: Vintage.
- Orwell, George (1968), 'Why I write' in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell. Volume 1. An Age Like This 1920–40*. London: Secker and Warburg, pp. 1–6.
- Pfenninger, Karl H. and Valerie R. Shubik (eds) (2001), *The Origins of Creativity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Pope, Rob (2005), *Creativity. Theory, History, Practice*. London: Routledge.

- Ramey, Lauri (2007), 'Creative writing and critical theory', this volume.
- Sampson, Fiona (2007), 'Writing as "therapy"', this volume.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (2002), *Iron in the Soul*, London: Penguin.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe (1995), 'A defence of poetry' in Duncan Wu (ed.), *Romanticism: An Anthology*, Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 956–69.
- Spark, Muriel (1963), *The Comforters*, London: Penguin.
- Sternberg, Robert J. (ed.) (1999), *Handbook of Creativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tolstoy, Leo [1898] (1995), *What is Art?*, London: Penguin.
- Vida, Vendela (ed.) (2005), *Believer Book of Writers Talking to Writers*, San Francisco: Believer Books.
- Wimsatt, W. K. R., Jr, and M. Beardsley (1954), *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press.
- Woolf, Virginia (1966), 'How should one read a book?' in *Virginia Woolf. Collected Essays*, Vol. 2, London: The Hogarth Press.