

Authors on Authorship*

1. *Theatre and Drama*

Luigi Pirandello, from 'Prefazione', in *Sei personaggi in cerca di autore* ('Preface' in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*), 1925

What author will ever be able to say how and why a character was born in his fantasy? The mystery of artistic creation is like the mystery of birth. A woman who loves may wish to become a mother; but the desire alone, however intense, cannot suffice. One day she will find herself a mother without any precise consciousness when it began. In the same way an artist, while living, absorbs many germs of life and can never say how and why, at a given moment, one of these vital germs has implanted itself into his fantasy to become a living creature on a plane of life superior to that of the ephemeral daily existence.

I can only say that, without being aware that I had seeked them out, I found before me, alive – you could touch them and even hear them breathe – the six characters that you now see on the stage. And they were waiting there, in my presence, each with his secret torment and all bound together by the one common origin and mutual weaving of their cases, waiting for me to let them enter the world of art, constructing from their persons, their passions and their affairs a novel, a play, or at least a story.

Born alive, they wished to live.

...

Creatures of my spirit, those six were already living a life which was their own and no longer mine, a life which it was not any more in my power to deny them.

So much so that, while I persisted in my desire to drive them out of my mind, they, almost completely separated from every narrative support, characters from a novel miraculously rising from the pages of the book which contained them, went on living on their own; they chose certain moments of the day to reappear before me in the loneliness of my study and coming – now one, now the other, now two together – tempted me and proposed that I represented or described this scene or that, the effects that could be drawn from them, the new interest which a certain unusual situation could raise and so forth.

...

Why not, I then said to myself, present this highly new fact of an author who refuses to let some characters live though they have been born alive in his fantasy and the case of these characters who, having acquired life in their

veins, do not accept to remain excluded from the world of art? They are now separated from me; they have a life of their own; have acquired voice and movement; have indeed by themselves – in this struggle for existence that they have had to wage with me – already become dramatic characters, characters that can move and talk on their own initiative; already see themselves as such; have learned to defend themselves against me and so will know how to defend themselves against others. And so let them go where dramatic characters go to become living characters: on a stage. And let us see what will happen.

That's what I did. And, naturally, it happened what it had to happen: a mixture of tragic and comic, of fantastic and realistic, in a humorous situation that was altogether new and infinitely complex; a drama which, by itself and through its characters who, breathing speaking moving, carry that drama inwardly, seeks at all costs to be represented.

...

What I wanted was to represent six characters in search of an author. Their drama cannot be represented – precisely because the author whom they seek is missing. What is represented, instead, is the comedy of their vain attempt with all that it contains of tragedy because of the fact that these six characters have been rejected.

But can one represent characters while rejecting them? Obviously, to represent them one needs, on the contrary, to receive them into one's own fantasy and then express them. And I have indeed accepted and realized these six characters: I have, however, accepted and realized them as rejected: in search of another author.

Jorge Luis Borges, 'Todo y nada', in *El hacedor* ('Everything and Nothing', in *The Maker*), 1960

There was no one in him; behind his face (which even through the bad paintings of those times resembles no other face) and his words, which were copious, fantastic and restless, there was only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one. At first he thought that all people were like him, but the surprise of a friend to whom he had begun to comment on this emptiness showed him his error and made him feel since then that individuals should not differ from their species. At times he thought that in books there was a cure for his illness and thus he learned the small Latin and less Greek a contemporary would speak of; later he considered that in an elementary rite of humanity might well be found what he sought and, during a long June afternoon, let himself be initiated by Anne Hathaway. At the age of twenty-odd years he went to London. Instinctively, he had already trained for the habit of simulating that he was someone, so that his condition as no one would not be discovered; in London he found the profession to which he was predestined, that of the actor

who, on a stage, plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person. His histrionic tasks brought him a special satisfaction, perhaps the first he experienced; but, once the last line had been applauded and the last corpse withdrawn from the stage, the hated flavour of unreality returned to him. He ceased to be Ferrex or Tamburlaine and became no one again. Hounded, he began to imagine other heroes and other tragic fables. Thus, while his body fulfilled its destiny as body in the brothels and taverns of London, the soul that inhabited it was Caesar, who disregards the soothsayer's admonition, and Juliet who abhors the lark, and Macbeth, who converses on the plain with the witches who are also Fates. No one has ever been so many men as this man who, like the Egyptian Proteus, could exhaust all the semblances of being. At times he left a confession in some corner of his work, certain that it would not be deciphered; Richard affirms that in his person he plays the part of many and Iago claims with strange words *I am not what I am*. The fundamental identity of existing, dreaming and representing inspired famous passages of his.

For twenty years he persisted in that controlled hallucination, but one morning he was gripped by the revulsion and the horror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many unfortunate lovers who converge, diverge and melodiously agonize. That very day he decided to sell his theatre. Within a week he returned to his native village, where he recovered the trees and river of his childhood and did not connect them to the others his muse had celebrated, illustrious with mythological allusions and Latin sounds. He had to be someone; he was a retired impresario who had made a fortune and is interested in loans, litigations and petty usury. In this character he dictated the arid testament known to us, from which he deliberately excluded all traces of pathos or literature. His friends from London would visit him in his retreat and for them he would resume his role as poet.

History adds that, before or after dying, he found himself in the presence of God and told Him: *I, who have been so many men in vain, want to be one and myself*. The voice of the Lord answered from a whirl: *Neither am I anyone; I dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms of my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one*.

Eugenio Montale, 'Le storie letterarie', in *Quaderno di quattro anni* ('Literary Histories', in *Four Years' Copybook*), 1977

I have ever been of the opinion
that Shakespeare was a cooperative.
That for his buffooneries he availed himself
of buskers equal to him in genius
but indifferent to everything except money.

William Shakespeare, *2 Henry IV*, 1600 [?], Epilogue

First my fear, then my curtsy, last my speech
 My fear, is your displeasure; my curtsy, my duty; and my speech, to beg your pardons. If you look for a good speech now, you undo me; for what I have to say is of mine own making; and what, indeed, I should say will, I doubt, prove mine own marring. But to the purpose, and so to the venture. Be it known to you, as it is very well, I was lately here in the end of a displeasing play, to pray your patience for it and to promise you a better. I meant, indeed, to pay you with this; which, if like an ill venture it come unluckily home, I break, and you, my gentle creditors, lose. Here I promis'd you I would be, and here I commit my body to your mercies. Bate me some, and I will pay you some, and, as most debtors do, promise you infinitely; and so I kneel down before you – but, indeed, to pray for the Queen.

If my tongue cannot entreat you to acquit me, will you command me to use my legs? And yet that were but light payment – to dance out of your debt. But a good conscience will make any possible satisfaction, and so would I. All the gentlewomen here have forgiven me. If the gentlemen will not, then the gentlemen do not agree with the gentlewomen, which was never seen before in such an assembly.

One word more, I beseech you. If you be not too much cloy'd with fat meat, our humble author will continue the story, with Sir John in it, and make you merry with fair Katherine of France; where, for anything I know, Falstaff shall die of a sweat, unless already a be killed with your hard opinions; for Oldcastle died a martyr and this is not the man. My tongue is weary; when my legs are too, I will bid you good night.

Carlo Goldoni, from *Mémoires*, 1787

While I worked on certain old repertoires of the Italian Comedy and only produced half-written and half-impromptu plays, they let me enjoy the applause of the audience, but as soon as I professed myself an author, an inventor, a poet, spirits awoke from their lethargy and made me the object of their attention and criticism.

My fellow-countrymen, who had been used for such a long time to trivial farces and to gigantic representations, became all of a sudden rigorous censors of my productions; they made the names of Aristotle, Horace and Castelvetro resound in intellectual circles and my works became the news of the day.

...

I needed to clear out and I went to Bologna, to join my players.

As soon as I arrived in this city, I went into a coffee-house which is opposite the church of San Petronio; I come in, no one recognises me; after a few minutes a local gentleman arrives and, addressing a table where five or six people he knows

are sitting, tells them in good Bolognese: 'Do you know the news, my friends?' He is asked what the news is. 'The news is that Goldoni is arriving.' 'I don't care', one says, 'What is it to me?' another adds. The third answers more honestly: 'I would be pleased to see him ...'; 'Indeed, a fine thing to see', the first two say. 'He is', the other answers, 'the author of these fine comedies ...' He is interrupted by a man who had not spoken up till then and who cries in a loud voice: 'Oh, yes, a great author! A magnificent author who has disposed of the masks and stock characters, who has spoiled Comedy ...' At this point, Doctor Fiume arrives and says, embracing me: 'Ah, my dear Goldoni, you are very welcome!' The one who had expressed the wish to know me came close to me and the others slipped off.

...

I got into my stagecoach, resumed my route and, at night, arrived in Bologna. It was in this city, the mother of sciences and the Athens of Italy, that a few years before they had complained about the fact that my reformation tended to suppress the four stock characters of the Italian *Commedia*. People in Bologna were more than others keen on that genre of comedies. There were, among them, people of merit who delighted in composing *scenari* and some very clever citizens played them skillfully and highly pleased the city.

The admirers of the old *Commedie*, seeing that the new comedy was rapidly progressing, started to shout everywhere that it was unworthy of an Italian to make an attempt against a genre of comedies in which Italy had excelled and that no other nation had been able to imitate. But the thing which most highly shocked those riotous spirits was the fact that my system seemed to threaten the suppression of masks and stock characters. They said that those characters had delighted Italy for two hundred years and that Italy should not be deprived of a form of humour which she had invented and which she had so well promoted.

...

The mask cannot but damage the actor's action, either in representing joy or in representing sorrow; whether he is in love, surly or agreeable, it is always the same *leather* which is shown; he can gesture and change the tone of his voice as much as he likes, but he will never be able to communicate, through the traits of his face, which are the heart's interpreters, the different passions which agitate his soul.

Masks, in Greek and Roman theatre, were a sort of mouthpiece which had been imagined so that the characters might be distinguished and heard in the vast extension of the amphitheatre. Passions and feelings were not, in those times, as refined as is required today; today an actor must have a soul and a soul behind a mask is like the fire under the ashes.

This is why I had devised the project to reform the masks of the Italian *Commedia* and replace farces with comedies.

But complaints increased day by day: the two parties had become disgusting to me, and so I tried to please both. I complied to produce some plays based on *scenari*, but did not stop staging my comedies of character. I used the masks in the first and turned to noble and interesting comicity in the second; so all took

their own part of pleasure and, with time and patience, I made them all agree and I had the satisfaction of seeing myself authorized to follow my own taste which became, in a few years, the most general and the most popular in Italy.

2. Poetry

Isabella Andreini, *Rime di Isabella Andreini Padovana. Comica Gelosa (Rhymes of Isabella Andreini from Padua. Comica Gelosa)*, 1601

Sonetto Primo

S'alcun fia mai, che i versi miei negletti
 Legga, non creda à questi finti ardori;
 Che ne le Scene imaginati amori
 Vsa à trattar con non leali affetti:
 Con bugiardi non men con finti detti
 De le Muse spiegai gli alti furori:
 Talhor piangendo i falsi miei dolori,
 Talhor cantando i falsi miei dilette;
 E come ne' Teatri hor Donna, ed hora
 Huom fei rappresentando in vario stile
 Quanto volle insegnar Natura, ed Arte.
 Così la stella mia seguendo ancora
 Di fuggitiua età nel verde Aprile
 Vergai con vario stil ben mille carte.

[Should ever anyone my neglected lines read,/Don't believe these feigned passions,/for imagined loves on the Scene/I am used to playing with emotions /false no less than feigned words./Of the Muses the lofty frenzy/I showed sometimes bewailing/my untrue pains sometimes singing my untrue delights./ And, as in Theatres, in varied style,/now as Woman, now as Man,/I have played what Nature and Art would instruct/So once more following my star/ Of fleeting age in April green /did write in varied style well a thousand sheets.]

Sir Philip Sidney, from *The Defence of Poesie*, 1595

Among the Romans a Poet was called *Vates*, which is as much as a Diuiner, Fore-seer, or Prophet, as by his conioyned wordes, *Vaticinium* & *Vaticinari*, is manifest; so heauenly a title did that excellent people bestow vpon this heart-rauishing knowledge. And so farre were they carried into the admiration thereof, that they thought in the chaunceable hitting vpon any such verses, great fore-tokens of their following fortunes were placed. VWhereupon grew the worde of *Sortes*

Virgiliana, when by suddaine opening *Virgil's* booke, they lighted vpon any verse of hys making, whereof the histories of the Emperors liues are full: as of *Albinus*, the Gouvernour of our Iland, who in his childe-hoode mette with this verse,

Arma amens capio, nec sat rationis in armis.

And in his age performed it, which although it were a very vaine, and godles superstition, as also it was to think that spirits were commaunded by such verses, whereupon this word charmes, deriued of *Carmina*, commeth, so yet serueth it to shew the great reuerence those wits were helde in. And altogether not without ground, since both the oracles of *Delphos* and *Sibyllas* prophecies, were wholly deliuered in verses. For that same exquisite obseruing of number and measure in words, and that high flying liberty of conceit proper to the Poet, did seeme to haue some dyuine force in it. And may not I presume a little further, to shew the reasonableness of this word *Vates*? And say that the holy *Dauids* Psalmes are a diuine Poem?

...

Poetrie is of all humane learning the most auncient, & and of most fatherly antiquitie, as frō whence other learnings haue taken theyr beginnings: sith it is so uniuersall that no learned Nation dooth despise it, nor no barbarous Nation is without it: sith both Roman & Greek gaue diuine names vnto it: the one of prophecying, the other of making. And that indeede, that name of making is fit for him; considering, that where as other Arts retaine themselues within their subject, and receiue, as it were, their beeing from it: the Poet onely bringeth his owne stuffe, and dooth not learne a conceite out of a matter, but maketh matter for a conceite: Sith neither his description, nor his ende, contayneth any euill, the thing described cannot be euil: Sith his effects be so good as to teach goodnes, and to delight the learners: Sith therein, (namely in morall doctrine, the chiefe of all knowledges,) hee dooth not onely farre passe the Historian, but for instructing, is well nigh comparable to the Philosopher, & for mouing, leaueth him behind him: Sith the holy scripture (wherein there is no vnclennes) hath whole parts in it poetically. And that euen our Sauour Christ vouchsafed, to vse the flowers of it: Sith all his kindes are not onlie in their vnited formes, but in their seuered dissections fully commendable, I think, (& think I thinke rightly,) the Lawrell crowne appointed for tryumphing Captaines, doth worthily (of all other learnings) honor the Poets tryumph.

Novalis, from *Fragmente und Studien* (*Fragments and Studies*), 1799-1800; fragment 671

The feeling for poetry has much to do with the feeling for mysticism. It is the sense of the original, the personal, the unknown, the uncanny, of what must

be revealed, of the fortuitous-necessary. It represents what is unrepresentable. It sees the invisible, feels what cannot be felt, etc. The criticism of poetry is an absurdity. It is even difficult to distinguish – and it is the only possible distinction – what is poetry and what is not. The poet is indeed deprived of all senses; but in him is everything: he represents, in the fullest sense, the subject-object – soul and world. Hence the infinity of good poetry, the eternity. The sense of poetry is much akin to that of prophecy and, more generally, to the religious sense, the sense of the diviner. The poet orders, unites, selects, invents, and he himself cannot understand why it is exactly thus and not otherwise.

Hugo von Hofmannstahl, from 'Der Dichter und diese Zeit' ('The poet and this time'), 1906

... the poet is where he does not appear to be and is always in a place which is different from where we think he is. Strangely, he lives in the house of time, under the stairs, where everyone passes by but no one sees him. He is like the pilgrim prince of the old legend, who was enjoined to leave his princely home, his wife and children and journey to the Holy Land; and he went back, but before he crossed the threshold, he was enjoined to enter his home under the guise of an unknown beggar and live in the place which the servants would assign him. The servants showed him the below stairs area, where at nights the dog sleeps. And there he lives and hears and sees his wife, his brothers, his children when they go up and down the stairs and speak of him as of one who has disappeared, even a dead man, and weep for him. But he is enjoined not to reveal himself and so he lives unacknowledged under the stairs of his own home.

...

He is here and no one is obliged to notice his presence. He is here and silently visits one place and another and is nothing else than eyes and ears and assumes the colour of the things he sees. He is the spectator – no, the hidden companion, the silent brother of all things and the change of his colour is an inner torment; because he suffers for everything and, by suffering, rejoices in everything. This faculty to rejoice by suffering is the whole content of his life. He suffers for feeling things so intensely, suffers for a single thing and all things together; suffers for their singularity and connection; for the lofty and the ordinary; the sublime and vulgar; he suffers for their situations and thoughts; he suffers for pure mental objects, ghosts, and the immaterial parturitions of time, as though they were human beings. Because for him human beings, things, thoughts and dreams are one and the same thing: he only knows the shows which surface before him, which make him suffer and so make him happy. He sees and feels; his way of knowing is modulated like his way of feeling, his way of feeling is as penetrating as his way of knowing. He can omit nothing. He is not allowed to shut his eyes over any being, any thing, any ghost, any shadow of the human brain.

Eugenio Montale, 'Le parole', in *Satura II*, 1971

Words
if they awake again
reject the site
most propitious, the Fabriano
paper, the China
ink, the folder
leather or velvet
which keeps them secret;
words
when they wake up
lie down on the back
of invoices, on the margins
of lottery bills,
on wedding
or funeral cards;
words
only ask
the tangle of keys
on the Olivetti portable,
the dark of the waistcoat pocket, the bottom
of the wastebasket, there crumpled
in pellets;
words
are not at all happy
to be thrown out
like trollops and greeted
with cheers of applause
and disgrace;
words
like better the sleep
in the bottle than the derision
of being read, sold
embalmed, freezed;
words
belong to everyone and vainly
hide themselves in dictionaries
because there is always a rogue
who digs out the truffles,
the most fetid and rare;
words
after an eternal wait

renounce the hope
of being pronounced
once and for all
and then die
with their possessor.

Eugenio Montale, 'Non chiederci la parola' ('Don't ask us for the word'), in *Ossi di seppia* (*Cuttlefish Bones*), 1925

Don't ask us for the word which squares on every side
our formless spirit, and in letters of fire
proclaims it and glistens like a crocus
lost in the middle of a dusty field.

Ah the man who walks confident,
to others and himself a friend,
uncaring of his shadow which
high summer prints on the peeling wall!

Don't ask us for the formula that can open worlds,
just some crooked syllable and dry like a branch.
This only we can tell you today,
what we are *not*, what we do *not* want.

3. *The Artist and the Toil of Creation*

Michelangelo Buonarroti on the strain of painting the Sistine ceiling (1509-1510)

I' ho già fatto un gozzo in questo stento,
come fa l'acqua a' gatti in Lombardia
o ver d'altro paese che si sia
c'a forza 'l ventre appicca sotto 'l mento.

La barba al cielo, e la memoria sento
in sullo scrigno, e 'l petto fo d'arpi,
e 'l pennel sopra 'l viso tuttavia
mel fa, gocciando, un ricco pavimento.

E' lombi entrati mi son nella peccia,
e fo del cul per contrapeso groppa,
e' passi senza gli occhi muovo invano.

Dinanzi mi s'allunga la corteccia,
e per piegarsi adietro si ragroppa,
e tendomi com'arco soriano.

Però fallace e strano
surge il iudizio che la mente porta,
ché mal si tra' per cerbottana torta.

La mia pittura morta
difendi orma', Giovanni, e 'l mio onore,
non sendo in loco bon, né io pittore.

[This heavy strain has given me a goitre/as water does to cats in Lombardy/or any other country whatsoever/forcing my belly tugged under my chin./ Beard toward the sky, and my head I feel/against my hump, breast pigeoned like a harpy's,/the brush above drips ever on my face/and makes my front a richly-marbled floor./My loins I feel have sunk inside my gut,/my bum for counterpoise I've tucked tight in,/my strides I cannot see and walk in vain./In front of me my skin is all extended,/behind for bending it's all creased and wrinkled/and I am stretchéd like a Syrian bow./So, vain and strange/rises the judgement which my mind sets forth/for a twisted blowpipe badly shoots./My poor dead art/defend, Giovanni, and my honour too,/for I am badly set and cannot paint.]

Gustave Flaubert, from a letter to Louise Colet, written on December 23, 1853, at 2 AM

I must really love you if I write to you tonight, for I am exhausted. I have an iron helmet on my head. Since yesterday at two o'clock in the afternoon, except for about twenty-five minutes for dinner, I have been writing about *Bovary*. I am in the midst of a love scene: I am sweating and my throat is tight. This has been one of the rare days of my life passed in illusion, completely, from beginning to end. At six o'clock this evening, as I was writing the word 'hysterics,' I was so swept away, was bellowing so loudly and feeling so deeply what my little *Bovary* was going through, that I was afraid of having hysterics myself. I got up from my table and opened the window to calm myself. My head was spinning. Now I have great pains in my knees, in my back and in my head. I feel like a man who has fucked too much (forgive the expression), that is, in a kind of rapturous lassitude. And, since I am in the midst of love-making, it is only proper that I should not fall asleep before sending you a caress, a kiss, and whatever thoughts are left in me.

William Blake, from *Jerusalem*, 1804

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me,
Yet they forgive my wanderings. I rest not from my great task!
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes

Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought, into Eternity
 Ever expanding in the Bosom of God, the Human Imagination.
 O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love!
 Annihilate the Selfhood in me: be thou all my life!

Italo Svevo, from *Il vecchione* (*The old man*), 1929

I don't feel old, but I have a feeling of being rusty. I must think and write to feel alive because the life I lead, between so much virtue that I have and that is attributed to me and so many affections and duties which bind and paralyze me, deprives me of all freedom. I live with the same inertia as one who is dying. And I want to rouse myself, I want to wake up. This is why writing is going to be for me a hygienic gesture which I will perform every night shortly before taking a laxative. And I hope that my papers will contain also the words which I usually do not say, because only then will the therapy be successful.

Carlo Emilio Gadda, from *Lettere a Gianfranco Contini, 1934-1967* (*Letters to Gianfranco Contini, 1934-1967*), 1988

Those [stylistic] games are my novocaine, my opium, *mon alcool à moi*. Their biological and geminal meaning is the unconscious attempt to divert me from pain and harm.

4. *The Authorial Subject*

Gaspara Stampa, from *Rime* (*Poems*), 1554

Se così come sono abietta e vile
 donna, posso portar sì alto foco,
 perché non debbo aver almeno un poco
 di ritraggerlo al mondo e vena e stile?

S'amor con novo, insolito focile,
 ov'io non potea gir, m'alzò a tal loco,
 perché non può non con usato gioco
 far la pena e la penna in me simile?

E, se non può per forza di natura,
 puollo almen per miracolo, che spesso
 vince, trapassa e rompe ogni misura.

Come ciò sia non posso dir espresso;
 io provo ben che per mia gran ventura
 mi sento il cor di novo stile impresso.

[If as I am, an abject and vile woman,/I can in me bear such a lofty fire,/Why should I not at least possess a little/Of mood and style to tell it to the world?/If love, with such a new, unusual blast/Lifted me up where I could never soar/Why cannot it, with an uncommon play/Make pen and pain be in myself alike?/And if it cannot by the force of nature/At least as by a miracle it may,/As often wins, beats and defeats all measure./How this can be I cannot surely say;/But yet I feel, because of my great fortune,/My heart affected with a whole new style.]

Michel de Montaigne, from 'Du repentir', *Essais*, Livre III, chap. 2 ('Of Repentance', *Essays*, Book III, chap. 2), 1595 ed.

Authors communicate themselves to people by some especial and extrinsic mark; I, the first, by my universal being; as Michel de Montaigne, not as a grammarian, a poet, or a jurist. If the world complains that I speak too much of myself, I complain that it does not think only of itself. But is it reason that, being so particular in my habits, I should claim to recommend myself for my knowledge? And is it also reason that I should produce to the world, where one's art and ways have so much credit and praise, crude and simple effects of nature, and indeed of a weak nature? Is it not like building a wall without stones, or some such thing, to compose books without learning? The fancies of music are performed by art, mine by chance. I have this, at least, according to discipline, that never any person treated of a subject he better understood and knew than I what I have undertaken; and that in this I am the most understanding man alive. Secondly, that never any person penetrated farther into his matter, nor more distinctly sifted the parts and sequences of it, nor more precisely and fully reached the end he proposed to himself. To achieve it, I only need to bring fidelity to the work; that is there, and it is the most pure and sincere that is to be found. I speak truth, not so much as I would, but as much as I dare; and I dare more and more as I grow older; for it seems that custom allows to age more liberty of prating and more indiscretion when talking of one's self. It cannot happen here what I often see elsewhere, that the work and its maker contradict one another: 'Can a man of such sound conversation have written so foolish a book?' Or: 'Do so learned writings proceed from a man of so weak conversation?' He who talks at a very ordinary rate and writes rare things, that is to say, that his capacity is borrowed and not his own. A learned man is not learned in all things: but a sufficient man is sufficient in all, even in ignorance.

Virginia Woolf, from *A Room of One's Own*, 1929

Hundreds of women began as their eighteenth century drew on to add to their pin money, or to come to the rescue of their families by making translations or writing the innumerable bad novels which have ceased to be recorded even

in text-books, but are to be picked up in the fourpenny boxes in the Charing Cross Road. The extreme activity of mind which showed itself in the later eighteenth century among women – the talking, and the meeting, the writing of essays on Shakespeare, the translating of the classics – was founded on the solid fact that women could make money by writing. Money dignifies what is frivolous if unpaid for. It might still be well to sneer at ‘blue stocking with an itch for scribbling’, but it could not be denied that they could put money in their purses. Thus, towards the end of the eighteenth century a change came about which, if I were rewriting history, I should describe more fully and think of greater importance than the Crusades or the Wars of the Roses. The middle-class woman began to write. For if *Pride and Prejudice* matters, and *Middlemarch* and *Villette* and *Wuthering Heights* matter, then it matters far more than I can prove in an hour’s discourse that women generally, and not merely the lonely aristocrat shut up in her country house among her folios and her flatterers, took to writing. Without those forerunners, Jane Austen and the Brontës and George Eliot could no more have written than Shakespeare could have written without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer, or Chaucer without those forgotten poets who paved the ways and tamed the natural savagery of the tongue. For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter – the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early to learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she – shady and amorous as she was – who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.

Jorge Luis Borges, ‘Borges y yo’, in *El hacedor* (‘Borges and I’, in *The Maker*), 1960

The other one, a certain Borges, is the one things happen to. I walk through the streets of Buenos Aires and stop for a moment, perhaps mechanically, to look at the arch of an entrance hall and the grillwork of 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, etymologies, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; the other one shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor. It would be an exaggeration to say that ours is a hostile relationship; I live,

I let myself go on living, so that Borges may weave his literature, and this literature justifies me. It is no effort for me to confess that he has achieved some valid pages, but those pages cannot save me, perhaps because what is good belongs to no one, not even to the other one, but to language and to tradition. Besides, I am destined to be lost, definitively, and only some instant of myself can survive in the other. Little by little, I am giving over everything to him, although I am aware of his perverse custom of falsifying and magnifying things. Spinoza realized that all things long to persist in their being; the stone eternally wants to be a stone and the tiger a tiger. I must remain in Borges, not in myself (if I am someone), but I recognize myself less in his books than in many others or in the laborious harping of a guitar. Years ago I tried to free myself from him and went from the mythologies of the suburbs to the games with time and infinity, but those games now belong to Borges and I shall have to envisage other things. Thus my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to the other. I do not know which of us is writing this page.

5. *About Poetics*

Michelangelo Buonarroti, Letter to Messer Benedetto Varchi (Lettera a Messer Benedetto Varchi), Rome, 1549

A Messer Benedetto Varchi

Messer Benedetto. Perché e' paia pure che io abbia ricevuto, come ho, il vostro Libretto, risponderò qualche cosa a quel che e' mi domanda, benché ignorantemente. Io dico che la pittura mi pare più tenuta buona, quanto più va verso il rilievo, et il rilievo più tenuto cattivo, quanto più va verso la pittura: et però a me soleva parere che la scultura fussi la lanterna della pittura, et che dall'una all'altra fussi quella differenza ch'è dal sole alla luna. Ora, poi che io ho letto nel vostro Libretto, dove dite, che, parlando filosoficamente, quelle cose che ànno un medesimo fine, sono una medesima cosa; sono mutato d'opinione: et dico, che se maggiore iudicio et difficoltà, impedimento et fatica non fa maggiore nobiltà; che la pittura et scultura è una medesima cosa: et perché ella fussi tenuta così, non dovrebbe ogni pittore far manco di scultura che di pittura; e 'l simile, lo scultore di pittura che di scultura. Io intendo scultura, quella che si fa per forza di levare: quella che si fa per via di porre, è simile alla pittura: basta, che venendo l'una e l'altra da una medesima intelligenza, cioè scultura et pittura, si può far fare loro una buona pace insieme, et lasciar tante dispute; perché vi va più tempo, che a far le figure. Colui che scrisse che la pittura era più nobile della scultura, s'egli avessi così bene inteso l'altre cose ch'egli ha scritte, le avrebbe meglio scritte la mia fante. Infinite cose, et non più dette, ci sarebbe da dire di simili scienze; ma, come ho detto, vorrebbero troppo tempo, et io n'ho poco, perché non solo son

vechio, ma quasi nel numero de' morti: però priego mi abbiate per iscusato. E a voi mi racomando et vi ringrazio quanto so et posso del troppo onore che mi fate, et non conveniente a me.

Vostro Michelagnuolo Buonarroto in Roma

[To Messer Benedetto Varchi

Messer Benedetto. Since it seems that I have received your booklet – and indeed I received it – I will answer something to what you are asking me, although ignorantly. I say that it seems to me that painting is deemed more admirable when it is closer to relief, and relief is deemed inferior when it is closer to painting: and therefore I used to think that sculpture was the lantern of painting and that between the two there was the difference which holds between the sun and the moon. But now, since I read in your booklet the passage where you say that, philosophically speaking, those things which have the same aim are one and the same thing, I have changed my mind: and I say that, if greater discernment and difficulty, impediments and exertion do not amount to greater nobility, then painting and sculpture are one and the same thing: and so that it might be deemed such, every painter should not make less sculpting than painting; and, similarly, every sculptor should not make less painting than sculpting. I mean sculpting that thing which is done by dint of taking off; the one which is done by dint of adding is similar to painting: and it is enough that, since both painting and sculpture come from the same intelligence, we can reconcile them and abandon such disputes; because more time is spent in these than in making figures. The person who wrote that painting is nobler than sculpture, if he had well understood the other things he wrote, indeed my maidservant would have written them better. An infinite number of things, which have not been said, might be said of such sciences; but, as I said, too much time would be necessary to tell them and I have little time, because I not only am old, but almost number myself among the dead; and therefore I pray you to excuse me. And I entrust myself to your good will and thank you as I am able for the undue honour you make me, which is not suited to me.

Yours Michelagnuolo Buonarroto in Rome]

Carlo Goldoni, from *Prefazione a Opere* (Preface to *Works*), vol. I, Venezia, 1750

... the two books on which I have most meditated and which I will never repent having made use of were the *World* and the *Theatre*. The first shows me so many and various characters of persons and paints them in such a natural way that they seem to be purposefully contrived to supply me with a great variety of subjects for graceful and instructive Comedies: it represents the signs, the strength, the outcomes of all human passions; it provides me with

curious events: it informs me about present customs: it instructs me about the vices and flaws which are most common in our time and in our nation, which deserve the censure or the derision of the wise and, at the same time, it points out, in some virtuous Person, the means by which Virtue resists such corruptions; and therefore, from this book I gather – by incessantly browsing into it, or meditating about it, in whatever circumstance or action of my life I find myself – what is absolutely necessary to know for someone who wishes to carry on my profession. The second, that is, the book of the Theatre, while I manipulate it, teaches me by what colours each character, passion and event which can be read in the book of the World must be represented on the Stage; how each is to be shaded in order to put it into relief, what colours make each of them pleasant to the sensitive eyes of the spectators. In short, from the Theatre I learn to discern what things leave the deepest impression on souls, that rouse the greatest wonder or laughter, or that delectable tickle in the human heart which is especially born from finding, in the Comedy you are attending, naturally portrayed and urbanely set in their own perspective, the flaws and ridicule which we find in those whom we daily encounter, but in such a way as not to annoy or offend too much.

Guy de Maupassant, from 'Le roman' ('The Novel'), in *Pierre et Jean*, 1888

Whatever you want to say, there is only one word to express it, one verb to animate it, one adjective to qualify it. You must then look for that word, that verb, that adjective until you have found them and never be content with more or less, never resort to ruses, however happy, or to language tomfooleries, in order to avoid a difficulty.

One may convey and suggest the most subtle things by applying the following quote from Boileau:

D'un mot mis en sa place enseigne le pouvoir.

You don't need the extravagant, complicated, numerous and Chinese vocabulary which is today prescribed under the name of artistic writing in order to fix all the nuances of thought; but you do need to discern with extreme lucidity all the modifications of a word's meaning according to the place it occupies. Let us have less nouns, verbs and adjectives whose meaning is almost impossible to grasp and more different sentences, differently constructed, ingeniously cut, full of skilful sonorities and rhythms. Let us strive to be excellent stylists rather than collectors of rare terms.

It is indeed more difficult to manage a sentence at will, to make it say everything, even what it does not express, to fill it in with allusions, with secret and unexpressed intentions, than to invent new expressions or to retrieve, at

the bottom of old unknown books, all those expressions whose usage and meaning we have lost and which are for us like dead words.

Robert Louis Stevenson, from 'The Morality of the Profession of Letters', *Fortnightly Review* 157, April 1881

Those who write have to see that each man's knowledge is, as near as they can make it, answerable to the facts of life; that he shall not suppose himself an angel or a monster; nor take this world for a hell; nor be suffered to imagine that all rights are concentrated in his own caste or country, or all veracities in his own parochial creed.

...

In all works of art, widely speaking, it is first of all the author's attitude that is narrated, though in the attitude there be implied a whole experience and a theory of life.

Robert Louis Stevenson, from 'Memories and Portraits', *A College Magazine*, Nov.-Dec. 1887

Whenever I read a book or a passage that particularly pleased me, in which a thing was said or an effect rendered with propriety, in which there was either some conspicuous force or some happy distinction in the style, I must sit down at once and set myself to ape that quality.

Christina G. Rossetti, from 'Madonna Innominata', in *A Pageant and Other Poems*, 1881

Beatrice, immortalised by 'altissimo poeta ... cotanto amante'; Laura, celebrated by a great though an inferior bard – have alike paid the exceptional penalty of exceptional honour, and have come down to us resplendent with charms, but (at least, to my apprehension) scant of attractiveness.

These heroines of world-wide fame were preceded by a bevy of unnamed ladies, 'donne innominate', sung by a school of less conspicuous poets; and in that land and that period which gave simultaneous birth to Catholics, to Albigenes, and to Troubadours, one can imagine many a lady as sharing her lover's poetic aptitude, while the barrier between them might be one held sacred by both, yet not such as to render mutual love incompatible with mutual honour.

Had such a lady spoken for herself, the portrait left us might have appeared more tender, if less dignified, than any drawn even by a devoted friend. Or

had the Great Poetess of our own day and nation only been unhappy instead of happy, her circumstances would have invited her to bequeath to us, in lieu of the 'Portuguese Sonnets', an inimitable 'donna innominata' drawn not from fancy but from feeling, and worthy to occupy a niche beside Beatrice and Laura.

Giacomo Leopardi, from *Zibaldone*, 3 Nov. 1821; published posthumously in 1898

Rapidity and brevity of style are liked because they present to the soul a crowd of ideas which are either simultaneous or so rapidly following each other as to appear simultaneous and make the soul wave in such a wealth of thoughts, or of images and spiritual sensations, that the soul is either unable to embrace and fully comprehend them all, or has not the time to remain lazy and deprived of sensations. The strength of poetic style, which for the most part is one and the same thing as rapidity, is only pleasing thanks to these effects and only consists of these. The excitement of simultaneous ideas may derive from each isolated word, either literal or metaphorical, their location, turn of the sentence, and the very elimination of other words, etc. Why is Ovid's style weak and therefore not particularly pleasurable, although he is a most faithful painter of objects and a most obstinate and clever image-hunter? Because his images, in him, spring from a quantity of words and lines, which only generate the image after a long detour, and so there is nothing simultaneous, and indeed the spirit is led to see the objects little by little and in parts. Why is Dante's style the strongest imaginable and for this reason the most beautiful and pleasing possible? Because every word in him is an image, etc. etc. See my discourse on the romantics. Here I may refer to the essential weakness and the inward repletion of descriptive poetry (which is *per se* absurd) and the old precept that the poet (or writer) should not linger too long over descriptions. Here I may refer to Horace's style (very rapid and full of images in each word, or construction, or inversion, or meaning translation, etc.) and, as to thought, the style of Tacitus.

Italo Calvino, from 'Rapidità', in *Lezioni americane* ('Rapidity', in *American Lessons*); published posthumously in 1988

The horse, as an emblem of rapidity, even in the mental sense, marks the whole history of literature, foreshadowing the issues which characterize our technological horizon. The age of rapidity, as regards both transport and information, begins with one of the most beautiful essays in English literature, *The English Mail-Coach* by Thomas De Quincey who, in 1849, had already understood all we now know about the world of motors and motorways, including mortal crashes at high speed.

De Quincey describes a night journey on the box of a very quick mail-coach, beside a gigantic cabman who is deeply asleep. The technical perfection of the vehicle and the transformation of the driver into a blind inanimate object put the traveller at the mercy of the inexorable perfection of a machine. In the acuity of sensations provoked by a dose of laudanum, De Quincey realizes that the horses are running at a speed of thirteen miles per hour on the *right* side of the road. This means certain disaster, not for the extremely swift and robust mail-coach, but for the first hapless coach which will drive on that road on the opposite side! And indeed, at the bottom of the tree-lined road which resembles the nave of a cathedral, he spies a fragile wicker gig with a young couple, which proceeds at one mile per hour. 'Between them and eternity, to all human calculation, there is but a minute and a half'. De Quincey lets out a scream. 'Mine had been the first step; the second was for the young man; the third was for God'.

The narration of these few seconds has remained unrivalled, even now, when the experience of high speed has become fundamental in human life:

Glance of eye, thought of man, wing of angel, which of these had speed enough to sweep between the question and the answer, and divide the one from the other? Light does not tread upon the steps of light more invisibly than did our all-conquering arrival upon the escaping efforts of the gig.

De Quincey succeeds in giving the sense of an extremely brief time fraction which however may contain both the estimate of the technical inevitability of the crash and the imponderable, which is God's part, on whose account the two vehicles do not even brush one another.

The issue which interests us here is not physical rapidity, but the relationship between physical and mental rapidity. This relationship also fascinated a great Italian poet of De Quincey's generation. Giacomo Leopardi, in his extremely sedentary youth, used to experience one of his rare moments of joy when he wrote in his *Zibaldone*: 'Rapidity, for example in horses, either seen or experienced, that is, when they drive you, is very pleasant by itself, that is, for the vivacity, energy, strength of such a sensation. It really awakens a quasi-idea of infinity, sublimates the soul, fortifies it ...' (27 October, 1821)

Thomas Mann, from 'Einführung der *Zeuberberg*' ('Introduction to *The Magic Mountain*'), 1939

When you conceive a work, this appears under a harmless, simple, practical light. It seems that the effort to realize it is not going to be great. My first novel, *The Buddenbrooks*, devised on the model of the Scandinavian stories about tradesmen or about a family, was imagined as a book of two hundred and fifty pages, and in the end the result was two big volumes. *Death in Venice* should have been a short story for the Munich magazine *Simplicissimus*. The same is

true for the Joseph novels, which at the start I imagined as short stories of more or less the size of *Death in Venice*. The case of *The Magic Mountain* was not different: this is, I believe, a necessary and productive kind of self-deception. If one had, from the start, the clear vision of all the possible difficulties of a work and if one were conscious of its autonomous volition, which is often quite different from the author's, maybe we would be discouraged and not even dare to start working. A work may sometimes have its own ambition, which even surpasses by far that of its author, and it is well that things are so. Indeed, the ambition should not be personal ambition, should not precede the work, but the work must produce it from its own bosom and compel the author to admit it. Thus, I believe, all great works are born; not from an ambition which, since the start, intended to create a great work.

Thomas Mann, from 'Richard Wagner und der *Ring des Nibelungen*' ('Richard Wagner and *The Ring of the Nibelung*'), 1938

From Zürich, or better from Alpbisbrunn, where he went on a trip, the important letter of 20 November 1851 was sent to Liszt, in which Wagner transmits and explains for the first time to his great Weimar friend and protector the plan of his gigantic enterprise: 'Know from this letter', he begins solemnly, 'the story, reported with absolute truth, of the artistic project to which I have been attending for some time and which direction it had necessarily to take'. Then, he narrates this extraordinary story, so surprising and happy for him. It is important to hear it told in his own words if we want to understand how little, at the beginning, an artist knows of his own work, how imperfectly he knows the obstinacy of the being he has started to deal with, how little he may predict what the work intends to be, what it – precisely as *his own* work – is bound to become; the work before which he finds himself in the mood which is expressed by the words '*This* I did not want, but now, may God help me, I *must*'. The livid ambition of the self is not what we find at the beginning of great works, it is not their origin: the ambition is not the artist's, but the work's, which wants itself much greater than the artist believed to be able to hope or be obliged to fear, and which imposes its own volition.

James Joyce, from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 1914

A day of dappled seaborne clouds.

The phrase and the day and the scene harmonized in a chord. Words. Was it their colours? He allowed them to glow and fade, hue after hue: sunrise gold, the russet and green of apple orchards, azure of waves, the grey-fringed fleece of clouds. No, it was not their colours: it was the poise and balance of

the period itself. Did he then love the rhythmic rise and fall of words better than their associations of legend and colour? Or was it that, being as weak of sight as he was shy of mind, he drew less pleasure from the reflection of the glowing sensible world through the prism of a language many-coloured and richly storied than from the contemplation of an inner world of individual emotions mirrored perfectly in a lucid supple periodic prose?

...

Even in literature, the highest and most spiritual art, the forms are often confused. The lyrical form is in fact the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion a rhythmical cry such as ages ago cheered on the man who pulled at the oar or dragged stones up a slope. He who utters it is more conscious of the instant of emotion than of himself as feeling emotion. The simplest epical form is seen emerging out of lyrical literature when the artist prolongs and broods upon himself as the centre of an epical event and this form progresses till the centre of emotional gravity is equidistant from the artist himself and from others. The narrative is no longer purely personal. The personality of the artist passes into the narration itself, flowing round and round the persons and the action like a vital sea. This progress you will see easily in that old English ballad Turpin Hero which begins in the first person and ends in the third person. The dramatic form is reached when the vitality which has flowed and eddied round each person fills every person with such vital force that he or she assumes a proper and intangible esthetic life. The personality of the artist, at first a cry or a cadence or a mood and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak. The esthetic image in the dramatic form is life purified in and reprojected from the human imagination. The mystery of esthetic, like that of material creation, is accomplished. The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.

6. *Irony and Understatement*

Umberto Eco, from 'Postille a *Il nome della rosa*' ('Afterword to *The Name of the Rose*'), 1983

After writing, authors should die. Not to disturb the text's journey.

...

When authors say that they have worked following the raptus of inspiration, they lie. 'Genius is twenty per cent inspiration and eighty per cent perspiration'.

I don't remember regarding which of his poems, a famous one, Lamartine wrote that it had been born all of a sudden, in a tempestuous night in a wood. When he died the manuscripts of that poem were found and they presented corrections and variants: that particular poem was probably the most 'laboured' piece of writing of all French literature.

...

For the last two years I have refused to answer certain idle questions like: is yours an open work or not? What the devil do I know, it is your business, not mine. Or else: with which of your characters do you identify yourself? My god, with whom do authors identify themselves? Why, with adverbs, obviously.

Robert Louis Stevenson (as reported from his stepson Lloyd Osbourne after Stevenson's death)

I am not a man of any unusual talent, Lloyd; I started out with very moderate abilities; my success has been due to my very remarkable industry – to developing what I had in me to the extreme limit. When a man begins to sharpen one faculty, and keeps on sharpening it with tireless perseverance, he can achieve wonders. Everybody knows it; it's a commonplace; and yet how rare it is to find anybody doing it – I mean to the uttermost as I did. What genius I had for *work!*

...

A writer who amounts to anything is constantly dying and being re-born. I was reading *Virginibus* the other day, and it seemed to me extraordinarily good, but in a vein I could no more do now than I could fly. My work is profounder than it was; I can touch emotions that I then scarcely knew existed; but the Stevenson who wrote *Virginibus* is dead and buried, and has been for many a year.

Robert Louis Stevenson, from a letter to Mr W. Craibe Angus, November 1891

I am still a 'slow study', and sit for a long while silent on my eggs. Unconscious thought, there is the only method: macerate your subject, let it boil slow, then take the lid off and look in – and there your stuff is – good or bad.

Robert Louis Stevenson, from a letter to Bob Stevenson, 30 September 1883

There is but one art — to omit! O if I knew how to omit, I would ask no other knowledge. A man who knew how to omit would make an Iliad of a daily paper.

*All works originally not in English are presented in translation. Italian poems, as well as Michelangelo's letter to Messer Benedetto Varchi, are presented in the original and followed by a translation. We would have liked to reproduce the Italian version also of Montale's poems, but our repeated and insistent attempts to obtain permission from the publisher that holds Montale's rights (Mondadori) have remained unanswered. All translations are editorial.