Negotiating with the Dead
A Writer on Writing

What is the role of the Writer? Prophet? High Priest of Art? Court Jester? Or witness to the real world? Looking back on her own childhood and the development of her writing career, Margaret Atwood examines the metaphors which writers of fiction and poetry have used to explain – or excuse! – their activities, looking at what costumes they have seen fit to assume, what roles they have chosen to play. In her final chapter she takes up the challenge of the book's title: if a writer is to be seen as "gifted," who is doing the giving and what are the terms of the gift?

Margaret Atwood's wide and eclectic reference to other writers, living and dead, is balanced by anecdotes from her own experiences as a writer, both in Canada and on the international scene. The lightness of her touch is underlined by a seriousness about the purpose and the pleasures of writing, and by a deep familiarity with the myths and traditions of Western literature.

Margaret Atwood was born in 1939 in Ottawa and grew up in northern Quebec, Ontario, and Toronto. She received her undergraduate degree from Victoria College at the University of Toronto and her master's degree from Radcliffe College.

Throughout her thirty years of writing, Margaret Atwood has received numerous awards and honorary degrees. She is the author of more than twenty-five volumes of poetry, fiction, and non-fiction and is perhaps best known for her novels, which include *The Edible Woman* (1969), *Surfacing* (1972), *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), *Cat's Eye* (1988), *The Robber Bride* (1993), and *Alias Grace* (1996). Her newest novel, *The Blind Assassin*, won the 2000 Booker Prize for Fiction.

Margaret Atwood has been acclaimed for her talent for portraying both personal lives and problems of universal concern. Her work has been published in more than thirty-five languages, including Japanese, Turkish, Finnish, Korean, Icelandic, and Estonian.

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MARGARET ATWOOD

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The Empson Lectures

The Empson Lectures, named after the great scholar and literary critic Sir William Empson (1906–84), have been established by the University of Cambridge as a series designed to address topics of broad literary and cultural interest. Sponsored jointly by the Faculty of English and Cambridge University Press, the series provides a unique forum for distinguished writers and scholars of international reputation to explore wide-ranging literary–cultural themes in an accessible manner.

As they were all sitting at table, one guest suggested that
each of them should relate a tale. Then the bridegroom
said to the bride: "Come, my dear, do you know
nothing? Relate something to us, like the others."
She said: "Then I will relate a dream."

"The Robber Bridegroom," collected by the
Brothers Grimm[1]

. . . I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or werse,
Or elles falsen som of my mateere.
And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere,
Turne over the leef and chese another tale . . .

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*[2]

And now in imagination he has climbed
another planet, the better to look
with single camera view upon this earth –
its total scope, and each afflated tick,
its talk, its trick, its tracklessness – and this,
this he would like to write down in a book!

A. M. Klein, "Portrait of the Poet as
Landscape"[3]

For the others

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Introduction: Into the labyrinth

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

Elias Canetti, *The Agony of Flies*[1]

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

Mavis Gallant, Preface, *Selected Stories*[2]

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

Marguerite Duras, *Writing*[3]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prologue

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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