

Authority

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My old college friend, whom I had not encountered in twenty-five years, laughed, reminiscing about how young we'd been. How intense. How ready to call the world to account. "And *you*," he said. "You wouldn't give anyone an inch. Not a millimeter. You had the highest standards, and you wouldn't budge them for anybody."

Now, this was not the way I remembered myself. I remembered myself as shy. And eager to do the right thing. And *sweet*. Essentially, anyway. Essentially sweet! Beneath what—it was coming back to me now—could only be called an intellectual pugnaciousness. . . .

But I'd been so hesitant! I said. So aware that things looked at from one point of view could take on a different cast looked at from another! Not to mention so downright timid! (This is the way old friends renewing an acquaintance dwell on themselves, amazed to find that their lives have not moved through time so much as time has moved through their lives, uprooting expectations, overturning plans.) Had I really been so positive of my opinions?

Indeed, yes, he said.

And he was right. But even as we sat there over drinks

and dinner in the restaurant with its huge windows that looked out on the mall, I still secretly believed that, if I had been an opinionated young person, I had been a *very sweet* opinionated young person.

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Hindsight is one thing. In those earlier days, I was so accustomed to thinking of myself as fearful (even, for example, as I took my seat on the train for Moscow; or even as I put out the fire that a stoned roommate had started; or even as I quit my job to write) that the quality I was most mesmerized by in other writers' work, especially other women writers' work, was their conviction of their own *authority*. Whenever I read a woman who wrote with authority I was bowled over, prostrate with admiration. Some of these women writers—come to think of it, maybe all—were younger than I was, as if they had received as a birthright a sense of self that I was still struggling to achieve. I read their work again and again, trying to locate their sense of sureness. I found it in one writer's verbs, and in another's linguistic playfulness. Once I found it in a writer's omissions—the way she dared to leave certain information out of her poems.

It was easier, for me, to write poetry and fiction with authority than to write nonfiction with authority. Writing poetry or fiction, the writer creates her own world: coherence is one of her tasks, and more or less frequently verisimilitude may be another, but she need not worry whether any statement she makes within the work is true or false outside the work, not *really*. She achieves authority by being in control of her techniques (and her verbs, her linguistic playfulness, the knowledge of when it is effective to leave out something that might have been put in). She achieves a larger authority as she acquires scope—tonal, thematic, any kind of scope. She acquires scope one sentence at a time, one line at a time. She acquires it as she

comes to know herself and the world she lives in. "Write an autobiography," a teacher, the fiction writer Ivan Gold, said, giving our class an assignment meant to bring the students closer, enhance the feeling of a literary community. I worked on mine all semester. At the end of the semester, it was four pages long. I felt that I knew nothing about myself and the world I lived in, or at least nothing that I could tell.

A shadow of secrecy darkened what I did know about my world. As bold as I might be about other things, there was a history that I did not dare approach, for fear of whom I might hurt. Perhaps this is why I thought of myself as fearful—even, for example, as I went to the cemetery in Riga at midnight in January 1965, during the Cold War, or—this was years later, in the States—exacted an apology from a hospital for assault. (I met with management in a rarely used conference room.)

I'm not going to reveal that secret here, because it's not necessary to know it in order to pursue the problem of authority in art. It's not even necessary to know why I met with management to exact an apology from the hospital. . . .

It may be necessary, though, to know that there are traumas that rob the self of its belief in its ability to perceive accurately anything about itself or the world. This self navigates its days by a kind of negation: if something seems to be so, it must be not so. If something seems one way, it must be, in fact, another way. The self's own thoughts and feelings are presumed not to be what it thinks or feels they are. The syntax of such a self may grow exceedingly subtle in its search for a definition, having an ever increasing complexity to encompass, but subtlety is not authority, or not yet—not until it reaches into every aspect, and not until it can test its idea of itself in the world.

Subtle selves love the abstract. Like hiding an object in the open, subtlety covers itself in logic, in argument. I loved the process of creating a problem, of developing a line of thought whether theoretically or metaphorically. I

was surprised to discover how few writers even attempt sustained argument or the creation of a new aesthetic problem. Sometimes I even thought that maybe they were incapable of doing these things, but now I think that they didn't need to do them: they were not in hiding, they could declare themselves, they could be, and were, visible, their words a reflection of personality. That is, they had a kind of authority.

In 1974 I published my first novel—in which the narrator puts out a fire that has been started by her stoned roommate. When *The Chicago Tribune* followed up a review of my novel by calling to ask if I would write a review of John Gardner's recent collection of short fiction, I blurted, utterly unprofessionally, "Do you think I can *do* it?"

As soon as I hung up the phone I began to think I was in over my head. I did! Because I thought that if one were going to voice one's opinions in *The Chicago Tribune* they had better be *right*. If they were wrong, I thought, their wrongness would be added to the tally of critical wrongness that kept mounting over the centuries; I was afraid of being responsible for even a fraction of that tally. It had not yet occurred to me that one might change one's opinion.

It also did not occur to me that I could say no to reviewing a given book or request a specific book to review. I assumed it was my job to review whatever was sent to me for review. I think I assumed it was a type of homework.

In her posthumously published *Intellectual Memoirs*, Mary McCarthy remembers writing book reviews for *The Nation* and *The New Republic* when she was barely into her twenties, and soon after that for *The Partisan Review*. My god, I think, reading this: she had writers' lives in her hands and she had not yet even written a book of her own. "I was rough," she confesses, with a dismay that strikes me as pro forma. "I laid about me right and left." She did not lack for a sense of authority. . . .

On the other hand, W.H. Auden told *The Paris Review* in 1974, "Writing nasty reviews can be fun, but I don't think the practice is very good for the character."

As I say, extending a line of thought as far as it could go without breaking in two exhilarated me, seemed the most exciting thing anyone could do with her life, but cutting the line short—stopping it here and there to say "And that's what I think about this" or "This is what I think about that"—seemed as drastic as castration. Maybe I *wouldn't* think that about this or this about that if I could just think things *through*. But reviewing was not about thinking things through, after all; it was about having opinions.

Or rather—this was the rub—it was about not only having them but going on record with them. But I hadn't wanted to disappoint *The Tribune's* book editor—that female trait, I assumed until recently, of being afraid to say no, as if book editors, like dates in high school, might fall ill with "blue balls" if one said no to them—and so I said yes and was now expected to write a review.

Karl Shapiro's 1960 essay "What Is Not Poetry?" recounts his first experience of reviewing. He had successfully submitted some poems to *Poetry*: "Immediately upon acceptance of the poems, the editor asked if I would undertake to write a review. Thinking it some kind of obligation or perhaps *honor* I accepted. . . . From then on I took it for granted that I was expected to write essays or reviews when asked, and I almost never refused." So maybe it is not women who are inclined to be meekly accepting of tasks; maybe it is poets. Or maybe it was just Karl Shapiro and I. In any case, I was now expected to form an opinion—and propound it. I was about to become an authority.

Which is not at all like being an author.

What is it like to be an author in America? In his mid-20th-century essay "The Age of Criticism," Randall Jarrell reports: "A novelist, a friend of mine, one year went to a Writers' Conference; all the other teachers were critics, and

each teacher had to give a formal public lecture. My friend went to the critics' lectures, but the critics didn't go to his; he wasn't surprised; as he said, 'You could tell they knew I wasn't really literary like them.'

Aware that I was "only" a writer, I remained diffident about my reviewing, and then about my essay-reviews and literary essays.

Yet each book I reviewed was a wonderful occasion for considering what I thought of it. And every opinion I arrived at required consideration in the light of my other opinions, which, I began to see, one might change, one might have to change, one might enlarge one's view of the world by changing. . . .

To review a book, I decided, required that I try to set aside my awareness of how I might have written it and participate in the book as the author had written it. It required that I analyze the book in the terms the book had set for itself. In a sense, then, in order to arrive at my opinion of the book I had first to relinquish any authority over it.

What an interesting process this was. The less a priori authority I claimed, the more authoritative I felt by the end of the book. This is diametrically opposed to what ideologues do: those people who read books through lenses provided by Freud, Marx, Derrida supply their lack of authority by assuming someone else's. But what does it mean "to participate in the book as the author had written it"?

Ideologues "all come different speaking," to steal, from myself, a phrase on which, when I was twenty, I'd built a poem celebrating Wallace Stevens, but they all say the same thing. Feminists or Marxists or deconstructionists, they say that the poem or story or novel is what it is because it never could have been otherwise. Either the author was obliged to make the decisions she did and, furthermore, made them unwittingly, because history and her relation to it mandated those decisions, the text being constructed not by her but by psychological or social dynamics that

she is too much a part of to perceive (though the critic of contemporary literature apparently retains a miraculous distance from said dynamics and so perceives *everything*, though not, unfortunately, quite enough to write a novel or a poem) or the author was never more than an accident of birth anyway, something like an appendix or sixth finger, that can be removed by a simple critical operation without injury to the text. The text remains whatever it is, which is what it was always going to be, though precisely what that is we do not know except as critics tell us. And what is that? Jarrell says, "An *Encyclopedia of Pseudo-Sciences* might define critical method as *the systematic (q.v.) application of foreign substances to literature; any series of devices by which critics may treat different works of art as much alike as possible.*"

Given these constraints on a writer's ability to make judgments, it was possibly not a bad thing that I hesitated to make them. For years, I kept quiet.

(Even as I was, I now reveal, kicked out of several schools. But I *did* my homework! And when my husband kicked me out of marriage. I cried a bit, then, sitting on the bed as he yanked clothes from the closet and slammed them into my suitcase. Later, I did write a novel about a young couple whose marriage ends in divorce—a comic novel, reversing the traditional definition of a comic novel as one that ends with a marriage. It addressed the question of free will versus determinism, as did Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. And I was certainly somewhat less than quiet when I badgered the Soviet Consulate for a visa and fired off letters to world leaders to urge support for the Helsinki Accords.)

Events take place, even in writers' lives. Of course, in writers' lives the events that take place are sometimes writerly events. To describe three such events: Writing, and, especially, writing reviews, I began to think that from time to time a greater authority may be secured by

sacrificing a sprightly Strunk-and-White verb in favor of a bald form of the verb “to be”: placing sentences in copulative relation can clarify clausal connection, priority, and hierarchy (that is, valuation). I saw that linguistic play can be a distraction, fascinating as light on water but not a way to see to the depths. I saw that leaving things out can produce a sophisticated surface that, ultimately, dies of lack of intellectual and emotional nourishment, slickness a kind of sickness. How much better to run the Tolstoyan risk of saying too much, for the opposite danger is the glib, gestural story, the glib, gestural poem.

(There were also events that were not writerly events. There were deaths of people one loved, for example. Among them was my ex-husband. He had been a sculptor, his artworks emblematic of intellectual rigor as a source of beauty even in despair.)

In story or poem, as with reviewing, a certain submission to the text takes place. T. S. Eliot argued that “[t]he emotion of art is impersonal. And the poet cannot reach this impersonality without surrendering himself wholly to the work to be done.” But, he suggested, the poet cannot surrender himself without a comprehensive knowledge of what he is surrendering to—the tradition. In other words, he cannot give himself over to what he has incompletely imagined, because where what is imagined remains incomplete that blankness will be filled in by *an idea of himself*. That is my phrase, not Eliot’s. And by it is meant the opposite of what Yeats meant when he wrote that “even when the poet seems most himself, when he is Raleigh and gives potentates the lie, or Shelley ‘a nerve o’er which do creep the else unfelt oppressions of this earth,’ or Byron when ‘the soul wears out the breast’ as ‘the sword outwears its sheath,’ he is never the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast; he has been reborn as an idea, something intended, complete.” To be reborn as an idea requires, first of all, shedding the idea of oneself.

To become an intention is to be completed, imagined; it is, then, to be *created*, and the creation stands outside the creator.

The created work—the completely imagined work—can never be the poet's idea of herself. So much less can it be the critic's idea of the work. It is the realized idea of itself, which was accomplished by the author's ability to surrender herself to the text.

I think I'd better explain something here. A writer surrendering to a text is performing an act of love, but precisely because it is not self-love it is an act that acquires authority as it acquires knowledge. This is why Eliot is correct to point to the living tradition, even if his own idea of the tradition may have been truncated by his privileged position in life. This is also why critics who like to think the text is caused by something other than an author show that they have only an elementary understanding of the creative process. The writer can give herself over to the text only by being conscious, at every moment, *of* the text and of the possibilities of the text. She reads the page as she writes it. *That* is the reading that transcends all critical readings. She reads what the page has to say to her, and she responds attentively, and the page responds, and in this dialogue is the creation, as if the Logos were to demand of us an answer to itself.

And does it not?

Robert Frost's essay "The Figure a Poem Makes" comes as close as anything to explaining this process. Wondering "how a poem can have wildness and at the same time a subject that shall be fulfilled," he states, "It should be of the pleasure of a poem itself to tell how it can." And then those well-known, true lines about the figure made by a poem, any poem: "It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life—not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects

and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.”

The writer makes a mark on the page—a word, two words, a line, a sentence. She reads what she has written (what she actually has written, not what she has thought; this is difficult to do), and she responds to it with another word, or two words, another line, another sentence. And so it goes, a chancy thing at best but a terrifically conscious thing, a thing that insists on such concentration as must exclude any thought of the writer herself. Where is she in all this? She is lost, lost to the world, involved in an activity as risky as running rapids. If she keeps her balance, she ends with the poem, or the story or the novel, in a place of tranquility.

(One reason my husband had sent me packing was that I was ready to have a child, and he had decided that he did not want children. He must have worried that he couldn't trust me. Later, doctors told me I couldn't have children. Later still, I had a miscarriage. Then I tried artificial insemination, but the university hospital refused to do the procedure because I was single. The married, male doctor looked me in the eye and dared to say this, despite funding from the state legislature. In order to transfer my medical coverage to a place that didn't discriminate against single women, I had to threaten to sue the hospital. This was not the same hospital where I had been assaulted and met with management. So many men in so many offices control women's lives. Do you think this is no longer the case?)

The poet, like a woman who wants to conceive a child, believes in what she is doing. She possesses this faith, a faith in the thing to be done, that carries her past boulders, over the undertow, downstream. She has always had this faith, even when she did not always have faith in her ability to do the thing. This is how it is that she sometimes does what she thought she could not do. She may even write and publish an autobiography.

This autobiography may begin with a young woman, a sweet young woman, stepping onto a train bound for Moscow, the doors between cars shuttered with sheets of ice. The “thaw” of Khrushchev’s rule was over. . . .

While giving herself up to her work, she has learned—parenthetically, as if in a kind of amplification of the narrative that is she—something about herself and the world she lives in.