

## **Portraits of Artists**

by Marshall Jon Fisher

I was reading Ian McEwan's most recent novel, *Atonement*, not long ago, when I suddenly had to stop and run inside for a pen and notebook. I may have been in the middle of the harrowing account of the British retreat to Dunkirk. Or maybe it was during the nightmarish finale to the book's first section, churning with lust, crime, and fateful accusations. I was enjoying myself immensely. But, I realized, I had been unable to read more than a few pages at a time without stopping and thinking about some story, novel, or essay that I intended to write.

My ideas had no thematic connection to what I was reading. They were inspired simply by the excellence of McEwan's work. It occurred to me that this is one of my main criteria for literature: that it make me want to write. I wrote that down. A good book, to me, is one that I cannot concentrate on for more than a few minutes at a time. There's a sadness to this, for I can never appreciate a book in quite the proper way--that is, by vanishing completely into the other world of the fiction and experiencing it from an unenvying, nonprofessional perspective. On the other hand, my perspective provides perhaps a different appreciation of the books I read.

It certainly has had a strong influence on the content of my shelves. Many of my favorite books are about the writing life. I know this disgusts many, but I make no apologies. It should not be surprising that writers write about writers. After all, you're supposed to write about what you know. Yet there is a palpable distaste among the publishing world, and indeed among general readers (if a random sampling of overheard comments means anything), for these autobiographical works. I'm not sure why; I'm not an actor, but I love plays about actors, a

related genre I've heard disparaged by theatergoers old and young, passionate and blasé.

One of the most prominent spots in my library is that occupied by Nicholson Baker's book-length essay, *U and I*. I consider this one of the best contemporary books, and I know several people who agree. They all, however, happen to be writers, or at least people with an interest in being writers.

Beginning with his revelation that "the act of beginning to write in the morning never loses its pleasure," Baker uses his fascination with John Updike as a lens through which to project the concerns, fears, and vanities of the young writer. He does it with a unique combination of humility and arrogance, and above all with humor. I laughed aloud reading for the fifth or sixth time his description of being "cut dead" by Miss Manners at an *Atlantic Monthly* party: "She, understandably revolted by our foolish beaming pleading miserable faces,...apparently felt that it was her duty as a syndicated upholder of social norms not to talk to us or nod kindly at us or even to look at us until we could demonstrate that we were comfortable and capable in this sort of expensive literary ceremony."

Many great novels are also about writers. The modernist age spawned a number of them, including Thomas Wolfe's *You Can't Go Home Again*, in which young novelist George Webber faces the hazards of his occupation:

Randy then made the blunder which laymen so often innocently make when they talk to writers.

"What's it about," he said.

He was rewarded with an evil scowl. George did not answer.

Working around the same time as Wolfe, in 1930s Berlin, the young Nabokov was creating his own tour de force about the writing life. *The Gift*, which first appeared in installments in a Parisian Russian-émigré periodical, was not published as a complete novel until 1952 and not in English until 1963. But it is one of Nabokov's four or five masterpieces, and

certainly a gem of this genre. Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev is a young Russian in 1920s Berlin, writing and publishing his first poems and dreaming of great books to follow. He bounces around the émigré poetry scene, woos and wins alluring literary acolyte Zina Mertz, and "for firing practice" writes a biography of an 1860s Russian socialist, which is accepted by a small press:

...[after signing the contract] he emerged onto the street like a ballerina flying out onto the fluorescent stage. The drizzle seemed a dazzling dew, happiness stood in his throat, rainbow nimbi trembled around the streetlamps, and the book he had written talked to him at the top of its voice, accompanying him the whole time like a torrent on the other side of a wall. He headed for the office where Zina worked; opposite that black building, with benevolent-looking windows inclined toward him, he found the pub where they were to meet.

"Well, what news?" she asked, entering quickly.

"No, he won't take it," said Fyodor watching, with delighted attention, her face cloud as he toyed with his power over it and anticipated the exquisite light he was about to summon.

At the end of the book, he conceives his first novel, which apparently will very much resemble *The Gift* itself. But, he tells Zina,

.... In any case I'll do something else first--I want to translate something in my own manner from an old French sage--in order to reach a final dictatorship over words, because in my [recent work] they are still trying to vote.

Sixty years later, *Atonement* is the most recent great portrait of a writer. One of the main characters, Briony, is an imaginative girl in the first section, an aspiring novelist in the middle, and an elderly successful one in the last part. The meat of the novel, in fact, turns out to be her fictional account of the past and her way of dealing with her own baneful role in it.

A slighter example is Milan Kundera's 1996 novel, *Slowness*. It's not the somewhat facetious seduction plot or the retelling of an eighteenth-century novella that make me regard *Slowness* with affection, but rather the brief interlude in which the narrator reveals himself to be Kundera (or at least a Franco-Czech writer with the nickname Milanku). His wife awakens from a troubling dream consisting of an outtake from the very novel we are reading, and Milanku

apologizes, "you're the victim of my crazy imagination...As if your dreams are a wastebasket where I toss pages that are too stupid."

One of the best from this solipsistic genre is a book dedicated to Kundera: *The Ghost Writer*, my favorite Philip Roth novel. This first volume of the Zuckerman tetralogy is the cleanest, the most innocent, and yet also the most wise. The young Nathan Zuckerman, "writing and publishing [his] first short stories, and like many a hero before [him], already contemplating [his] own massive Bildungsroman," visits his idol, an older writer of fiction with Jewish themes. E.I. Lonoff, something of a cross between I.B. Singer and J.D. Salinger, lives in relative seclusion deep in the Berkshires with his wife and a female former student whom he has more or less adopted. Over the course of one night and 180 of the tightest and crispest of pages, Zuckerman learns something from his hero about finding inspiration in the quotidian. He also (on Lonoff's own writing paper) transforms the young woman into Anne Frank and then imagines her as his wife, an unassailable defense against his critics' charges of anti-Semitism.

Lonoff may also have been modeled on Bernard Malamud, arguably the greatest Jewish-American writer. In 1971, eight years before *The Ghost Writer* came out, Malamud published his own perfectly executed short novel, *The Tenants*. It's the story of two writers, one black and one Jewish, each struggling to finish his own novel as the decrepit tenement they refuse to vacate crumbles around them. I avoid taking this one off the shelf, for I have rarely been able to read the first page without sitting down and rereading the entire book.

Another novel of dueling novelists, of less lasting importance but engaging in its own right, is Martin Amis's *The Information*. Richard Tully is a serious writer whose two published novels are brilliantly opaque and apparently immune to the phenomenon of retail: "nobody understood, or even finished [them]." Gwyn Barry, on the other hand, Richard's old friend from

Oxford, has become a foppish bestseller fatuously enamored of the financial and sexual rewards of celebrity. The rivals battle to the (very) bitter end at tennis, snooker, romance, and of course literature. The section in which Richard tails Gwyn to America to write a magazine article about him is a hilarious commentary on today's Hollywoodish celebrity book tours.

No one would have sympathized more with Richard's disgust than Frederick Exley. In his 1968 autobiographical novel, *A Fan's Notes*, he erupts in despair at his own failed literary ambitions and his inability to fit in with the expectations of society. It's a story of alcoholism and manic depression and psychiatric hospitals (and insulin shock therapy) as well as of literary dreams, and it remains one of the funniest and most moving portraits of failure ever written.

Perhaps the greatest tribute to failure is Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. There are two striking differences, though, between it and *A Fan's Notes*: the reader is well aware that Miller will go on to become one of the most celebrated authors of his time; and the autobiographical narrator, though forty years old and never published, is absolutely delighted with his fate. "I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive. A year ago, six months ago, I thought that I was an artist. I no longer think about it, I *am*." We could say with similar paradox: *Tropic of Cancer* is vulgar and formless, and its protagonist is irresponsible and vile; it's one of our greatest novels. Unrivalled for pure artistic passion, it strips away the mitigating influences of family, security, and income and lays bare the essence of Miller's existence: to live is to write.

Sometimes a great book will offer inspiration and discouragement at the same time. *The New Yorker's* eulogies a few years ago to their longtime writer Joseph Mitchell led me to pick up a copy of his collected works, *Up in the Old Hotel*. The endpiece, "Joe Gould's Secret," (once a book in its own right), is a wonderful profile of a 1911 Harvard graduate who lived as a street

person for forty years, obsessed with writing an impossibly long and comprehensive opus, an "Oral History of Our Time." Late in the piece, Mitchell has cause to look back to when he was twenty-four and, "under the spell of Joyce," dreaming of his own great novel: "But the truth is, I never actually wrote a word of it."

Considering then both Gould and himself, he thinks "of the cataracts of books, the Niagaras of books, the rushing rivers of books, the oceans of books, the tons and truckloads and trainloads of books that were pouring off the presses of the world at that moment, only a very few of which would be worth picking up and looking at, let alone reading.... I began to feel that it was admirable [not to write books]. One less book to clutter up the world, one less book to take up space and catch dust and go unread from bookstores to homes to second-hand bookstores...."

It was almost enough to erode the inspiration gleaned from reading Mitchell--from the purity of his own writing, from the example of his writing life. For an antidote, I went back to the young Mitchell's hero and the greatest of all novels about writers, Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Stephen Dedalus moves through his Dublin childhood like a wounded seagull through a thick Sandymount fog, struggling desperately against the reins of Catholicism and Irish society. Finally, he finds his salvation in art: "His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable." And at novel's end: "Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race."

You might think that one would need the ego of Joyce to imagine forging the conscience of one's race with words. But under the spell of the master's prose, anything seems possible. And

even Joyce, in a letter to his patroness Harriet Shaw Weaver, after having already written *Dubliners*, *Portrait*, and most of *Ulysses*, wrote, "It is very consoling to me that you consider me a writer because every time I sit down with a pen in my hand I have to persuade myself (and others) of this fact."

It's like hearing Nicklaus worrying about his short game. And is consolation, even encouragement, of a sort.

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