

ON BECOMING A WRITER

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I thought I'd speak today about several aspects of the writing life, some of them practical, some of them mystical. I can only say what I've found to be true for myself, because a large part of becoming a writer is finding what works for *you*. It's for this reason that the standard writer's interview often seems absurd. We know how it goes: if the author scribbles or types his first drafts, or works in the morning or late at night, or reads his pages aloud to his wife or husband or cat or mongoose, etcetera. I don't think these matter any more than whether we wash our knees first or our elbows.

One of the best things a writer can learn early on is that how I pull the rabbit out of the hat might not be the way you should do it at all, and neither of us may be able to change the docile bunny to a rainbow of silk handkerchiefs no matter how hard we try. Most writers are given only a limited range of illusions which come naturally, and it's important to learn which sleight of hand you must practice to make your art appear complete, and which conjuring tricks you must graciously leave to others. Paul Theroux put it succinctly. He said, "We don't write as we want to, we write as we *can*."

So our duty to our writing selves, to our talents, to the part of us that wants to

give life to something in language that's our very own, is to find what we should be writing at any given moment, and also abandon any ideas of sounding like some luminary we admire. The problem is that the answers may surprise us. What your imagination announces you should be writing this year may not be within your grasp at this stage (though the imagination is usually right), and it may not be what the rest of you thinks you should be writing ever.

The question of how one becomes a writer is, to me, about as full of hidden dangers as someone asking where you were last night. I don't think I've ever been shy about giving writing advice to anyone who would sit still and take it, but I found that when you invited me here to speak and I began considering in a serious way how I became a writer, I was surprised at how quickly my memory pulled down the blinds in the window and hung out the *Sorry, we're closed* sign.

Let's frankly admit that what we're really asking is how one becomes a *good* writer, or at least a better writer. I know one point that the greats up in heaven, our former colleagues, would agree on: some days, and some years, and some decades even, you don't make progress; you stay in place or even get turned around and go backward. This is why we should judge a writer by his strengths, by his best work.

To me a writer is simply someone who writes a lot, in the sense that a pianist is someone who plays the piano a lot—and *play* is a word I'll return to. I have always found unbearable those people who sit across from you and sip their coffee like a writer, and dress as they think a real writer should, and carry the shoulder bag

they think a writer should, and keep up with the books they guess a writer should. They talk like writers and make love like writers and use their forks and knives like writers; they wear their writer-ness like an elaborate cape. In a line of work where quality depends on uniqueness, they're trying hard to follow a pattern and inhabit a role. In my experience of meeting first-rate writers, craftsmanship and genius rarely come in the human form you might expect. I love this, and I love what it suggests about people—that their essence is seldom what we first imagine. This sense of constant human surprise is, to me, pure joy.

You become a writer by writing, and you become better by writing more than you ever thought possible. It might not be what you do most of the time—but even though a Swiss Army knife has fifty-three other functions, it still has the right to call itself a knife.

The hard part for many people early in their writing lives is believing through and through that they can do it. To get anywhere you must take for granted that you *can* do it, that with dedication you'll get somewhere—then thrust the pesky question aside and carry on with the job. Every writer is beset by fears, especially early in a new project, but you have to keep going and slip through them, no matter how many drafts it takes. The vast question of wondering if you can do it, if you can become a good writer, *must* be answered yes—yes, that is, if you really do love to write, love it despite the difficulties and the setbacks and perhaps even love it more because of them. And once answered *yes*, the question must be banished forever, because it's

never a fruitful line of inquiry.

It can also become, especially in writers starting out, an excuse for not getting on with the work at hand, which deserves all the concentration you can give it. If the problem is—as for so many—that to write seems to demand a bigger sense of ego than can be easily summoned up, I would suggest that, in every work, confidence comes and goes to a writer like bouts of good and bad weather. And some days you just have to stay out there in the fields when the weather's awful.

As for the complex question of ego, the answer is not to make your ego as large as it can be but rather as small, so you can slip through the difficulties like a needle through a wall of rock. If you do that, I promise, the work will still look and sound unmistakably like you. Keep your focus on the work at hand, not on you. As the poet Peyton Houston, one of my personal saints, wrote: “Everything was in shadow until I got out of the way.”

So how did I become a writer? Good question.

It's hard for me to remember a time when I didn't know I was going to be a writer. Soon I set about becoming a musician as well; this is still an enormous part of my life. There were a few months at age seventeen, the dire old age of childhood, when I thought I was done with writing, the well had run dry. The following year I wrote my first novel, which shows how wrong you can be.

The source was that I loved books from an early age. I learned to read at four and soon read well, and I began writing little stories by age six. I don't think an

early start matters in the least, it's just what happened to me. I have a solid memory of lying on my stomach, scrawling away at a story, and of the satisfaction it gave me to put quotation marks around dialogue, because then it looked like the real thing.

At the heart of this memory, though, is a love of books. If I could devour books now with the healthy gluttony and remorseless speed as I did then, I would consider myself well-read. I used to wake through some internal pressure at four in the morning and read in bed until it was time to get up for school; and because most schoolwork came easily to me, one strong memory of my grammar school years is lugging piles of books home from the library every couple of days.

That library was an Eden to me. There is, of course, a serpent in Eden, and the cruel temptation was that I wasn't allowed to check out books from the adult floor, where they obviously kept the more interesting volumes. Like, say, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, unabridged and as heavy as a strongbox. For a while I tried to check out books on my mother's card. Whether they cared that I was not Gladys Lasky Weller, or realized that (despite all my shameless lies) my mother couldn't possibly be asking me to take out books on Genghis Khan, the battle of the Little Big Horn, and space travel to Neptune, either way, my hopes were thwarted.

So I used to spend a couple of idyllic afternoons every week at the library after walking there from school. They could stop me taking those books home, but they couldn't stop me reading them in a corner. Eventually the rule-makers relented, and on the strength of my mother's card I was given the keys to this adult paradise.

I remember, too, a bust of the poet Sidney Lanier in a grove across from the library, where I waited for the bus. Every day I'd ponder that it must be a fine thing to be a writer, they put up your statue and planted flowers on your behalf. I didn't consider the weed in the flowerbed—so many writers, so few statues. In European cities they used to name streets after even minor authors, so they're remembered even if they're no longer read. I wouldn't bet on this trend returning.

My reading, outside of what my English mother fed me with unerring taste, was scattershot. There was a good deal of poetry, whose music cast a lasting spell; for much of my life I've written nearly as much poetry as prose. Earlier I mentioned a love of books—I mean by that a love of the object itself. Part of wanting to write is the desire for a binding with your name on it. Most writers have an affection for the printed word; an eye for dust jackets and the merits of alternate editions; an appreciation of typefaces and the look of lines on a page, the way paper feels, the heft and shape of a book. I can still remember arranging books I wanted to read on my desk at school—those desks on the wrong side for a left-hander.

My social experience growing up in a small city in central Georgia doubtless contributed to my becoming a writer. I rode a city bus to and from grammar school, because my mother didn't drive, and as a result ended up not participating in the usual group activities, with a lot of time to myself for reading. Before, when I was too small to go home alone, I'd walk downtown to my mother's ballet studio and read away the afternoons while she taught and rehearsed. And though we had many

friends there, partly because my father (a Bostonian) was always abroad covering some war or other as a reporter, and because my mother remained a Londoner with much of her mind in Europe, I never felt myself entirely an American and definitely not a Southerner. I say this although I feel great love for Macon, for Georgia, and for the South; that part of the country holds more magic for me than New England, where I now live. Still, to this day I find myself feeling more general affinity for European writers than American ones, and undoubtedly my writing reflects this.

In any event, this social situation was a childhood laboratory preparing me for my profession. V. S. Pritchett has likened the writer to a man living on a frontier. This means having one foot planted in the familiar country that everybody inhabits, and the other foot in the private country he spends page after page exploring—with the internal country really a dream-version of the other, like a hand-shadow thrown on a wall whose ultimate shape may bear little resemblance to what produced it. So from an early age I got used to being simultaneously an outsider and an insider: to feeling part of a community, and safe within it, while also feeling utterly removed from it. Things have never really been different no matter where I lived.

Of course we all of us feel this way. There's us, and everybody else—which is why other people are fundamentally unknowable. I think of James Joyce, writing, "A hundred cares, a tithe of troubles and is there one who understands me?" But the writer *is* different to the degree that the country on the other side of the frontier is for him generated with much more detail and energy than for most people, precisely

because it is constantly being visited and mapped and cultivated and peopled and explored. This double life allows a writer to move in and out of the world he's creating on the page, and the room he happens to be working in, with the blithe ease of someone waving a diplomatic passport at agreeable border officials. I should add that whenever the work goes badly the border officials can turn very surly. For me one test of how well my work is going is whether what I'm writing about remains more vivid than the life occurring around me when I stop for lunch.

These two countries on either side of the frontier also represent the subjective and objective sides of the writer. By "subjective" I mean the ability to immerse yourself in what your imagination offers you, with no more second-guessing than you'd give to a dream when you're asleep. This immersion must be followed by a ruthless scrutiny, over and over, by the objective, rewriting mind. Yet the scrutiny is valuable *only* if it is able to wholeheartedly reenter the spirit of the initial dream almost instantaneously, and be reminded of what the imagination was striving for, then dart back to the terrain of the written page and make the necessary adjustments.

This back-and-forthing is often very tricky, especially in the early stages of a work, but as you push on and acquire a deeper sense of what the work will be, that open border becomes almost casual—rather like a smuggler who finds a convenient frontier crossing-point, a hidden pass through the mountains, where he can slip from country to country alongside his pack mules loaded with contraband, and no rifle-toting guards anywhere in sight. Thus the act of writing is first imagining what a

work will be, then discovering as you write what it is—and successfully reconciling the two (we hope) with what it ought to be.

My mother, one of the most widely cultured and open-minded people I've known, gave me a great deal besides teaching me to read and providing me with endless books and enthusiasm for my writing. We traveled overseas on the cheap every summer, and this interest in other ways of life has been crucial to me. The sooner a writer understands that everybody thinks differently and we all of us believe we're justified in everything we say and do, the better. Travel exposed me to other languages, which meant a lot to my inner ear. Young, I saw some of the best art museums of Europe; I think my visual sense is one of my strengths as a writer and probably comes from this. I was also exposed through my mother to the rigors of the ballet world at its highest levels, and this is also good for someone determined to do creative work—to get an idea early on of the costs as well as the possible rewards, and to shake hands with greatness.

Around age eight I began to read a good deal of science fiction and fantasy. This lasted five years, until I went off to boarding school. I haven't read anything of the genre since, but it was a healthy obsession for a writer-to-be. Because much of the apparatus of science fiction doesn't depend on an adult experience of the world, I could feel capable of writing it myself in a way that "regular" books denied me. I wrote a number of science fiction or fantasy stories in 7th and 8th grade, and a kindly editor in New York sent me a helpful book on shaping stories in the setup-climax-

resolution way. Inadvertently I became the youngest published science fiction author in history—I still hear from the genre statisticians—unless some upstart has eclipsed my record. A paperback anthology called *Infinity Three* turned down a story I sent them, but accepted a poem. I wrote it at twelve; it came out when I was thirteen.

The virtue of the way my boarding school taught English was that you were required to write a story every week. Obviously some people were better at it than others, but if you're going to be a writer, one short story a week from ninth through twelfth grades is not a bad place to start. Senior year I took a special writing course that was wonderful partly because the teacher kept us reading modern fiction, and at an exhausting rate. We had three nights to handle Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and we were expected to deal with Borges or Kafka or Cary in a night or two. For someone accustomed to standard high school fare, these books were like a sequence of detonations, of well-timed depth charges, and made anything seem permissible in our own stories. Bravery and experimentation were encouraged, and the result was that instead of trying to imitate Hemingway we tried to write like ourselves. Out of a dozen classmates, four write professionally.

In college I found that the Yale approach to reading was not of much use to me. To hear their pretentious literary analyses executed on a hapless text was like watching a live butterfly get its wings pinned back, or hearing people who haven't the slightest idea how to build a table talking with authority about the ludic cross-pollination between a table's semiotics and its hermeneutic sense-memory. All those

syllables left me—who wanted mainly to learn how the bits of wood fit together—literally over in the Music Building. The academic approach struck me as irrelevant, and I noticed that the only books they ever deigned to discuss were those that suited their souped-up, techno-syllabic, hot-rod crypto-lingo. So I stopped taking English classes and wrote novels and poetry on my own.

At this point I got very lucky. I was taken under the wing of an older poet, Peyton Houston, who for years gave me the kind of word-by-word and line-by-line tutelage that a young poet can only dream about. All this time I have kept writing poems, and perhaps they're my best work. The years have only reinforced my belief that poetry is the highest, most flexible state language can achieve, and to practice it even clumsily is of immeasurable value for anyone who aspires to write well.

I also fortunately came under the influence of a Spanish composer, Julián Orbón, with whom I studied musical composition for years. These two men, who died early in the '90s, influenced my approach more than anyone else has.

From them I got a powerful conviction that art, no matter how it may surprise or shock us, must still always be logical and never arbitrary in its construction and development. They gave me a sense of how compelling a force structure can be in a work, and how organic the structure must be—that the tiniest detail, no matter how ornamental it may seem, must abet the entirety, and give a sense of resonating and flowering across the total architecture. That every word, every beat, must be gone over again and again, questioned and prodded and thrown back into the smelting

furnace. That you must be on guard against the banal, the tired, the done-before. That you must know our predecessors' work very well, and not be reluctant to use the tradition, while renewing it radically in making something fresh and yours.

They also impressed upon me an ability to severely cut what I'd done, to leave only what was alive and really essential: an ideal work contains a minimum of words, the truthful minimum. They taught me not to be afraid of simplicity while seeking a pressure of ideas, and to be on guard against striking a pose or shouting for effect. And that the whole should have the appearance, after all that rewriting, of being spontaneous, of inventing itself right before your eyes.

Finally, they taught me how hard it is to get anywhere in the arts, that quality has little to do with it and this doesn't matter—that you created something beautiful was enough and must remain enough. We are measured by what we can perceive and what we do with those perceptions, not by the zeros on a publisher's contract.

So I wrote a novel my freshman year, which came naturally, and got a literary agent, who tried but failed to sell that book. I wrote a second novel with enormous difficulty; the more I worked the more labored it became, because the rule is that the second novel is allowed to whack you as much as it wants to see if you're serious. Thankfully, after two years of this punishment my agent—Dorothy Olding, who represented Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Salinger, Agatha Christie, Anthony Powell, and Muriel Spark—called at seven one morning and woke me by advising I give up and go on to the next book. Great advice, abrupt freedom: sometimes the gods are kind.

I finished my third novel the summer after graduating from college. My agent couldn't sell that one either, though we came close. I moved to New York and wrote *The Garden of the Peacocks* from 1980-82, but soon took it back from her because I realized, in a flash of revelation, that the family saga of a wilful Cuban sculptor was beyond my reach, and nothing was gained by circulating a catastrophe to publishers.

I then spent three years on another novel which, again, came very close with a couple of publishing houses but, after initial excitement from individual editors, failed to persuade their evil committees. All this time I supported myself with odd jobs: as a guitarist and as a freelance magazine journalist, sent abroad a great deal.

I then returned to *The Garden of the Peacocks* for another four years. I was barely staying afloat in Amsterdam, Paris, Cyprus, and finally Massachusetts. By 1990 I had the *Peacocks* pretty close to how it was eventually published. I now had a different agent, Henry Dunow, my first having been incapacitated by a stroke. My new agent did his damndest—the novel was turned down by thirty-five publishers. A roulette wheel has no memory; those odds are bad but unchanging, each time.

Meanwhile I wrote another novel, *The Polish Lover*. Three more years on the tightrope, before I found that the answer to structuring a compressed novel about a love affair gone wrong was to leap among several time-streams and leave out a lot. It'd been turned down by two dozen houses when the head of Marlowe, a mid-size New York publisher, read it, loved it, and bought it and the *Peacocks*, plus a half-finished travel memoir of a road journey across India and Pakistan, from Calcutta to

the Khyber Pass, that originated as an article I did for *Smithsonian* magazine.

Suddenly in early 1996 I went from being on the verge of giving up to having three book contracts. This may sound like sour grapes, but the feeling was not one of triumph, but rather of sheer relief. The triumph came not when I held the finished book—partly because color xeroxes skew your notion of what the cover's going to look like—but when the initial proofs came in, and for the first time I saw my words arrayed on paper that finally resembled not my typescript but the pages of a book.

Having written so much from a young age, I'd had every reason to think my career would get off to an early start. I hadn't reckoned on how very hard it is and how slim the odds are, because there are so many more writers who deserve to be published than ever will be. To be good enough simply doesn't get you far, you have to be lucky also. It was twenty years after I finished my first novel before I got a publisher, twenty years of working ceaselessly on little sleep while buying time to do my own writing. My breakthrough came at a moment when I'd vowed to give up novels and only write poetry. Novels take up a huge space in one's life, and I was sick of getting nowhere. I doubted I could write significantly better books, and to pretend I might coincide with what they were buying next season seemed naive.

It is all too easy for me to bring back that sensation of being nullified by the publishing world, and though I have six books out now, the muscle I developed of keeping this sensation at bay still gets exercised all the time. It taught me that no matter what your goals are—whether you're writing a poem, an article, a novel, a

memoir, a screenplay, a journal, a short story, a comic book, or something else that none of us have thought of yet—you must not blink or give up. Sometimes I feel I got rewarded by not going away; if you hang around long enough, perhaps attention gets paid. When I try to analyze how my writing has improved over the years—how different, truly, is the final draft of *The Garden of the Peacocks*, which a publisher bought, from the rejected draft before?—I’m left utterly befuddled.

Still, I have a theory that editors everywhere, especially at publishers but also at magazines, have a weird sixth sense. Most are second- or third-rate minds, many are frustrated writers (sometimes surprisingly bad or good ones), and they’re filled with plenty of wrong answers but few of the right questions. Yet after being daily pummeled by manuscript after manuscript, they do acquire an animal instinct for when a work has not been fully imagined, not been taken all the way; and I believe the reason my earlier work was not accepted was because it was only 80% or 90% of the way there. Editors, alas, just cannot lavish their time on a risky first novel to haul the manuscript that last 10% of the distance—and it’s artistically perhaps the most important 10%. Professionally, it certainly is.

Thus you should be very, very careful about sending out work; many writers submit it too quickly. Keeping it in a drawer for one month or six will not hurt, and you’ll be surprised by what you see when you go back to it. My mistake was that because I’m a tireless reviser, I felt certain that after countless drafts, when I saw nothing more to change, this meant the book was ready. Had I been willing to wait

and look at it again after an enforced absence, I'd have vastly improved my chances. You have to tell yourself: *There is no hurry. There is no hurry.* And whenever you feel the slightest urge to speed up your final editorial process, slow it down instead.

Today the difficulties that writers eternally face are wildly magnified by a market changing under the pressure of many other media yelling for the attention of a bored audience in need of higher and higher dosages of excitement. Each season from every nook of the electronic jungle more possibilities arise than ever, and it's hard for an original talent to make itself heard. We're living through a time when the role of fiction has changed fundamentally from twenty-five years ago. Ever since movies came along there has been a gradual shift, and the last decades have amplified and sped up this sea-change. Nowadays when an audience wants a good story it turns to film, a much more natural medium for simple narrative—delivering a plot with relevant details. People's basic notions of what a story is are ever more defined by what movies can provide than by what prose can.

This isn't the place to go into the differences between the two, but just as people once read epic poems for the story, and gave up on them in favor of novels, now they watch movies. DVD rentals are our equivalent of the 19th century lending library. Thus the adequately-written "story" novel of the 1950s, '60s, '70s scarcely exists anymore, except in particular genres like mysteries. Likewise, the Grishams, Clancys, Browns, and Crichtons do not rely on language for their effects but are instead anti-language. Their books read like film synopses and depend heavily on an

audience's familiarity with movies and borrowed visual images to convey a scene.

This is usually spoken of as a bad thing, but I'm not sure it is. Books have always been a minority interest, and it's better if writers stop trying to wage a war they can't win and instead concentrate on the special things that language can do.

Let me close by offering a few bits of writing advice that should be taken with plenty of salt. They are merely what I've found to be true, for me.

The first is that you must write pretty nearly every day if you want to sink deep into your own work and improve it. The imagination is the laziest muscle in the body, and unless it's relied on constantly it will atrophy. I leave out, of course, the vacations that are needed to recharge the batteries after solid labor—but these should be earned vacations, not excuses.

In any case, follow a routine. Even if you can only write two days a week for an hour each day, stick to that schedule no matter what, and choose a time that you know is safe, when no one will disturb you and you won't be called away. You'll be surprised at all the pages you produce even under such time constraints.

A test I subject my writing to, draft after draft, is how much can be cut and thrown away without damaging the effect I'm striving for.

The advice you usually hear is to write about what you know. I'd emend this to say: Write while standing on the shoulders of what you know. A lot of people try to get started by keeping a journal. This always strikes me amiss because I've never been able to keep one; whatever I write in them sounds phony. There's nothing

harder than writing currently about oneself. Maybe a place to start is with some memory of childhood or of a family member or, better still, a glimpse of someone you know peripherally—the fellow who sells you coffee every day. The more you can free yourself from any worry over what you’re saying about someone close to you, the better; the only way to write well is to not care in the slightest what people will think. What’s crucial is to find something to write about that makes you sound like you. And it might be a subject you don’t feel very attached to.

You must also learn to be kind to yourself, to understand that there are times when you can’t get the words to wrap around their intended meanings and a story just won’t budge on the page. This doesn’t mean you should give it up, but might mean you should put it aside for a while or try a radically different approach. I got familiar with this in writing the *Peacocks*, juggling four characters’ points of view. I often found myself stubbornly rewriting a scene many times until I realized that no amount of work was going to inject light into a chapter where I’d chosen the wrong point of view. So I’d start over. In the end those blind alleys were all necessary.

The problem of point of view is fundamental. There is the narrow view of the first-person narrator, who makes up for a limited horizon with an intense gaze and a personal voice; the trade-off is versus the all-seeing, all-knowing, vista of the third person, which seemingly gives us the entire world of the story. In my first novel I tried to combine them, to write looking over a particular character’s shoulder in each chapter. My last novel, *The Siege of Salt Cove*, is told by thirty-nine different

narrators, who pass the ball of the plot among them. The quandary, always, is to gently find out what form the story wants: you cannot tell it, it must tell you.

Another error that rarely occurs to people is that sometimes a paragraph or a sentence may be very good, but not in the right location to do its job. It may belong on page three, not page eight.

At the beginning I mentioned a question every writer faces, of what you should be trying at this point in your writing life. A natural corollary is that it's you who have to figure out your own solutions to the problems that crop up on the page. (Some difficulties recur constantly; every writer faces the awkwardness of moving a character from one room to another.) I'm talking here about the larger problems in a work. It's fine if you can learn from Maugham, Flaubert, or even Mickey Spillane, but be wary of the solution that comes ready-made from an outside literary source.

Writing is self-discovery, and in most works there comes a time—even if you're writing what's natural and apt for you now—when you must write scenes or characters that absolutely terrify you, that you're sure you cannot possibly pull off. I now understand these tests are in the work from the very beginning, built by our imaginations into the site plan. And that the aspect of a work which we fear to write most is probably the part we absolutely *must* write. When I look back at my novels I see that many parts I was terrified of in fact wrote themselves smoothly and turned out well once I stopped playing games and avoiding them. It's *necessary* to paint yourself into a corner: that's when you find out how far you can leap.

Earlier I spoke of a writer as being like a smuggler working two frontiers. The smuggling image may seem a romantic one for somebody who sits at a desk for hours turning sentences back and forth. But good writing always carries an element of danger, if only by showing us the world as we haven't seen it before. The hardest, most important part of the process, where many talented and determined writers fail, is that they don't keep in mind how a successful smuggler is always searching for previously unavailable goods. Not enough writers ask themselves if there's anything really fresh, or downright new, in what they've written, if it isn't ground that's been gone over thoroughly by many who came before you. If so, you must be courageous enough to discard the parts that are familiar and find some way, even in a short story about a couple who break up, to bring us something we've never read, whether it's in the characters or the situation or your approach. Most people are not brutally self-critical enough in this regard, but it's what makes a work timeless and energetic, and why the best writing of the past still looks vibrant.

Lastly, the question we all face, at the heart of becoming a writer, is *why?* *Why do it?* It does set you free—no matter how frustrating the writing is, or what your external circumstances are, it turns you into a free man. I know that I've never gotten over the enchantment of language, the intoxication of those rare moments when earth and sky upend and it all unexpectedly appears on the page, at least for a sentence or two.

I've had other rewards. My journalism let me see the world and forced me to

be gregarious in ways that even a vast income never would have, and this plurality of human experience deepened my writing. Had I never done that, never been able to publish novels, I'd still have gone on writing poetry and probably stories anyway, and not just out of habit. Ultimately, to write forces you to understand what you did not understand before, to confront yourself and find out who you are and what you know of the world outside you and the world in you. It liberates you from the ghastly prison of self and enables you to see the hills and the sea and the light on the houses and the people around you as you never have, by writing them down. And if you work hard enough, and trust your imagination enough, you can remake those myriad ever-multiplying worlds in a language that's your own and no one else's.

This is, I believe, as close as the human can ever come to the divine—not in the sense of wisdom or power, but in the sense of play. And if your words are at all original, the truths released by them will be original too, and there on the written page you will find the world new again.

Which seems, to me, reason enough to be here.
