

# On Writing FICTION

Rethinking Conventional Wisdom  
About the Craft

**DAVID JAUSS**  
foreword by  
**BRET LOTT**

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WRITER'S DIGEST  
BOOKS

WritersDigest.com  
Cincinnati, Ohio

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This book is dedicated to the memory  
of Delbert Wylder, George P. Elliott, and  
Frederick Busch—master teachers, all.

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*I was alone with all that could happen.*

—William H. Gass, “The Pedersen Kid”

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## FOREWORD

I have never written a foreword for someone else's book before, and now that I am sitting down to do this, I am filled with a certain kind of apprehension, or perhaps it is a sort of inadequacy. Maybe both.

Not because this is my first foreword, but because I am writing one for a writer whose work I respect and admire utterly, and from whom I myself have learned a great deal about writing.

I met David Jauss at a very peculiar moment in my life. This was in January of 1999 at Vermont College in Montpelier, Vermont, where I was teaching in the low-residency M.F.A. program. David was the new guy on the faculty—I had been with the program for five years by that time—and though I had read and admired his fiction and poetry, knew of his superb work as editor of the literary journal *Crazyhorse* as well, I hadn't met him before, and when I was introduced to this mild-mannered, bespectacled and distinguished gentleman, I remember thinking, *Here's a nice guy.*

During that eleven-day residency in the cold New England winter, I got to know him a little better and found that my first assessment of his being a nice guy was truer than true. He was and remains a gentleman, a kind soul whose gentle voice and thoughtful demeanor reveal a man of great character.

But here is the peculiar circumstance under which we met: On the next-to-last day of the residency, I got a call from Oprah Winfrey, who had found me up in Vermont; it was on this day that she gave me the news a book of mine had been selected for her book club.

Though this might seem to have been an occasion for *Huzzahs!* from the Vermont College writing community, the circumstances in which I found myself that day made this an absolute impossibility. For reasons too complex and convoluted to go into here, this news from Oprah became the most humbling moment in my literary career and precipitated my writing, a couple of months later, a lengthy essay attempting to describe the entire sequence of events that had forced upon me this clarifying sense of humility.

Once I'd finished the essay, uncertain of what it was or whether or not it worked—it was and still is unlike anything else I have ever written—I sent it to David. I did so because of his demeanor during that strange and tumultuous residency; I did so because of his calm, and his smile, and what I had come to see as his honest sense of what it means to be a teacher and a writer. So I decided to send it to him, and to listen to what he had to say.

My life as a writer hasn't been the same since.

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He brought to what I had written a quality of vision that saw not only where I had bungled words, but also where I had bungled thoughts. He saw at once and in detail what my essay was trying to do and to be, saw where it was failing and where it was working, and saw just what the heck I needed to do with *this* word *here* and *that* word *there* so my essay might ring as true as it could.

And perhaps the most important part of this exchange was that all of his acumen was delivered with generosity, with love, and with respect.

That essay ended up being published first in the journal *Fourth Genre*, and was then reprinted in *Utne Reader*; later that year it received a Pushcart Prize, and later still appeared in the Pushcart collection of the best essays published in its twenty-five-year history, and has since appeared in a dozen or so anthologies and textbooks.

I give you this story not to toot my own horn. Believe me, I know better than any person alive that the last person anyone needs to hear from about *me* is *me*.

Rather, I tell you all this as a means to express my apprehension and inadequacy at writing this foreword. Most everything I have written since handing David that essay I have passed before him for both his practical and spiritual editorial input. Rest assured I will continue to send him what I write so as to help me understand, finally, what it is I truly mean to say, and the best way in which I can say it. I will even send him this foreword so it might benefit from his gift at making my writing all the better.

What you hold in your hands this moment is now a gift to *you*. It is the gift of a man who is beloved by his students, beloved by his colleagues, and beloved by his readers. You will find in these pages, whether he is writing about such practical matters as point of view or such seemingly esoteric issues as Janusian thinking, a teacher who cares deeply about his students and a writer who cares just as deeply about the power of words and all they can mean. His is a fierce kind of caring—he takes this vocation seriously—and yet it is also a nurturing kind, as you will soon see.

The best way I know to discover how words do their work, and to understand how they can become *art*, is for the apprentice to study with a fierce and compassionate master of that art. David Jauss is just such a master, and this book grants its readers—you who desire to know what it means *to write*—an invaluable course of study, all at the hands of this extraordinary teacher, writer, and human.

—Bret Lott, author of *Jewel; A Song I Knew by Heart; Before We Get Started: A Practical Memoir of the Writer's Life*;





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# INTRODUCTION

“I was alone with all that could happen”: This comment, by the narrator of William H. Gass’s “The Pedersen Kid,” seems to me the quintessential description of the fiction writer’s situation. The way I see it, Emily Dickinson missed the mark when she said that poets “dwell in Possibility — / A fairer House than Prose”: Possibility is the place where *all* writers of imaginative literature hang their hats, regardless of their genre. Each time we sit down to write a work of fiction, we face a vast panorama of possibilities—and not just “all that could happen” but also all the narrative strategies and techniques we could possibly use to convey the people and events we imagine.

The process of writing a work of fiction is ultimately the process of making choices among this panorama of techniques and strategies. But before we can make these choices, we need to know what the possibilities are, and in my opinion, too much of what’s been written about the craft of fiction restricts the possibilities we can, and should, be exploring. In this book, I have tried to take a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, approach to the craft of fiction. The seven essays that follow attempt to describe the technical possibilities available to us and, further, to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each possibility, the effects each choice we make has on the work as a whole. Instead of *Do this* and *Avoid that*, this book aims to delineate the possibilities, then say, *If you do this ...* and *Avoid that unless...*

Although the essays are grounded in literary history and tradition, they frequently depart from the reigning dogma of our time, as expressed both in standard creative writing textbooks and in the practice of many contemporary fiction writers. For example, much fiction today is written to the tune of the restrictive and ubiquitous mantra “Write what you know,” but in my essay “Autobiophobia,” I argue for writing what you *don’t* know—for what is fiction if not something we haven’t literally experienced? In “From Long Shots to X-Rays,” I counter the inaccurate and generally unhelpful advice about point of view we commonly find stated in textbooks, and as a result illustrated in much of the fiction of our time, by providing definitions and examples of a wide spectrum of points of view that have been successfully employed in fiction (including that ostensibly “impossible” point of view, first-person omniscience). And in “Remembrance of Things Present” and “What We Talk About When We Talk About Flow,” I question the current hegemony of the present tense and minimalist syntax and diction, respectively, and explore the advantages and disadvantages of other tenses, syntax, and diction.

“Some Epiphanies About Epiphanies” challenges the current extremist attitudes, both pro and con, toward those life-altering moments of revelation (cue the trumpets and celestial choir!) and surveys a plethora of possible ways to write satisfying and successful epiphanies. In “Stacking Stones,” I likewise survey the many possible ways to create unity and order in collections containing stories that are disparate in form, style, and content, and in the book’s final essay, “Lever of Transcendence,” I argue for an understanding of the creative process that I believe vastly increases the technical—and therefore intellectual and emotional—possibilities of fiction.

In all of these essays, then, my goal has been to describe as accurately and thoroughly as I can what has actually been done in fiction and to assess the relative value of these various possibilities, many of which contemporary writers have ignored, to the detriment of our fiction, because of prevailing attitudes that have been all too readily accepted. I hope these essays will help you the next time you sit down to write and find yourself alone with all that could happen.

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# I

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHOBIA: WRITING AND THE SECRET LIFE**

### **1. YOU'RE NOT ALONE**

Recently, I received two phone calls that made me think about the kind of fiction I tend to write. One was from a man who told me he had just read a story of mine called “Rainier,” which is about a divorced alcoholic whose son dies in a car accident. “The same thing happened to me,” the caller said, then proceeded to tell me about the anguish he suffered after the death of his son and how AA had helped him overcome not only his alcoholism but his grief. He did not cry, but I could tell he was fighting tears. When he finished telling me his story, he paused, then said, “I just wanted you to know that you’re not alone.”

I couldn’t tell him that *he*, at least at that moment, was alone. My story is not autobiographical. I have never lived in Montana or Wyoming, where the story takes place; I am not now, nor have I ever been, divorced; I am not an alcoholic, recovering or otherwise; and my son, I’m happy to say, is very much alive. Nothing in that story happened to me, or to anyone I know. I made it up. I didn’t have the heart to tell the caller this, however; for the duration of the phone call, I pretended that the story was true, and that I shared his grief not only imaginatively but literally.

The other phone call was from a Vietnam vet who had read my short story “Freeze,” which is about a soldier in Vietnam who steps on a mine that doesn’t explode yet nonetheless has devastating effects on his life. The caller wanted to know if we’d ever met. “I remember that guy you wrote about,” he said. “The lieutenant. And I think we must have been at Lai Khe at about the same time. Did you know Larry Kelvin? Or Rick Hammond?” When I told him I’d never been in Vietnam, or even in the military, he was more than disappointed, he was outraged. “What gives you the right to write about a war when you weren’t even fucking *there*?” he demanded. Clearly, he felt as if he’d been taken in by a con man. And in a way, he had, for what is a fiction writer if not a confidence artist, someone who trades words for your trust, and—if he’s lucky—your money? And how can writers blame their readers for failing to recognize that fiction is *fiction*, not truth, when we do everything we can to make them believe something we imagined is true? Still, I wish he had realized that writers, like magicians, work in the realm of illusion, not reality.

He would never assume that the magician actually sawed the lady in half, yet he was quick to assume that the soldiers I killed had bled real blood.

I didn't get a chance to defend myself to this caller—he hung up almost immediately after accusing me of the crime of lying in a work of fiction—but if I had, I would have told him that “Freeze,” like “Rainier” and the rest of my stories, *is* a true story, but not true in the way he wanted. Its truth is not the kind that can be captured by a surveillance camera but the kind that appears in our dreams, a truth heightened by distortion and the odd juxtaposition of a lifetime's accumulation of images. Like a dream, a story, if it's any good, tells the truth about the author's secret, inner life, and as often as not it does so by telling lies about her public, outer life, for, as Oscar Wilde said, “One's real life is so often the life that one does not lead.” And about the nature of that truth the reader sometimes knows more than the author.

Perhaps the most repeated advice in the history of creative writing workshops is “Write what you know.” For writers who have a talent for negotiating between the demands of facts and the demands of the imagination, this may be valid advice. But for most of us, I believe, writing what we know can only result in nonfiction, whether thickly or thinly disguised. This is why Graham Greene suggested that a good memory was incompatible with good fiction writing. “All good novelists have bad memories,” he said. As Robert Olen Butler explains, “What you remember comes out as journalism. What you forget goes into the compost of the imagination.”

Knowing also creates aesthetic problems that imagining doesn't. As Garrett Hongo has said, “Sometimes, in writing about ‘what you know,’ ... autobiography gets in the way. If you write ‘Grandfather's backyard,’ *you* may see his amazing collection of hybrid lilies, but the reader won't unless you put them into the poem. It's easier to describe something that you've invented than something that's so deeply familiar you take it for granted.” Furthermore, writing about what you already know can be a prescription for boring yourself—and if you bore yourself, you'll bore your reader. For my money, Grace Paley got it exactly right when she said, “You write *from* what you know but you write *into* what you *don't* know.” You can't avoid what you know—it's who you are, after all—but if you're trying to write into what you don't know, you'll discover things about yourself that you didn't know. In short, you'll discover your secret life, and so will your readers.

All literature, I believe, is predicated on the desire to reveal the author's essential, secret self, to be known by others. This is most obviously true of the work of writers like Walt Whitman, Allen Ginsberg, and Robert Lowell, whose strategy, and sometimes subject, is candor. Yet there are many writers—including some of our greatest—who reveal their essential selves by eschewing candor and adopting the strategy of disguise. Both candor and disguise are valid—even indispensable—ways of approaching the secret life in literature, and both can result in great art, though I believe disguise improves your chances, because the less you rely on

autobiographical fact, the more your imagination is of necessity invoked. For the last several decades, however, the dominant approach in American literature has been candor. Our literature has become more overtly factual in its pursuit of the inner life than at any previous point in literary history. Since so many writers believe that the subject of fiction and poetry is and should be their factual experience—"what they know"—it's no wonder so many readers assume the same thing.

In my stories, and in my poems, I have tried to write my way into many characters whose lives I know nothing, or next to nothing, about. On paper, I have been—or at least tried to be—a nun, a serial killer, a bag lady, a nine-year-old boy, a ninety-nine-year-old man, a woman afflicted with hysterical blindness, a teenager who witnesses his father's nervous breakdown, a man with an artificial hand, a divorcée, a girl from Bangladesh, a minor league baseball player from the Dominican Republic, a Hmong refugee, a sixteenth-century Spanish priest, a nineteenth-century Russian dwarf, the biblical Lazarus, and various other characters, including several actual jazz musicians and authors. One of those authors—Gustave Flaubert—wrote a letter to Louise Colet about the pleasure of writing about lives other than his own. Of his day's work on *Madame Bovary*, he wrote:

It is a delicious thing to write, whether well or badly—to be no longer yourself but to move in an entire universe of your own creating. Today, for instance, man and woman, lover and beloved, I rode in a forest on an autumn afternoon under the yellow leaves, and I was also the horses, the leaves, the wind, the words my people spoke, even the red sun that made them half-shut their love-drowned eyes. Is this pride or piety? Is it a silly overflow of exaggerated self-satisfaction, or is it really a vague and noble religious instinct?

It may be evidence of my own pride, but I'll opt for piety as the correct answer. I believe that escaping the self, imagining the life of another, is a noble, even religious, act. But I also believe that we learn as much or more about Flaubert's true self through the people he invents than we would through any overt autobiographical account, for imagining the other is ultimately a way of discovering the self. Flaubert clearly knew this, for when he was asked how he was able to create such a convincing female character, he answered, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi." And Jorge Luis Borges understood this, too, as his summary of the life of an artist indicates:

A man sets himself the task of portraying the world. Through the years he peoples a space with images of provinces, kingdoms, mountains, bays, ships, islands, fishes, rooms, instruments, stars, horses, and people. Shortly before his death, he discovers that that patient labyrinth of lines traces the image of his face.

I cannot see my own face yet, but I trust that I am drawing it, if badly, each time I sit down and attempt to enter another person's central nervous system. And that's the face I want my readers to see, my true face, not the false ones I wear in order to reveal it.

But what will they see if they see my true face? Their own faces, I believe. As Charles Simic has said, "Poems are other people's snapshots in which we recognize ourselves." The same goes, of course, for stories.

Here's the paradox: Just as you reveal your secret life when you imagine others', you reveal others' secret lives when you reveal your own. As Donald Hall once remarked, literature "starts by being personal but the deeper we go inside the more we become everybody."

Everybody, *c'est moi*. And *c'est vous*.

## 2. THE SECRET WANTS TO CROSS OVER

In his great story "The Lady With the Pet Dog," Anton Chekhov says this of his protagonist, Gurov:

He had two lives: an open one, seen and known by all who needed to know it, full of conventional truth and conventional falsehood, exactly like the lives of his friends and acquaintances; and another life that went on in secret. And through some strange, perhaps accidental, combination of circumstances, everything that was of interest and importance to him, everything that was essential to him, everything about which he felt sincerely and did not deceive himself, everything that constituted the core of his life was going on concealed from others; while all that was false, the shell in which he hid to cover the truth ... went on in the open. Judging others by himself, he did not believe what he saw, and always fancied that every man led his real, most interesting life under cover of secrecy as under cover of night.

Chekhov believed that the public life, not only of a character but also of its author, is the false, "accidental" one, the inner, secret life the real, "essential" one. As this suggests, he also believed that autobiographical fiction, if it is devoted to the "conventional truths" of the public life (as it often is), must therefore also be false. No wonder, then, that this man who abhorred falsehood above all things also abhorred autobiographical writing. In an 1899 letter, he diagnosed his abhorrence in medical terms: "I have a disease," he said, "called autobiophobia." Writing about himself was like sticking a knife in his side, he claimed, and he just couldn't do it. Nor did he want to. Nor, I should add, did he have to, for I believe we learn as much or more about Chekhov from his work than we learn about such conventionally autobiographical authors as Jack

Kerouac or Henry Miller from theirs. What we learn—*feel* or *sense* might be more accurate words—is his essential, secret self, not the arbitrary, accidental facts of his life, which would only mask his real nature. Few writers in history have put less of their public lives, and more of their secret lives, into their work. And he did it, paradoxically, by creating an extraordinary range of characters whose lives, on the surface, differed dramatically from his. In this he resembles Shakespeare, the greatest of our writers, who wrote that “the truest poetry is the most feigning.” Reading Chekhov and Shakespeare, and others like them, we inhabit their essential selves and dream their dreams along with them. When we read overtly autobiographical writers, however, all too often we stand apart and watch, from a greater or lesser distance depending on the gifts of the author, the arbitrary and accidental circumstances of their public lives.

Oscar Wilde once said, “Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell the truth.” Lionel Trilling seconds that opinion, saying “disguise is not concealment” but revelation, for “the more a writer takes pains with his work to remove it from the personal and subjective, the more—and not the less—he will express his true unconscious.” Some writers are gifted enough to tell the truth about their inner lives without the aid of a mask, but most of us, I believe, are not. Even if we know our secret selves (and that’s a big *if*), it’s almost impossible to draw our true faces for our readers merely by reporting what seems to be the “truth.” Instead, like Shakespeare, like Chekhov, we have to imagine we are someone else, we have to wear a mask; in short, we have to *lie*. For a lie is nothing more, nor less, than the means to make a secret public while still keeping it secret. As Jorie Graham has put it,

The secret cannot be  
kept.

It wants to cross over, it wants  
to be a lie.

Writing about the secret life is not, then, a matter of revealing actual secrets but of distorting and altering them, consciously or unconsciously, so they tell a larger kind of truth. If you simply reveal a secret—tell the god’s honest truth about it—you may in fact tell a lie about your real, inner life. At the very least, you will be false to the primary characteristic of the secret, which is that it is *secret*. There have been times in my life when I’ve told someone a secret I’d suppressed for years, and once it was spoken, it suddenly felt false and insignificant. On the other hand, a secret that remains buried under the oppressive weight of silence increases in significance and value, the way carbon buried under the weight of the earth turns into a diamond. To reveal this “diamond” factually is to return it to carbon, but to reveal it in a way that conceals it—in other words, to tell a lie about it—allows the secret to retain the luster that silence has given it.



As this suggests, a lie is a form of silence, for it is a refusal to reveal the secret. But, as Wilde suggests, a lie tells the truth all the more fully and honestly by refusing to tell it. Or, as Emily Dickinson would put it, it tells the truth but tells it slant. Dickinson's poetry is a good example of literature that reveals through its reticence. Her poems convey a stunning inner life while concealing the specifics that would claim the spotlight in a confessional poem. In an article in *The New York Times Book Review*, Elizabeth Schmidt asks, "Why do readers feel so close to [Dickinson] in spite of her attempts to push her audience away?" The answer, I believe, is that her poems reveal her essential life more compellingly *because* of the aura of secrecy rather than *in spite of* it. Clearly, Dickinson knew that reticence can be a form of revelation. C.P. Cavafy recognized this, too. In his poem "Hidden Things," he says, "From my most unnoticed actions, / my most veiled writing— / from these alone I will be understood." If Dickinson and Cavafy and writers like them had revealed their secret selves nakedly, we would not *feel* their inner lives so much as *know* them, and feeling is a deeper, more vital form of knowing. What brings a poem to life more than anything else, I believe, are its secrets and the feelings they engender in the reader. Stanley Kunitz agrees: "A poem without secrets," he once said, "lies dead on the page."

The principal paradox of literature, then, is that by lying it simultaneously reveals and represses the truth about the author's secret life. Ted Hughes goes so far as to suggest that this combination of revelation and repression is the very *definition* of literature. "Maybe all poetry," he has said, "... is a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately needs to communicate, to be delivered of." And, he concludes, "Perhaps it's the need to keep it hidden that ... makes it poetry."

The secret cannot be kept and it must be kept. The only way to satisfy both demands, the only way the secret can cross over without being recognized, is to don the disguise of a lie.

### 3. THE GENERATIVE SECRET

As the quotation from Hughes suggests, literature has its origin in secrets that the author feels compelled both to reveal and conceal. In other words, secrets, and the secret life, *generate* literature. As I said earlier, literature ends, if it's successful, by expressing everybody's secrets, but it begins in the personal life of the author. Let me give two examples of personal secrets that "cross over" as lies in works of literature that, in my opinion, rise well beyond their personal origins.

Some time ago, a former student of mine whose poetry I admire revealed a secret that she has kept from everybody, including her husband, for more than twenty years: When she was a teenager, she ran away from home and, after working as a waitress in various cities and towns, married a middle-aged bartender in one of the western states. They lived as man and wife for

several years, then one day she left him—she’s still not sure why—and returned to her home state, where she eventually met and married her current husband without ever divorcing her first. When she revealed this secret to me, she mentioned a poem of hers that is perhaps her most harrowing, one in which a teenage girl witnesses her father’s fatal heart attack. I knew the poem wasn’t factual—her father is alive and healthy—but I didn’t know, until she told me, that the man described in the poem is her first husband (who is also, as far as she knows, still alive). The poem ends with a reference to a button that’s missing on the father’s shirt. “That’s my husband’s shirt,” she said. “That’s what he was wearing the day I left him.” The fiction she made to surround one small fact—the missing button—reveals far more about her inner life, I believe, than a straightforward history of her first marriage possibly could. By transforming her husband into a father, and his heartache after she left him into a heart attack, she reveals the extremity of her sorrow and guilt over abandoning him—and simultaneously expresses a desire, perhaps secret even to herself, that he in fact die, so she won’t have to worry about having her past revealed to her current husband. However we interpret the transformation of facts in her poem, the description of her first husband’s shirt is the only overt reference to him in all of her work, and it’s as oblique as can be: No one reading the poem could possibly guess the secret of its significance to the author. And now that I know this secret, I cannot read that poem, or others by her, without seeing how it informs and generates her poetry.

Similarly, Charles Dickens had a secret that informs much of his work—most especially *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, and *Little Dorrit*, though its traces are virtually everywhere—and this secret appears to have generated not only those works but, to a large extent, their very author. As his biographer Edgar Johnson reveals, when Dickens was twelve, his parents’ financial straits became so dire that they sent him to work at a grimy, rat-infested blacking warehouse (*blacking* being the English term for shoe polish). There, the young Dickens labored from eight in the morning until eight at night pasting labels on pots of blacking. The six shillings he earned each day did not prevent his father from being imprisoned for debt, however; eleven days after Charles began his degrading work, his father entered Marshalsea Prison, bringing further shame to Dickens and dashing whatever hopes he had of one day distinguishing himself in the world. Though both he and his father were released from their respective prisons within four or five months, those months felt like an eternity to the young Dickens, who could not have known when, or even *if*, his or his father’s bondage would end. Dickens would have taken the secret of his family’s shame to his grave had it not been for a chance encounter between his friend John Forster and a man named Charles Wentworth Dilke. Dilke told Forster, who was writing a biography of Dickens at the time, that he recalled seeing Charles working in the blacking warehouse when he was a child. When Forster mentioned Dilke’s comment to Dickens, Dickens abruptly changed the subject. “I felt,” Forster later wrote, “that I had unintentionally touched a

painful place in his memory.” After several weeks of silence about the matter, Dickens gave Forster a fragmentary written account of his childhood. Of his work at the blacking warehouse and his father’s imprisonment, he said, “From that hour until this at which I write, no word of that part of my childhood which I have now gladly brought to a close, has passed my lips to any human being. ... I have never, until I now impart it to this paper, in any burst of confidence with any one, my own wife not excepted, raised the curtain I then dropped ...”

Of course Dickens *did* raise that curtain throughout his life—though only in his fiction, where he raised it again and again. But, importantly, each time it appears, it appears in disguise: The secret crosses over in the form of a lie. In *David Copperfield*, for example, Dickens alters the autobiographical facts, making his protagonist—whose initials are his own reversed—younger (ten instead of twelve) and putting him to work for a wine merchant, pasting labels on wine bottles instead of blacking pots. These are minor alterations, of course, and as such they’re typical of your garden-variety autobiographical fiction. Another alteration takes us a little farther from the “conventional truths” of his public life, however: Instead of Copperfield’s father going to prison for debt, it’s his surrogate father, Mr. Micawber, who is imprisoned. More importantly, Dickens also made a major alteration, one that departs from the facts of his public life so completely that it reveals his secret life nakedly: He made Copperfield an orphan. This alteration reveals more than any recitation of the facts possibly could just how alone and abandoned Dickens felt then, and would feel as long as he lived. Furthermore, the fact that he “murders” his parents in his imagination may even suggest how much he secretly blamed and hated them for causing him such shame and misery. In any case, one thing is clear: For all his efforts to keep his secret, Dickens couldn’t keep from telling it, in fictional form, throughout his life.

These two examples involve secrets that eventually became public, but I think it is fair to assume that much of literature—if not all of it—is similarly informed and generated by secrets that have remained secret. Reading literature, we feel these secrets the way we feel, rather than see, subliminal advertisements for popcorn and drinks at a movie theater. They’re there but not there at the same time, yet their effect is nonetheless palpable: We suddenly feel hunger and thirst, and don’t know why.

#### **4. SECRECY AND IMMORTALITY**

One of Chekhov’s greatest stories, “The Bishop,” is about a dying man who judges the external facts of his life a success yet nevertheless feels dissatisfied. As Chekhov says, Bishop Pyotr “had attained everything in life that it was possible for a man in his position to attain; his faith was unsullied, and yet all was not clear to him; something was lacking, and he did not want to die. It still seemed to him that he was leaving unfound the most important thing of all.” That “most

important thing of all,” the story goes on to reveal, is “someone to whom he could unburden his heart.” Like Chekhov’s early story “Misery,” which recounts a cabdriver’s vain attempts to find someone to whom he can tell his sad story, “The Bishop” traces the bishop’s failure to find that all-important someone to whom he could unburden his heart. He wishes to confide in his mother, who has come to visit him, but though she is “so natural and simple with strangers,” she is “silent and awkward” with him, because he is a bishop. Pyotr wishes desperately to be known by someone—he even tries to reveal his feelings to the cantankerous Father Sisoï—and his tragedy is that he dies paradoxically both famous and anonymous: His public life is famous, but his secret life, the one that really matters, is utterly unknown. (No doubt the famous Chekhov feared the same fate, but rather than attribute his anxieties to an overtly autobiographical character—say, an atheistic writer—he attributes them to a devout bishop.) After the bishop’s death, it is as if he had never truly lived at all, for even his public life soon fades from memory. “A month later a new bishop was appointed,” Chekhov writes, “and everyone forgot his Reverence Pyotr.” Only his mother remembers him, and though she tells people about him, she can’t keep his memory alive. In fact, as Chekhov movingly suggests, the very effort to keep his memory alive helps *erase* it: When she tells people about her famous son, they believe she’s lying in an attempt to increase her prestige. As a result, the bishop’s life becomes, for most people, nothing more than a fiction, and his reality fades further into oblivion.

The desire to be known, not only now but also after our deaths, is one of the most basic of human desires. Ultimately, it’s not celebrity the bishop, or Chekhov, wants, but immortality, our real life surviving beyond our public life. Everyone seeks immortality in some form or another. The very fact that we tend to judge the value of the present in terms of the future—“And would it have been worth it, after all?” Prufrock asks—reveals the premise that life lacks meaning unless it continues in some way after its biological close. Death, then, is the enemy of meaning, unless something more valuable than the physical body survives. All systems of thought, in order to assert meaning, deny death and posit some kind of afterlife. Religion touts the immortality of the soul, and science the perpetuation of the species or the replenishment of the earth (which our bodies renew as they decompose). To my way of thinking, neither of these forms of “immortality” provides consolation. Heaven, hell, and their relatives strike me as feeble fictions, and the afterlife science offers is meager indeed. I take little comfort from the thought that someday I’ll be fertilizer for weeds, and not much more from the fact that, as a father, I will live on in future generations through my children and their children and so on, for as time passes my individual contribution to the species will diminish at an astronomical rate. In his book *The Dance of Life: Courtship in the Animal Kingdom*, Mark Jerome Walters points out that we are able to pass on only half of our genetic material when we reproduce and that our genetic contribution erodes drastically with each new generation. “After nine generations,” he writes,

“fewer than one in every 415 million genes is a direct offshoot of the original parents,” and “Successive generations dilute the contribution at a geometric rate, rapidly driving the genes of the ancestral parents from the picture.” If our lives derive meaning from the presence of our genes in those who follow us, that meaning diminishes just as geometrically as our surviving genes.

The only kind of immortality that truly exists, to my way of thinking, is the immortality of fame, if we define fame as Donald Hall does in *Their Ancient Glittering Eyes*—as “the love that everyone wants, impersonal love, love from strangers for what we are, what we do or make” that will last “forever and ever, as long as the language exists and maybe longer.” But fame is tenuous at best: The artist whose stock is high today may be off the board tomorrow. (In the nineteenth century, for example, Philip James Bailey was ranked with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Tennyson, but today he’s forgotten.) And fame is not only tenuous but, in relation to eternity, short-lived: Ozymandias may erect a glorious monument to himself, but it will eventually crumble; Shelley can resurrect that monument, and Ozymandias, in verse, but his poem too will crumble—and so, one day, as Hall acknowledges, will the English language itself. Still, there is no other “afterlife,” however tenuous or short-lived, available to us than that earned through fame. And the fame accruing to a historical figure is a relatively paltry one, for it is based only on the public life, not the secret life that is the real life. Genghis Khan’s *name* may be immortal, but his inner life isn’t. The truest kind of fame is that based on “what we are”—on our real, secret selves—as revealed through “what we do or make.” And the best—perhaps the only—way the secret life can continue after our deaths is through art, and especially, I believe, literature, which Hall has aptly defined as “human inside talking to human inside.”

Reading Shakespeare, Dickinson, Chekhov, all the masters, we find, wherever we look, the literary equivalent of their DNA, all their genes surviving intact.

## 5. CYRANO

There is another reason I praise autobiophobia: Ever since I was a child, I have believed that secrecy and virtue are largely synonymous. If you did a good deed in public—helped an old lady across the street, say, as the Boy Scouts advocated—how could you be sure you were doing it for virtuous motives rather than vain ones? If an act was public, there was always the danger that you were doing it so that someone—the old lady, a bystander, God, Santa Claus—would think you were a good person. And if that was your motive, your act was not, in fact, a virtuous one.

In 1990 I saw the film *Cyrano de Bergerac*, starring Gerard Dépardieu, and wrote a poem about it that addresses this issue of the relationship of virtue and secrecy. The poem is a fictive attempt to deal with my actual reaction to the film. Here it is:

# CYRANO

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How we admire Cyrano's suffering,  
his noble silence, the purity  
of a love kept secret, as he whispers

into the ear of his dying rival  
*It's you she loves.* Unwitnessed,  
his lie wins him neither praise

nor Roxanne, for goodness is nothing  
if not a form  
of privacy. But what if he believed

God was watching, as all-knowing and voyeuristic  
as a moviegoer?

An audience taints every good act, a judge

corrupts it utterly. So is faith the greatest obstacle  
to virtue? I'm falling

through this thought when I hear her,

a woman two rows down,  
weeping so loudly I suspect  
a grief too personal to be expressed

except in public. Hands over her face,  
she whips her head back  
and forth, as if saying *no* over and over

to someone not there. Or is she  
talking to her life? Sympathy  
is one disguise curiosity wears:

if I comfort her, I wonder, would she tell me  
the sorrow that sits down with her  
each day for dinner, the pain

that makes her bed each morning?

I believe she would, and I'm tempted  
to be the audience that would give her grief

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its twist of pleasure. But I turn back  
to the movie and try not to listen  
as her sobs gradually subside. In an hour

we sit through twenty-seven minutes of darkness—  
the black spaces between frames—  
and though we can't see it, we feel it

behind the images light casts  
on the blank screen: the blue sky,  
the green lawn, and Roxanne's face,

beautifully ignorant, as Cyrano, old now  
and dying, visits one last time,  
his secret the only thing

holding him, and us, up.

Perhaps it is my association of secrecy and virtue that makes me suspicious of those writers who, to echo Norman Mailer, “advertise” themselves. Even when they’re advertising their vices, as is often the case, they seem to be congratulating themselves, as if they believe their candor is sufficiently virtuous to absolve them of those vices. As much as I love the work of many writers who choose nakedness over disguise, I sometimes find that love compromised by the suspicion that their work, however beautiful and moving, is motivated to some extent by self-admiration. The writers who most move me—the writers I, vainly, aspire to emulate—are those who most disguise themselves. (And we must remember that fact can sometimes serve as a brilliant disguise—witness Tim O’Brien’s richly imagined stories about a character named Tim O’Brien.) By cloaking their selves in secrecy, these writers create works that renounce the self in order to discover, and reveal, the other. In Sherwood Anderson’s opinion, “the whole glory of writing lies in the fact that it forces us out of ourselves and into the lives of others.” Antonio Machado made much the same point: “What the poet is looking for,” he said, “is not the fundamental I, but the deep you.” But, paradoxically, the more a writer focuses on “the deep you”—the other—the more his secret life enters the work, and enters it with the mystery and power—and virtue—of a secret.

## 6. ZORRO'S SERVANT

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What better way to end an essay on autobiophobia than with some autobiography?

In my youth, I saw a movie that, like *Cyrano de Bergerac*, taught me the virtue and value of the secret life. If, as Chekhov wryly suggested, autobiophobia is a disease, I was first exposed to it in the fall of 1958, when I was seven, and I caught it from an unlikely, and quite corny, source—the movie *The Sign of Zorro*. The movie was a distillation of the first thirteen episodes of the *Zorro* television series that had shown the previous fall and spring on ABC, and as far as I could tell, its characters and plot were familiar to virtually all the children who went to the theatre in my small hometown to see it that Saturday afternoon. My family did not yet own a television, however, and none of my friends had one either, so I knew almost nothing about Zorro. A few weeks before, one of my first-grade classmates had worn his Zorro costume to school for show-and-tell and all during recess he'd carved Zs in the playground dirt with his plastic sword. Ever since then, I'd been begging my mother to buy me a Zorro costume—I'd seen them for sale at our local Ben Franklin store—but she did not then, or ever, relent. Evidently, many of the kids at the movie that day had waged similar campaigns more successfully, for they were wearing Zorro capes and masks. The theatre had promised free admission to anyone wearing a Zorro costume (hats and swords had to be checked behind the candy counter, however) and they even let in a few girls who were carrying Fresh-Up Freddie dolls, stuffed roosters wearing Zorro outfits. (I'd seen these dolls at Ben Franklin also—along with Zorro games, puzzles, watches, and paint-by-number sets—but I had no idea what a rooster had to do with Zorro until the following year, when my parents finally bought a television and I saw an animated version of Fresh-up Freddie advertising 7-Up during *Zorro's* commercial breaks.) When the movie began, the theater full of Zorros sang along with the theme song—"Out of the night, / when the full moon is bright, / comes the horseman known as Zorro"—and I felt I was the only one who didn't know the words. Despite my youth, I was already accustomed to feeling like an outsider, even when I was with my friends and family, but I had never felt more like an outsider than I did that day. As much as I'd looked forward to the movie—I had seen only a few others in my short life—now that I was there watching it, I felt as if I were the only person who wasn't in on the secret.

Like most kids, I wanted to fit in, and at this time and place, that meant knowing about Zorro. But the more I watched the movie, the more I found myself fascinated not so much with Zorro but with his faithful servant, Bernardo, played by the virtually unknown, then or now, Gene Sheldon. Sheldon did not have the looks or style of Guy Williams, the teen idol who played Zorro; he was a short, dumpy, baby-faced man whose double chin was accentuated by the cord that held his Spanish hat on his head. Like Cary Grant and Kirk Douglas, he had a cleft in his chin, but that fact only emphasized his difference from them and other stars. Nonetheless, I was



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