

AN ETHIC FOR AESTHETICS

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The Book of the Dun Cow was published in 1978 by the Junior Books Division of Harper & Row (as HarperCollins entitled itself in those days). This was my own first book of any significance. It was written in a rollicking, unselfconscious enthusiasm. Simply, I was doing on a larger scale what I had been doing all my life till then: making up stories. Telling them. Writing them down.

Time has passed. With this present volume I shall have published more than thirty books, which together represent most of the literary genres: novels, short stories, poetry, expository prose, drama, devotional literature. Children's books. Through the length of such activity, an author is not likely to remain unselfconscious about his craft and his career--and I have not.

Moreover, for the last ten years I've been teaching creative writing at Valparaiso University.

In other words, I not only do what I do, but I've also been required to step outside the doing in order to contemplate it with some objectivity; to talk about it; to define it and to pass it on to others. "It." This identifiable human endeavor: art. And within the wide realm of art: writing.

The definitions resulting from these contemplations I call "working" definitions. Art is as living and elusive as the cultures that produce and preserve it, the communities, the sacred communions; art, then, resists absolute classifications. And the creative process itself is ultimately too personal to be reduced to something like a universal system.

"Working" definitions, I say, first because they are what works today, but tomorrow may be subject to change; and second because their value is essentially pragmatic. It is within these definitions that I work; it is by them that I can communicate something of this work to others, to fellow artists, to aspiring writers, to intelligent readers curious about the development of the material they read.

In this essay I will outline these definitions--together with the principles which I believe

them to impose upon me and my writing--since they govern the production of my children's stories as much as anything else I write.

Part One: What is Art?

As far as I am concerned, art occurs. It happens. It is always an *event* rather than an object, though it is by means of objects that art takes place.

The painting, then, that hangs in a nighttime darkness on the museum wall is not itself art. It is a medium *for* art. When the lights come on; when a viewer steps before the shapes, the textures, and the colors composed upon the canvas; when the viewer enters the thing by playing her sight from part to part of the painting-- that progressing *event* is art.

Likewise, when this book is closed and unread, it has the *potential* to become art; but it still awaits the moment of its happening. It waits for a reader. It waits for you.

Art is its own peculiar form of human communication.

As such, the complete event is divided into two parts: first, the artist acts. Second, the reader experiences. First, the artist (after long preparation, in craft and in life, both consciously and unconsciously, drawing upon life-long wisdom, insight, memory and yet upon knowledge gathered for this present project) acts by composing the medium for this particular communication, arranging the parts and particulars to which the viewer or reader will react. The artist paints. Or conceives a cathedral (within which conception a multitude of other artists carve, sculpt, engrave, build, color and cut). Or dances (making of the shape and the movement of her body a medium for the immediate reaction of her audience). Or puts words to paper and detail to narrative.

The artist is well advised to work in the knowledge that his work will not be finished till it finds its audience. Only so does he move outside himself, into community, communion, culture (or his work may exist in his eyes only, satisfying the self perhaps, but perishing as well with that self.) Only so does he acknowledge the "other" who will also shape the thing growing under his hand. And in remembering the "other" he will recognize certain basic obligations.

First, the artist composes. Second, the reader participates in this composition of sensible detail--details which are able to be sensed, imagined, felt: *experienced*.

To my definition, then. Altogether, in its full completion, I define art as "composed experience."

But this particular experience--the artfully designed experience--is peculiar among the great, undifferentiated blends of general human experience. As I've argued in essays throughout this book, it is the "shaping" experience, more powerful for forming a person's (a child's!) sense of truth and of self than plain teaching can, or than the rest of her daily life can.

For *this* experience is discrete, having clear beginnings and endings, being separated from the rest of the day, and receiving therefore an especially concentrated attention, a peculiar wholeness of the child's attention.

And *this* experience has an internal integrity. I mean that there is not a detail in its world which is accidental or extraneous. And no detail important to the story is left out. All the details, all the sensations exert an integrated, harmonious force upon the mind and spirit of the child. The force of many details working together is like the tread of many soldiers crossing a bridge together: any single soldier on the bridge could not affect the bridge; nor would many soldiers if they broke stride; but if all the soldiers stepped in time with one another and continued marching in perfect harmony, why, the force of their rhythm could build up until it destroyed the bridge. All the parts of a story in such perfect composition can have the same effect on the child, the destruction of certain notions, the construction of others.

And *this* experience involves the whole of the child: her calculating mind, all her senses (in the cauldron of her imagination), her affective heart and emotions, her moral judgments, her body in motion and laughter and fearful anticipations and cuddling and drowsiness.

If this is the "shaping" experience, then; if its effect can ultimately help compose the perceivings, if not the character and the identity, of a child, then I find myself as the artist not entirely free! A self-satisfying, completely self-determined freedom could damage her. In order to be a good artist, I am already under certain aesthetical obligations. But I wield a powerful tool. In order, then, to compose "good" experiences for the child, I believe I am under certain *ethical* obligations as well.

If anyone questions the power of art to change reality, let him consider what propagandistic cinema, music, architecture, verse, rhetoric have done to whole populations when demagogues desired to go to war (or when democracies are themselves at war). And mis-composed stories have justified unjust behavior (as the story of Noah's curse upon his son Ham

once justified slavery in my own native land).

In his essay "Religion and Literature," T. S. Eliot writes:

"The fiction that we read affects our behaviour toward our fellow men, affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways, with the approval of the author, who gives his benediction to this behaviour by his attitude toward the result of the behaviour arranged by himself, we can be influenced towards behaving the same way."

And when the audience which experiences the literature is youthful enough, he says,

"what happens is a kind of inundation, of invasion of the undeveloped personality, the empty (swept and garnished) room, by the stronger personality of the poet."

I observe certain ethical obligations, then.

But since art is itself a living thing, I don't consider myself obligated to rules which are fixed and absolute. That would be deadly indeed. Rather, I believe that as an artist I enjoy mutual relationships with the principles embraced by these obligations, aesthetical and ethical, and with the people affected by my art. *As relationships*, then, which may change and grow to honor the growth and the change in either party (or in both of them); as relationships in which each party acknowledges the other, making promises to the other and keeping them, I can best understand my writerly and my communal obligations as covenants.

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Part Two: the Five Covenants

Surely, I cannot be conscious of all five covenants while I work on a story or a novel; but they become the spiritual place and the subconscious context of the writing. I can work within them as a sprinter works within his noisy arena, or (in the case of a novel) as the long-distance runner moves within the context of his natural track, the other runners, his own immediate

physical characteristics, the sense and regulation of speed, his premeditated strategems. By a thousand subtle connections and clues, the context affects the runner's run.

Likewise, the covenantal relationships which I maintain with five elements of the world within which I write: they shape the tale that shapes the children. And it is ever my effort, by a wary obedience to these covenants, to "get it right."

1. The covenant with perceived reality.

The description of this covenant is easy enough. It's the practice that's complex.

What people generally reckon as the "real" world--everything visible and experiential around them--I must observe with a dead-eyed accuracy in order to "get it" (the descriptions, the setting, the ways things actually happen) "right!"

Does the wind *really* "moan"? As if so, how? (It always requires some obstruction to give it voice, like telephone wires or tree branches or the soft sifting of dry snow.) When a woman lies on her back in bed and weeps, why would I get it wrong to write "the tears streamed down her cheeks?"

No description should come from a writer's false presumption of how the universe works. No writer can live entirely within himself and expect to present a world to his reader which his reader will trust. And once trust is lost in small things it will be lost for the story whole--and *that* would make for a genuinely lonely profession (which writing is otherwise not).

So then: the natural weather in which my story's plot takes place should never be made *un-natural* in order to accommodate the plot! The two must honor and acknowledge each other (the organic motion of covenant). But I myself broke that covenant in my novel *The Crying for a Vision* by giving a two-foot depth of snow a crust hard enough to support the weight of a boy. Such a crust is possible, of course. I was the boy who walked on them in North Dakota. But not (as I wrote it thoughtlessly) on the same very cold day in which the snow first fell to the depth of two feet. *That* snow would be soft. It needs several days of sun and wind to harden the surface. I got it "wrong," and I didn't catch the error till after the book was in print.

If I had caught my error in time, I would *not* have grumbled for running up against a difficulty, a problem to solve. Rather, I would gladly have arisen to the challenge of this contradiction between my plot and its setting. In order to do right by both, I should be forced to

take certain creative leaps which might move my book in directions so new and unpremeditated that I myself might be astonished! Short cuts with the real world undermine a writer's rightness.

So how *do* houses creak? And why? And when?

And what does the sadness of a child feel like? And where is the sadness located within her? And what does it look like in the puckering of her chin and the tug of her lip? And is it *ever* enough to write "she was sad" without presenting the tiny and terrible manifestations by which the observer discovers sadness (and its peculiar quality) within her?

With this last series of questions we move from the realm of the natural world into the "real" lives of human beings, our multitudinous interactions, our gestures, facial expressions, moods, developments, behaviors, loves and hates and fears and delights, the subtle relationship between our *interior* selves and their *exterior* manifestations. We move into the realm of social experience--and here especially (since this is nearly always the central stuff of a story, its force and its purpose) I must observe with a dead-eyed accuracy, in order to "get it right." For if I get this wrong, why then the entire tale will be wrong, whether it's a realistic history or a fantasy.

And how shall I observe accurately the human behavior around me?

Well, (a) without prejudice (which is a blindness already in the author's eye). And (b) with sympathy. And (c) by a scrupulous, completely honest examination of my own interior self.

That "without prejudice" is hard. It is, even, frightening, since it means to live and act in an acknowledged ignorance! But we tend to live *ever by means of* prejudice. We must, you know, pre-judge most of our situations; that is, we must assume many things about each situation we enter, or we might never be able to act within it. We think we know how a salesperson will act toward us (though we don't *really* know the woman) because we take unconscious cues from only a few things: her dress, her behavior, her language. Likewise, we think we know teachers and plumbers, folks who use the language essentially as we do, men in expensive suits, conductors by their costumes, the waitress who cracks gum in the hollows of her molars.

But to see only what we *think* we see, as necessary as it is in daily life, would cause an author to write the narrow world inside his head rather than the broad and "otherly" world around him.

So I must practice the hard, the sometimes scary exercise of resisting pre-judging those I meet; of admitting that I do not know, and every human before me is a mystery, and I am a stranger in a strange land. This constantly causes in me the feeling I experienced when first I

became a pastor in the inner-city and forced myself to walk the streets in all my Euro-whiteness, in all my evident difference. It feels dangerous.

On the other hand, danger makes for sharp and watchful eyes! It tunes my ears and make my very flesh alert. And by *this* sort of observation I can discover what these people are authentically--and how they see themselves.

After a while, it isn't danger that persuades me to pay attention; it's the willing confession of ignorance and the patient watching that must follow. For those who think they know what they do not know, will never be able to know; rather, they will put all people in their own Procrustean bed, forcing upon an infinite population only a handful of the "characters" which their parochial minds have been able to identify in the world.

So in order to "get it right," I watch *for* the truth--not *with* the truth, as if it were a donkey's tail to pin on the persons I will write about.

And I watch with "sympathy."

"Sym-pathy": it derives from two Greek words, syn, which can be translated "with," and pathos, which denotes feelings, emotion, suffering, experience. I must not only observe the details of other people, but must also *participate* with them in what the details signify. So I observe "from within" the other, as it were. Though I've never experienced my own dying, yet having walked to the end the mortal paths of others, I can write of death with a personal authenticity. Though George Eliot (whose real name was Mary Ann Evans) was not a man, yet she wrote with a trenchant accuracy from the point of view (from within the mind of) a man. Though one may not be African American or Indian, yet the observer cleansed of himself and able to experience the world from the perspective of African Americans or Indians (at their welcome, incidentally--more on which later) may write their worlds and their persons with a self-less truth.

Keats said of Shakespeare's ability to "get right" such women as Lady Macbeth and Cordelia and Ophelia, such old men as Lear and soldiering men as Othello, that he had a "negative capability." The writer negates his self in order to write from within the place of other selves.

And *that* is accomplished, paradoxically, by having, first, with a perilous candor, examined one's truest self, and by being intensely aware of how that interior self is made manifest in exterior behaviors.

I know the sins of humankind by finding them first (the tendencies, at least, and the complex machinery of motive and action and justification) in myself. I know the affective turmoil of love by recalling the experience in myself. And the gut-knots of anger, and the sweet relief of certain tears, and the wonder of children, and loneliness, and prepubescent despair: I recall these things from within my own experience--and from having been intensely alert to them while they happened.

But more than that I, like most children, was also aware of the *signs* of these things in my own facial expressions, my posture, my tone of voice, my behavior. All such visible manifestations of the invisible experience became a language by which I could read the faces, the bodies, the sounds of *others*, and so interpret their moods, emotions, feelings: I could see into, and enter into, the interior drama. In this sense, artists *are* like children; either by nature or else by striving, they maintain the ignorance and the wonder and the immediate sympathy of the little girl who, when she sees the signs of sorrow in her mother's face, immediately mimicks those signs in her own and then (exactly like her mother) begins to weep, does genuinely weep, although she cannot know the cause of her mother's tears.

2. *The covenant with the conventions and the community of my chosen craft.*

I can be briefer about this covenant, though it has required a lifelong attention.

The conventions of my craft are the forms and patterns of literature's various genres. This covenant was established even before I knew it; I entered an apprenticeship of sorts when I, who read continually, became conscious of the words themselves, and loved what they could do, and started to question *how* they did it.

"Getting it right" in this case means making the words work as best they can. Making the poem a poem indeed--and besides that, a good one too.

Sentences. Lines of verse, the sounds of those lines, the shape of many lines put together according to certain anticipations: sonnets, lyrics, hymns. Alliteration. Dialogue. Description. Suspense. The episodic progress of a narrative. Stories. Novels. Each literary form has its definitions. Each has a history, through which the definitions have evolved and changed. These are the templates and the tools of my craft. Of course I should know them--even if I choose, in any particular story, to diverge from them. Of course, I should continue to read what they have been in the past so that the tools I have to hand are ever more various, ever more accurate.

So then, my covenant is as much with the authors who have gone before me as with the tools we use in common. T. S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and Individual Talent," argues:

"Tradition ... cannot be inherited, and if you want it you must obtain it by great labour. It involves ... the historical sense...; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.... This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal, and of the timeless and the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional."

But this second covenant must also embrace authors who are my contemporaries. We never do write in a vacuum of our own making. At least, I can't. (Maybe a writer gets to do one major work this way; but after that he'll be re-writing the same thing over and over.) Besides reading the material of this present age, I have established and maintain personal relationships with other writers--as friends, if possible, as colleagues busy about the same profession, certainly.

So I exchange communication regularly with authors like Wendell Berry, Madeleine L'Engel, the playwrights Robert Schenkkan and Jim Leonard and Mark St. Germain, the poet Robert Siegel, film-script writers and producers David McFadzean and Matt Williams. Moreover, we meet and talk when we can, and sometimes read one another's material. It is in the spontaneous interaction among artists (and, surely, artists of all the arts) that the spirit of any one writer is challenged, refreshed, revived, sustained. It is in such discussions that the work of a particular time-period gets its quality of kinship. And it has been this way throughout the history of literature, that artists talk with artists, argue, collaborate, criticize, disagree, imitate.

3. The covenant with my audience.

Of this covenant I think I am always aware. It is fundamental to any sort of communication; to art, however, it is the essential relationship, without which the artistic event remains unfinished. I write to be read. As talk is meant to dwell within the listener, so the end of all I write--its termination *and* its purpose--is the audience. Or, a sillier (more self-serving) way to say this is: the chance that a novel may be read (and perhaps praised) justifies the time and the serious, wearisome labor it takes me to produce the thing in the first place.

In the case of this third covenant (as implied by most of the essays in this book) my

obligation is to "get it right *for the sake of*" another.

So, then, I seek a relationship that may entertain you; that could possibly enlighten you; that might elevate, might even ennoble you; that should, will ye, nill ye, expand your experience, granting you new eyes upon the "real" world around you....

I seek, in other words, a relationship that could, in a manner sane and unsentimental, love you. Yes: though it is by its very nature not a visible thing, and though no one else need realize the motive that rests within me--that drives me, even as your reading draws me--writing is as much an act of love for the reader (one by one by one) as it is for the craft itself. And writing for children in particular is an act of *intimate* love: for when I write I cannot conceive of auditoriums full of children, nor of that abstract collective, "children." I think of child. This one child. This other child. Individuals who will *as* individuals in close relationship with the adult that reads to them--or, if they read on their own, in close relationship my own voice--enter my tale and dwell there for a while.

And what this cardinal covenant of love requires of its parties in any circumstance, it also requires of me as the artist who shapes and who names for the sake of the tender reader.

I must not abuse the subtle power of art.

I must not indulge in the abuse of power called propaganda, that is, in the cynical effort to make people--whole groups, whole communities--believe what is a lie. For, since art shapes those who receive it uncritically, the people would then *become* the lie. In this way, art can damage. It can enslave both the minds of the readers and those whom the readers control, who are the objects of the artistic lie.

I must tell the truth. Its alternative is devastating.

T. S. Eliot:

"It is literature which we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us.... [T]his reading never affects simply a sort of special sense: it affects us as entire human beings; it affects our moral and religious existence."

Do you recall my discussion of art's ability to "name" in the essay "The Writing of Branta and Other Affections"? I said that to name a thing is to bequeath upon that thing three necessary benefits: to make it known in the human arena; to grant it blessed and effective relationships to every other named thing in the universe; and to declare its purpose, and thereby its value, in the world.

But what if the story is a lie? And what if the name that people accept and utter thereafter conceals the truth?

Why, then it can in whole groups, whole communities and cultures, conceal the truth of the child so misnamed. It can hide the truth of her person, her real character, her purpose and her *value*, even from herself. Moreover, the true child would then be isolated, cut off from the rest of society, as well as from the blue firmament and the green earth and the gathered seas! For if the story of creation in Genesis 3 is construed to mean that Eve is responsible for the fall of all humankind--and if the telling of this tale names and characterizes *all* women according to a primordial fault--what must be (what, in fact, has been) the effect of such false naming upon women themselves? Ah, what a loneliness! What an incarceration. Even the Apostle Paul did not interpret the fall in this manner. But ages and ages of cultures have, destroying the truth of womanhood—and thereby of women—through cruel millennia of human history. And a story is at the source of it.

But if that example is rather too cosmic for the lowly children's tale, then consider Hugh Lofting's innocent book, *The Story of Doctor Dolittle*, which I in my childhood read with a happy hunger. I dwelt in the tale. I, only barely conscious of my identity as an American white boy, traveled with Dolittle down to Africa. The animals were not dangerous. They were just needy--and we, Dolittle and I, could satisfy them. I recognized the fantasy, and I delighted in it. But then Dolittle was locked by an African chief in an African jail. He got out, of course. By a cunning trick.

It's that trick which left a lasting (albeit unconscious) impression upon me. For, though it was accomplished by an unreal exaggeration, there was at the core of the trick an insight which I received as the fundamental truth upon which Lofting's fantasy was built. (Fantasy, in order to work, must always derive from realistic propositions of human nature and the nature of this world.) The trick? Dolittle promised the son of the chief that if he would let the doctor out of jail, the doctor would turn his black skin white. He mixed a brew of everything white in his medical bag, and had the black child dip his face into it.

Of course the trick worked; for don't little black boys see little white boys as the better thing to be? The "naming" that took place here entered me at the same deep level as my sense of my own whiteness: barely conscious, but pervasive and central to my more spontaneous definitions and decisions. I continued satisfying in my racial (if not my own personal)

superiority.

But this must be my covenant: by means of my writing to love *all* children, each and each--the one who reads as well as the one affected by the reading.

The Apostle Paul speaks of edification--an interweaving and an upbuilding of the community--as coming from "speaking the truth in love."

4. The covenant with my community at large.

As an officer of the law is a functional citizen of his community, whether he deals with ten people or with ten thousand, so am I an active citizen of mine, even though no more than ten people may have read what I've written. But (1) because my work can't help from reflecting my context and my community; and (2) because that work goes far beyond the community itself; and (3) because my attitude regarding my artistic profession affects the way I affect friends and citizens around me--it is right that I acknowledge a covenant of honor between me, my work, and the people among whom I live and write.

Too often, and too easily, artists have seen themselves as creators not unlike the first Creating Diety. Or, if they do not rise to divinity themselves, they worship their "muse," their talent, the transcendent experience of inspiration, their profession as if *it* were divine. Everything else pales before the supreme act of artistic creation. And because all the life around them may be material for their art, they can feel justified in sacrificing any tender part of it on the altar of this exalted profession (or else they may not even notice how they cut and burn living things for the sake of this obsession). Their art, then, feeds upon their community. It can consume friendships and families and spouses ever before it--the artistic project--is complete and available to a broader public.

Communities, too, are at fault, often elevating the more famous artists among them to celebrity status: actors, movie directors, *best*-selling authors, dancers, singers, song-writers. And if such a treatment is at least a potential for the more minor artist, he may take on airs before airs are granted him--in which case the damage is perhaps solely his own.

For my sake, then, as well as the sake of the communion in which I live as a busy citizen not different from the cop on the corner, I keep covenant with my family, my people, my church, my town, my commonwealth: I honor what they in good faith honor. I honor what is honorable

among them. At every level, both as an artist and as a member of the communal body, I participate.

Or, to put this another way, I do not objectify them, divorcing my own accountable self from them in order to study, scrutinize, criticize, examine, analyze them, as if they were a smear on the scientist's microscopic slide.

Here is what careless, uncovenanting art can do:

I know a woman who lives in a large house in a small town in Michigan. To the delight of everyone, a movie crew arrived to film the village, its streets and shops and houses, as the setting for a full-length feature. This woman's house received more camera attention than any other in town. My friend was flattered--until the movie itself was released to theaters nationwide. She went to see it. And she returned home ashamed. For her house had become the home of vile, ruinous people. It stigmatized the building for a little while, which caused her some local distress. But worse than that, she believed that her dear place had become in the imagination of the nation and place of wickedness and horror.

I myself became intensely aware of the need for this fourth covenant while I was doing research for a novel about the Lakota Indians, *The Crying for a Vision*. Marlene Whiterabbit Helgemo, an Indian herself and a friend of mine, invited me to spend time with her on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota, specifically to attend the Sun Dance there of the holy man named Elmer Running. She had said, "If you are serious about this, I will invite you to our religious ceremony." I accepted, never doubting that this would be the best sort of research I could accomplish.

"Research," I say--until I drove between two tall poles marking Elmer Running's ranch, and down a dirt road to a wooden hut, where three very large Indian men approach and motioned for me to stop.

I rolled down my window.

They wore their black hair long and braided. I saw thick, hypertrophic scars on their breasts and their backs. They gazed at me a while.

Why was I there, they asked.

I told them that Marlene had invited me.

"Do you have a camera?"

"No."

"Do you have a tape recorder?"

"No."

I was telling the truth. It hadn't occurred to me to bring either one.

"Do you draw?"

That was a different sort of question. And though in their minds it had a similar purpose, in mine it had ceased to consider mechanical devices and had begun to consider *me*, and my purpose for coming among them.

"No," I said. "I can't draw." *But I can*, I did not say, *take notes*.

They let me pass.

And I readjusted completely my relationship to them and to the experience I was about to enter.

I had intended to scrutinize, to examine these people, to make them the objects of my researches rather than to seek in them subjects of a fully human relationship with me. But they themselves had already experienced the faintly insulting experience of anthropologists working among them. No, not "among" them, but "upon" them. With a twinkling contempt, they call such human ciphers "Anthroes." Merely to study the sacred rituals of a people, you see, is to demean them, to deny the genuinely holy quality of the ceremony. What the Lakota know as a sacred way to dance with the eternal and to join the limitless, the anthroes reduce to a particularized, limited, definable practice of a primitive people. The scientist might truly admire what the Lakota do; might acknowledge a complexity to the act and a pragmatic consequence; but they would never subject *themselves* to it, body, heart and spirit; and the absence of faith in them makes them, the anthroes, seem like dissociated and foreign spirits in this place.

I took no notes. I dismissed the book from my mind. I subjected myself completely to them and their community; subjected myself, I must confess, in some fear--but fear is the poor man's humility since it does, after all, make him alert to all things around him, visible and invisible.

In other words, I became intensely conscious of the covenant which I as an artist must keep with all those who may enter my writing and thereby enter communities not confined to *this* place and *this* time.

The lack of a complete, complex human relationship between the artist and the communities that enter his art--the lack of a covenant of mutual obligations--can be cruel. Those

who are only scrutinized may feel as if they've suffered a theft. Something significant to their identities has been taken and handled, *hand-dled*, man-handled. Now, that significant thing may never have known its name before. The artist might have brought it to surface, allowing a community to see in itself what it had not noticed before (for this is the artist's skill, to name the hidden things). But unless this has been accomplished for the sake of the community, the artist has--by the very act of naming it, discovering it, as it were, and peddling it abroad as his own--the artist has, I say, assume an ownership of the community's precious things as well. A shared ownership need not be baneful, unless one of the two owners own coldly, without a devotion to the thing he takes in his hands to sell away. If it was something beautiful, its beauty is compromised by having been plucked from the ground that nourished it. If it was a secret grief or a concealed sin, well, the god to which it has been sacrificed is a god that doesn't redeem. This public god can only accuse.

This, then, is the core of my covenant with my community: that my writing must serve them rather than being served by them. Why should my profession be considered of any greater importance than their?

Ovid boasts:

*Est, Deus in nobis; agitante calescimus illo:
Sedibus aethereis spiritus ille venit.*

"There is a god in us," he writes of writers. "We grow hot at his urging: that spirit come from thrones ethereal!" Such an attitude has existed in western societies for ages, that there is a divinity about the artist; that art is his worship; that such worship carries all before it.

But in other societies--African, Indian, Inuit--the tale teller is a *griot*, a servant of persons and of people, comforting them through long nights, acting as the memory of all, whose tales therefore are memorials.

I like this latter much better.

5. *The covenant with my faith.*

No artist works without axioms by which to order the whirling bits of this existence. The poet: "a heaper into heaps and a piler into piles." It is the very nature of art to arrange messes. A novel is the result of organizing, is like an organism, creating structures the reader can

comprehend, *composing*, as I've said, the details and sensations which become a reader's experience.

But the artist must have certain standards according to which he makes an order (even an absurdist order) of the stuff of this life. I call these standards "axioms," because they are at the very base of his seeing; they are the *means* of his seeing; they themselves need neither proofs nor arguments to be regarded as true by the artist; rather, they become the arguments for the truth and the order of everything else.

Or to say this another way, these unquestioned standards are the tenets of his faith. Simply, he believes them. This faith may acknowledge a god. It may not. It may be orthodox or else peculiar to this artist alone.

Some artists may, by means of a spontaneous consistency within their work, for the first time come to recognize what they have believed all along.

Others are able to identify clearly and directly in expository essays the belief that also governs their art. Albert Camus is such a one, for the axioms that shape and arrange his novel *The Plague* are presented propositionally in his book *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus is an existentialist.

I am a Christian.

As with Camus, this is not separable from anything else I do. Surely, it does not mean that I must proselytize whenever I write, since this title defines my identity, not my intent--and proselytizing is an activity eminently separable from writing. "Christianity" indicates the axioms by which I make sense of the mess of human experience, sense enough to give it a compositional order in a story. My faith, however, doesn't suppose that I understand everything. I relate to it as in a covenant, a living, developing relationship. These are axioms by which I interpret; they are not fixed and rigid interpretations in themselves.

If either one of us, then--Albert Camus the existentialist or I myself the Christian--did not each honor our personal faiths; if we did not feel obliged to grant them a guiding role in the production of our stories and novels; if we refused to continue in covenant with these axioms and wrote what in fact we did not believe, then we would become something like mercenaries, pens for hire, putting our craft in the service of foreign "truths" for motives certainly less than artistic and possibly less than honorable. In fact, our work would be stunned at its core. We might be writers thereafter, but not artists, free and independent. And if we should so detach ourselves

from this fifth covenant as to become the expression of someone else's faith or foolishness, why, then every other covenant would be broken. I have already written of the damage that can do to others, readers and communities.

Moreover, with regard to the damage to myself: if I rejected this faith, my elemental means for making decisions (in life and in writing), how could I heap anything into heaps or pile anything into piles? How could I organize, compose, or structure anything of human experience into the experience a reader could enter? How could I write at all? You see, to break this fifth covenant (even though it were not for mercenary reasons) would surely throw up in front of me the most monumental writers' block ever! It would render me wordless.

In the case of this covenant, then, to "get it right" is to get it "righteous."

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