

Margaret Atwood

### An End to an Audience?<sup>1</sup>

I have been asked here presumably because I am story-teller and you wish to know something about the state of story-telling, either in this country or this decade or both. So I don't see how I can do worse than by beginning with a few stories.

Here we find ourselves immediately at the heart of the problem; for how am I to know what kind of stories you wish to hear? Do you wish to hear stories about John and Mary, two perfectly well-adjusted people who have a mature relationship, a nice house, two and a half children, a dog and some hobbies that they share? Or do you wish to hear stories about John and Mary being devoured by a great white shark? Perhaps you would like to know about the day John wakes up and notices that Mary has turned into a great white shark, in which case we will quickly realize that we are in the middle of a modern psychological novel and change the subject at once. Or perhaps you would rather hear, in a liberationist mode, about the day Mary wakes up and notices that John has *always* been a great white shark and she'd better make some speedy decisions about her own priorities. But I would insult your intelligences by supposing that you all want to hear the same kinds of stories, and this is the clue to the marketing problems facing almost all publishers today. As a story-teller then, all I can do is to tell the kinds of stories I wish to tell or think I ought to tell and hope that someone or other will want to listen to them, which is, and has been for some time, the plight of the writer in a post-romantic society.

You will notice that I'm calling myself a story-teller rather than a novelist. This notion got put into my head by an interviewer who recently asked me, How do you distinguish between story-telling and literary art? I don't, I said. Literary art is simply the means by which the story-teller feels she or he can most efficiently tell a particular

story. By story-telling, we obviously don't mean just the plot. Think of a simple joke; now think of the same joke told, first well and then badly. It's the timing, isn't it? And the gestures, the embellishments, the tangents, the occasion, the expression on the face of the teller, and whether you like him or not. Literary critics talking about fiction may call these things style, voice and narrative technique and so forth, but you can trace them all back to that moment when the tribe or the family is sitting around the fire or the dinner table and the story-teller decides to add something, leave something out or vary the order of telling in order to make the story a little better. Writing on the page is after all just a notation, and all literature, like all music, is oral by nature.

Neither of my parents are writers, but both of them are very good story-tellers; and since they're both from Nova Scotia, I'd like to illustrate one kind of story by giving you a couple of samples of the kind of thing I used to hear around the dinner table when I was growing up. Anyone from rural Nova Scotia is well-steeped in what we now call the oral tradition but which they didn't call anything of the sort. Sometimes they called these stories "yarns"; sometimes they didn't call them anything. They were just things that had once happened.

For instance, there was the ingenious man who lived down around the South Shore and built a circular barn for his cows. The cows spent the night facing outwards, with their rear ends all facing inwards towards the centre of the circle, which made mucking out the barn more efficient. Each cow had its own door, and the doors, equidistant around the perimeter of the circle, were worked by a central pulley. Every morning people would gather from miles around to watch the cows being let out of the barn. At the sound of a horn, the doors would all fly upwards at once, and the cows, urged on by little boys with switches, would squirt out of the barn like drops from a lemon. Or so my father said. As for my mother, one of the most memorable events in her life was the day the hellfire-and-brimstone preacher at the Woodville United Church got too carried away. During one especially thunderous phrase his false teeth shot from his mouth; but he reached up with his hand, caught them, re-inserted them and continued on without missing a beat. "The pew shook," said my mother, stressing the fact that my grandfather was very strict about behaviour in church: to laugh would be certain death.

These are true stories and there are many more like them; everyone knows stories like that, and they are one point of beginning for a novelist. Another point of beginning would go something like this:

On his way home from the war with Troy, Odysseus made a side trip to the land of the dead. Near a grove sacred to Persephone, he dug a trench, as he had been instructed to do, and let it fill with blood from a sacrificed ram and a black ewe. Attracted by the smell of the blood, many ghosts crowded around the trench, including those of Odysseus' own mother and several of his friends. But he would not let them drink until the ghost he had been waiting for appeared, the ghost of Teiresias, who had been both man and woman and was thus very wise and able to foretell the future. He drank from the trench and instructed Odysseus; after that many of the ghosts drank, and the blood made them substantial and gave them voices, so that Odysseus was able to converse with them.

Anyone listening to these stories can tell at once that they are of quite different sorts. We think of the first kind as "real" or "true," and of the second kind as "imaginary," "fabulous" or "mythological." Yet you have only my word for it that the first stories are true, and no proof at all that the second one is not. Put both kinds together and you have, for instance, James Joyce.

Why do people tell stories, "real" stories or "made-up" stories, and why do people listen to them? Nobody knows, but it seems to be something that the human race has always done. At this point we could all hug ourselves and conclude that therefore the human race will always do it, and we need not bother our heads anymore about the matter. But my central message to you tonight is that authorship as we know it, literature as we know it, is in serious danger of becoming extinct. If this is so, and I will present my evidence in due time, we had better start wondering whether we think authors and stories, poetry and fiction, are a good thing or a bad thing. And if they are a good thing, what are they good *for*?

Let me proceed in an oblique way by telling you a few more stories.

I was recently at a University in the United States, on one of those jaunts that includes a poetry reading, lunch with everyone who teaches Women's Studies, and a few hours spent with Creative Writing classes in poetry. I have nothing against universities or creative writing classes; I have attended the former and taught the latter. But something odd was going on. The creative writing class was pervaded by an unnatural calm. A student would read his poem, which had been Xeroxed and passed around in advance. There would be a few ruminative noises. Then the other members of the class would speak, hushed and reverent, in tones that recalled a Quaker prayer meeting. They said things like this: "I think you could do

without that colon." "Maybe you could break that line after the word 'language.'" "I like it, it works for me." "It works for me too, except for the place where he rhymes 'spastic' with 'plastic.'" "

Finally I could stand it no longer. "Why am I here?" I said. "What do you want me to talk to you about? What do you want to ask me? This is just a roundabout way of saying, Why are *you* here? What kind of activity do you think writing poetry is, and why do you do it? Where do you see yourselves going with it after you've finished with this class? Who's out there listening to you, and where are you going to publish? Do you see your audience as other poets who will admire the placement of your colons, or do you envisage a more general readership? Talking of reading, what do you read? Do you care enough about poetry to say, ever, that you think someone's poem is *terrible*?"

Well, it quickly became evident that I had stepped way over the line that separates decorum from bad taste in creative writing classes such as these. One was not, it appears, supposed to question the *raison d'être* of such classes. One was not supposed to discourage the students. One was supposed to radiate the air of genteel encouragement appropriate to, say, physiotherapists, or people who teach recreational ceramics. The role of the poet in her society was not to be examined. The goal of the class was to keep its enrolled and fee-paying students from quitting in despair, to give them all passing grades so as not to discourage next year's crop, and, with luck, to teach the student to turn out poems publishable in the kinds of little magazines favoured by the instructor. None of this was said. It was all implicit. I had done a bad thing, I had fiddled with the underpinnings of a delicately balanced structure, and the students, although mute during official time, were eager to talk afterwards. I spent an uneasy night at the Holiday Inn, plagued by dreams of a time in the future when all writing would be done by creative writing students, for creative writing students; though my waking self has been aware for some time that between the activity known as creative writing and writing itself there is no necessary connection.

That was a story about confusion and uncertainty—loss of nerve, we might call it—on the part of a body of potential writers. Here is one about confusion and uncertainty on the part of a body of potential readers.

This summer, I returned to the summer camp where, twenty years before, I had taught Nature Study, Campcraft and something called Tripping, which at that time meant only going out on canoe trips. The

occasion was the camp's twenty-fifth anniversary, and the camp director was importing former members who had since become what the world thinks of as successful, presumably as inspiration of some sort. It was pleasant to revisit the place where I had once skulked through the woods, gathering funguses and collecting snakes and caterpillars and revolving my plans to become a great writer. But as I told my young audience, none of whom were over 18, I was clearly insane at the time, as there was no visible evidence in 1959 that any Canadian, let alone me, could ever become a great writer. One might as well have been thinking of flight, without aircraft or wings. Looking back, I can see that my delusions must have come from reading too many Mary Marvel comic books, because they certainly didn't come from anywhere else in the culture that surrounded me.

I then went on to discuss the changes that have taken place in book publishing in this country since 1959. I spoke of the establishment of the small literary and/or nationalist presses in the mid-sixties, the sudden explosion of creativity, first in poetry and then, beginning in about 1969, in the novel, the creation of an audience for new Canadian work where once there had been none, the increased media coverage, and the fact that it was now possible for Canadian writers—not all but at least some—to make their livings practising their art.

My young audience was puzzled. "But you're talking about *money*," they said. It seemed they were still living with the post-romantic version of the artist that's been with us ever since Keats died of consumption and Shelley drowned. They wanted me to be starving in a garret or spending a few hours a week with my head in the oven. Such sufferings would somehow make me authentic.

Their attitude was a good example of the inverse snobbery that is still very much alive when it's a question of writers and money, even and especially among writers. A writer who makes money is assumed to have sold out. The fact is that there is no necessary relation between the quality of an author's writing and financial success. Chaucer didn't write for money, Shakespeare did. James Joyce was poor all his life, Charles Dickens made a fortune. Melville tried to make a fortune, but failed at it. On the other hand, he wrote *Moby Dick*, which flopped in his lifetime, but seems to have done quite well since.

"Why do you have the odd notion," I said, "that artists should not be paid for their work?"

"Because they enjoy it," they said.

"Would you want to employ a doctor who did not enjoy being a doctor?" said I.

"No," said they.

"Do you think doctors should be paid?" said I.

They did. "What is the difference between a doctor and a writer?" I asked them. They didn't know, but there is one. If you don't believe me, try the following exercise:

Imagine yourself at a party. You meet a young man. You ask him what he wants to be. "I want to be a doctor," he says. Imagine your reaction. Now pretend he says, "I want to be a writer." What do you feel now?

Is it not true that you regarded the first young man as maybe a little dull but a sane, stable, worthy member of society? As for the second, you probably gave, admit it, an internal shrug. Pretentious, you thought. Neurotic. Maybe a fruit-cake or even a nut-cake. He'll never do it anyway.

You get points in this society for wanting to be a doctor, not just because everyone knows what doctors are for, but because we all know they make money. It's even marginally more acceptable for a woman in this society to want to be a writer than it is for a man, because we don't really take the activity seriously. If a woman wants to do flower painting or crewel work or writing in her spare time, that's all right with us; you can do it at home, in between taking care of your family, as long as it doesn't interfere with the serious business of life, which is your husband's. We are willing to give a certain amount of attention to writers who have, as we say, made it, not necessarily because we admire the work they do, but because we feel that if they sell that many copies there must be something to it. It's not the writing but the making it we'll applaud. In fact, the television talk-show host—who must be, in some way at least, a representative of his society—is much more likely to approve of you if you say you're only in it for the bucks and that your biggest ambition is to sell a million copies. Watch him cross his legs and wince, though, if you say you want to make good art. That puts you at once into the category of those creeps our members of Parliament object to from time to time, the ones jumping around in long underwear or painting pictures that look like someone spilled the ketchup.

A friend of mine told me once that when she'd been in France a man, upon hearing that she was a writer, commented, "It is an honourable profession." In Canada we don't—even now—think of writing as an honourable profession. We don't think of it as a

profession at all. We think of it, still, as something called "expressing yourself." I'm sure you've all heard the one about the writer and the brain surgeon who met at a cocktail party. "So you write," said the brain surgeon. "Isn't that interesting. I've always wanted to write. When I retire and have the time I'm going to be a writer." "What a coincidence," said the writer, "because when I retire I'm going to be a brain surgeon."

Deep down inside, most people think that writing is something anyone can do, really, because after all it's only expressing yourself. Well, it's probably true that anyone can write. Anyone can play the piano too, but doing it well is another thing. If writing is merely and only self-expression, then all the philistine reactions to it I've been caricaturing above would be, in my opinion, quite justified.

Readers and critics both are still addicted to the concept of self-expression, the writer as a kind of spider, spinning out his entire work from within. This view depends on a solopsism, the idea that we are all self-enclosed monads, with an inside and an outside, and that nothing from the outside ever gets in. It goes hand in hand with that garland of cliches, the one with which female writers in particular are frequently decorated, the notion that everything you write *must* be based on personal experience. *Must*, because those making this assumption have no belief in the imagination, and are such literalists that they will not invest interest in anything they do not suppose to be "true." Of course all writing is based on personal experience, but personal experience is experience—wherever it comes from—that you identify with, *imagine* if you like, so that it becomes personal to you. If your mother dies and you don't feel a thing, is this death a personal experience? "If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less," said John Donne; or, to paraphrase him as Adrienne Rich does, "Every woman's death diminishes me."

We like to think of writing as merely personal, merely self-expression, and hopefully neurotic, because it lets us off the hook. If that's all it is, if it is not a true view of the world or, Heaven forefend, of a human nature of which we ourselves partake, we don't have to pay any serious attention to it. I happen to believe that at its best writing is considerably more and other than mere self-expression. But what more, what other?

Earlier this summer I was with another group of apprentice writers. They were taking a summer course and many of them were quite earnest and advanced. "Why do you want to write?" I asked them, being by this time very curious about the answers. The first man, an ex-

policeman, said he wrote in order to entertain people and to leave a record of himself behind. I did not question why one would want to do either of these things. There were some versions of the self-expression motif, elaborated in the direction of Jungian depth therapy; one does encounter, from time to time, the view that writing is somehow good for the writer, like vitamin pills or primal screaming. One man hinted that writing might have what he called a "political" function.

"What about," said I, "the desire for revenge and the wish to be important?" Blushes all around. Again, I had mentioned something you weren't supposed to. But if one is answering the question, "Why do you want to be a writer?" rather than the one I asked, then such petty motivations cannot be overlooked, because there's a little of that in every young writer when he envisages himself as a future, successful writer.

The question I actually asked was, "Why do you want to write?" and I believe the two questions are quite different. To think of *being a writer* is to imagine oneself as a noun, a thing called a writer; it is to imagine oneself playing a certain kind of role, being treated in a certain kind of way by society. It is to see one's body in a special dress, relating to other bodies as a social entity. *Being a writer* is signing your name in bookstores and making a horse's ass of yourself on TV talk shows and giving speeches like this one. It is concerned with versions of the self; it is *self* centred, and it has nothing much to do with writing, except insofar as it provides you with material.

To think of writing, on the other hand, is to think of a verb. Writing itself is a process, an activity which moves in time and through time, and it is self-less. I don't mean that it thereby makes the writer unselfish; on the contrary, a writer these days has to be selfish to the point of ruthlessness, if only—at the lowest level—to be able to seize the time necessary to write from all those who are clamouring for it. But writing is self-less in the same way that competition skiing is, or making love. How can you take part intensely in such an involving polyaesthetic activity and still be thinking about yourself? In writing, your attention is focused not on the self but on the thing being made, the thing being seen, and let us not forget that *poet* means *maker* and *seer* means *one who sees*.

The writer has about the same relation to the thing written, once that thing is finished, as fossilized dinosaur footprints have to the beast who made them. The footprints are a record both of the animal's existence and of the fact that once upon a time he walked, fast or slowly, through this particular stretch of mud. While she is



writing, the writer is to the thing being written as the pianist is to the music being played and recorded, provided it's an improvisation. Once she's finished, the primary relationship is not between the thing written and the writer but between the thing written and the reader. The thing written may bear traces of the process that created it, and indeed it's fashionable these days to *write in* such traces; or it may not. In either case the piece of writing exists now in the world, as does a piece of bread. Like a piece of bread, it can be measured and run through a computer. If you eat the piece of bread, it will evoke certain sensations in you, which will vary according to your sense of taste, your allergies, your state of mind and how hungry you are. If you consume the piece of writing, it will also evoke certain sensations in you according to your sense of taste, your allergies, your sense of mind and how hungry you are. Meanwhile, the process that created the piece which is now causing you either to long for more or to run for the bathroom has been lost in time. The person who wrote the poem I seem to remember composing yesterday no longer exists, and it's merely out of courtesy to librarians that we put everything with the word *Shakespeare* on the title page into the card file together.

Or it would be merely out of courtesy, were it not for the fact that each piece of writing changes the writer. The verb changes the noun, the verb changes future verbs. Shakespeare, whoever he was, was also the only creature who went through the experience of writing those plays, one after another after another.

Reading is also a process and it also changes you. You aren't the same person after you've read a particular book as you were before, and you will read the next book, unless both are Harlequin Romances, in a slightly different way. When you read a book, it matters how old you are when you read it and whether you are male or female, or from Canada or India. There is no such thing as a truly universal literature, partly because there are no truly universal readers. It is my contention that the process of reading is part of the process of writing, the necessary completion without which writing can hardly be said to exist.

"If the earth were destroyed, and you were left alone on the moon, would you still write?" I asked the summer students. Opinion was divided. This was of course just a version of the question I have often been asked myself: "Who do you write for?" What the asker usually assumes is that I have some particular kind of audience in mind—women, say, or Canadians—and that I am trying to slant what I say to appeal to such an audience, so they will buy more of my

books. This is not the case, I say. Then are you only writing for yourself?" they say. This also is not the case. It is hard, apparently, to grasp the idea that the writer may be writing *for* other people in the sense of assuming a common language and a human brain at the other end of his activity, but not *for* in the sense of trying to ingratiate, flatter, harangue or manipulate. One may have no image in one's mind of what one's ideal reader looks like, but one does have expectations of what such a being *is* like. The ideal reader, for a serious writer, is intelligent, capable of feeling, possessed of a moral sense, a lover of language, and very demanding. By *demanding*, I don't mean picky. Above all, such a reader will know what kind of book you are writing and will not expect you, as so many critics do, to be writing the book she would write if she were you; nor will the ideal reader expect a romance to be a satire, or a tragedy to be a comedy. There was a noticeable decline in the level of hockey-playing when the league was expanded to include audiences uneducated enough in the sport to think it was cute to throw rolls of toilet paper onto the ice.

"Well," I said to the summer students, "you've said some things I wouldn't disagree with, but I'll go a little farther. Here is what I believe about what you all say you want to do. I believe that poetry is the heart of the language, the activity through which language is renewed and kept alive. I believe that fiction writing is the guardian of the moral and ethical sense of the community. Especially now that organized religion is scattered and in disarray, and politicians have, Lord knows, lost their credibility, fiction is one of the few forms left through which we may examine our society not in its particular but in its typical aspects; through which we can see ourselves and the ways in which we behave towards each other, through which we can see others and judge them and ourselves.

Writing is a craft, true, and discussions of the position of colons and the rhyming of *plastic* and *spastic* have some place in it. You cannot be a concert pianist without having first learned the scales, you cannot throw a porcelain vase without having put in a good number of hours at the wheel. But writing is also a vocation. By *vocation* I mean a lifetime pursuit to which you feel called. There is a big difference between a doctor who goes into medicine because he wants to cure people and one who goes into it because that's where he thinks the money is. They may both be able to fix your broken leg, technically just as well; but there is a difference. Under the right conditions, the first may turn into Norman Bethune. The second never will. If you want to be a writer, you should go into the largest library you can find

and stand there contemplating the books that have been written. Then you should ask yourself, "Do I really have anything to add?" If you have the arrogance or the humility to say yes, you will know you have the vocation.

Writing is also a profession, and, at its best, an honourable one. It has been made honourable by those who have already been members of it. Whether you like it or not, every time you set pen to paper you're staring at the same blank space that confronted Milton, Melville, Emily Bronte, Dostoevsky and George Eliot, George Orwell and William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf and William Carlos Williams, not to mention the latest hero, Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Imitation is not emulation; nobody expects you to write their books over again. But unless you're trying to do as well, unless you're trying to do as well as you can, you are not worthy of the profession. There's a certain amount of cynicism among writers, just as there is among doctors. But if all doctors were hacking off legs with septic instruments in barber shops and losing sponges inside people's lungs because they're drunk during the operation, we would not think of medicine as an honourable profession but as a game played for money by charlatans and quacks, and doctors would still quite rightly be known as leeches.

Writing can also be an art, and one of the reasons that so many writers dodge this on television talk shows is that art is hard to define or describe. Money is easier to talk about, so we talk about money. Nevertheless, art happens. It happens when you have the craft and the vocation and are waiting for something else, something extra, or maybe not waiting; in any case it happens. It's the extra rabbit coming out of the hat, the one you didn't put there. It's Odysseus standing by the blood-filled trench, except that the blood is his own. It is bringing the dead to life and giving voices to those who lack them so that they may speak for themselves. It is not "expressing yourself." It is opening yourself, discarding your *self*, so that the language and the world may be evoked through you. *Evocation* is quite different from *expression*. Because we are so fixated on the latter, we forget that writing also does the former. Maybe the writer *expresses*; but *evocation*, calling up, is what writing does for the reader. Writing is also a kind of sooth-saying, a truth-telling. It is a naming of the world, a reverse incarnation: the flesh becoming word. It's also a witnessing. *Come with me*, the writer is saying to the reader. *There is a story I have to tell you, there is something you need to know*. The writer is both an eye-witness and an I-witness, the one to whom personal experience happens and the one who makes experience personal for others.

The writer *bears witness*. Bearing witness is not the same as self-expression."

There's something compulsive about the act of writing. All writers play Ancient Mariner at times to the reader's Wedding Guest, hoping that they are holding the reader with their glittering eye, at least long enough so he'll turn the next page. The tale the Mariner tells is partly about himself, true, but it's partly about the universe and partly about something the Wedding Guest needs to know; or at least, that's what the story tells us.

Jacob, so one of the stories goes, wrestled with an angel all night, neither prevailing against the other; and he would not let go until the angel blessed him. *What is your name?* said the angel, unable to give the blessing until the name was spoken. When the angel gave the blessing, it was not for Jacob alone but for his people. There is not a writer alive who would fail to interpret this story as a parable of his own relationship with his art. The encounter with language is a struggle in which each side is equally active, for what writer has not felt the language taking him over at times, blocking him at others? We all hope for the blessing; we all hope finally to be able to speak our names. And, we hope that if we receive the blessing it will not be for ourselves alone.

I notice that I've just used the word "hope" three times, which may surprise some of you, since I doubt that there's a writer in Canada who is asked more often, "Why are you so pessimistic?" I will dodge the question of whether or not the media bunnies (both male and female, and not to be confused with serious journalists) who ask this question lead lives that can be called real in most senses of the word. What I usually say to them is, *What you think is pessimistic depends very largely on what you believe is out there in the world*. I myself think that compared to reality I'm a reincarnation of Anne of Green Gables, but that's beside the point. I think that the world consists of Hell, Purgatory, Middle Earth, Limbo, Paradise and Heaven. Most of them are here with us in this room tonight. It is the duty of the writer not to turn down a visit to any of them if it's offered. Some people only live in a couple of these places but nobody lives in just one. I suspect that the people who ask the question want books to transport them to Paradise, as some compensation for being stuck in Purgatory or Limbo: the band-aid theory of literature. But back to hope. Writing, no matter what its subject, is an act of faith; the primary faith being that someone out there will read the results. I believe it's also an act of hope, the hope that things can be better than they are. If the writer is very lucky and manages to live long enough, I

think it can also be an act of charity. It takes a lot to see what is there, both without flinching or turning away and without bitterness. The world exists; the writer testifies. She cannot deny anything human.

So, I said to the summer students. Are you up to it?

Time will tell whether they are or not, but even if they are, they still may not become writers; or if they do, they may become writers of quite another kind. I said earlier that literature as we know it is in serious danger of becoming extinct, and now that I've told you all the good things it does I will frighten you by telling you why.

Writer and audience are Siamese twins. Kill one and you run the risk of killing the other. Try to separate them, and you may simply have two dead half-people. By "audience," I don't necessarily mean a mass audience. People still write in Russia; many of them write the forbidden. It has always been one function of the artist to speak the forbidden, to speak out, especially in times of political repression. People risk imprisonment and torture because they know there are other people who are hungry for what they have to say. Inhabitants of concentration camps during the second world war jeopardized their already slim chances of survival by keeping diaries; why? Because there was a story that they felt impelled to tell, that they felt the rest of us *had* to know. Amnesty International today works the same way: all it does is tell stories. It makes *the story* known. Such stories have a moral force, a moral authority which is undeniable. The book of Job begins with a series of catastrophes, but for each there is a survivor. Story-telling at its most drastic is the story of the disaster which is the world; it is done by Job's messengers, whom God saved alive because someone had to tell the story. *I only am escaped alone to tell thee*. When a story, "true" or not, begins like this, we must listen.

But such stories are being silenced all over the world. The countries with most writers in jail are Russia and Argentina. That doesn't mean that these countries treat writers the worst. At least the writers are in jail. In some other countries they are merely dead. El Salvador no longer possesses any poets not in exile. The rest have been murdered.

In any totalitarian takeover, whether from the left or the right, writers, singers and journalists are the first to be suppressed. After that come the union leaders and the lawyers and judges. The aim of all such suppression is to silence *the voice*, abolish the word, so that the only voices and words left are those of the ones in power. Elsewhere, the word itself is thought to have power; that's why so much trouble is taken to silence it.

Nothing to worry about here, you say. We live in a free society. Anyone can say anything. The word is not an issue here; you don't get

killed for social and political criticism, and anyway novels and poetry are just a few artists *expressing themselves*. Nobody takes them seriously. It won't happen here.

Well, perhaps. But there's more than one way to skin a cat. Let us take a brief look at what is happening to publishing in this country, in fact in the entire Western world, at this very moment.

First, we are witnessing a fragmentation of the audience on an unprecedented scale. The fragmentation of the audience has to do partly with changes in publishing. Huge popular bestsellers are being bought for enormous sums, and the paperback rights sold for even more enormous sums. This means that vast amounts of money are invested in such books, and vast amounts must be used to promote them; otherwise the investors will not make their money back. Less money is available for other purposes, and the middle-range serious work of fiction is being squeezed right out of the market. Difficult and "experimental" works have already found a place with small literary presses; but the readership for such books is tiny.

In addition, chain bookstores are controlling more and more of the book business. In the States it's forty percent, in Canada I believe it approaches sixty. If the trend continues, the smaller independent bookstores, who have traditionally supported serious fiction and poetry, are going to go belly-up in increasing numbers. The result will be that the chains will have a virtual monopoly on what gets published. In fact, it's likely that publishers will have to have a guarantee from the chains that they'll carry a book before even agreeing to publish it. What that means for prospective authors is that they'll either have to write *Jaws* or it'll be back to the mimeo machine in the cellar, which is where we all started out in this country twenty years ago.

Should this happen, the concept of "authorship" as we've come to know it may very well become obsolete. Already, south of the border, books are increasingly thought of, not as books, but as "entertainment packages." Someone gets an idea and a team is hired to put it together: movie, paperback, foreign sales, t-shirts, the works. The author is not called an author but an "element." Well, what's so bad about that, you may ask? Isn't that how the mediaeval mystery plays were written, and won't such team-created articles give us a more typical, a truer version of society than one made by just a single writer? Isn't that maybe more *collective*?

After all, the individual "author" has been with us only for a few hundred years. Before that, art was always made by the community. Maybe we should view these entertainment packages, in which the

writer is only "an element," as sort of like primitive folk art? Maybe, but in the days of the oral tradition, poetry and story-telling was used not only for entertainment. They were used to preserve the history of the tribe, to impart wisdom, to summon and propitiate the gods. I am not sure that *Princess Daisy* does very many of those things.

Then there's the problem of distribution. The serious reading audience may still exist, though if it can't get the kind of books it wants it may simply fade out as we enter the post-literate age. In the competition for larger and larger amounts of money, the literate audience too will suffer.

This aspect of the problem has special application to Canada, for the following reason. Much bookstore ordering is now done through computer terminals, all of which are located in the United States. It takes eight weeks for a store in the Canadian West to receive an ordered book through the current, non-computerized Canadian system. It takes a few days to get one by computer. If you were a bookstore owner, wouldn't you opt for a high turnover of easily-ordered books, rather than going to a lot of trouble for Canadian books that arrive well after the time you could have used them? Unless Canadians find a way of keying into or circumventing this system, *all* Canadian books will soon be back in the cellar with the mimeo machine. The only way you'll be able to buy them is by mail order.

And even then, you may find them limited in scope. I've implied that the writer functions in his or her society as a kind of soothsayer, a truth teller; that writing is not mere self-expression but a view of society and the world at large, and that the novel is a moral instrument. *Moral* implies political, and traditionally the novel has been used not only as a vehicle for social commentary but as a vehicle for political commentary as well. The novelist, at any rate, still sees a connection between politics and the moral sense, even if politicians gave that up some time ago. By "political" I mean having to do with power: who's got it, who wants it, how it operates; in a word, who's allowed to do what to whom, who gets what from whom, who gets away with it and how.

But we're facing these days an increasing pressure on the novel. I'll be careful when I use the word "censorship," because real censorship stops a book before it's even been published. Let us say "suppression." The suppression is of two kinds. One has to do with the yanking of books out of schools and libraries, and is usually motivated by religious objections to depictions of sexual activity. I happen to find this stance pornographic, for the following reason. Pornography is a presentation of sex in isolation from the matrix

which surrounds it in real life; it is therefore exaggerated, distorted and untrue. To select the sexual bits from a novel like *The Diviners* and to discard the rest is simply to duplicate what pornographers themselves are doing. It would take a very salacious mind indeed to find *The Diviners*, or indeed the works by Alice Munro, myself and others which have been put through this particular centrifuge, unduly arousing. You have to wade through too much other stuff. Literary writers are easy targets; they don't shoot off your kneecaps. It's a lot safer to villify them than it is to take on the real pornographers.

(The Bible, of course, contains blasphemy, torture, rape, sodomy, orgies, murder, lying and lots of other unpleasant things. It also contains the Sermon on the Mount, which would mean a lot less without its setting. Its setting is the world as it is, human nature as it is. Christ consorted with publicans and sinners, not just because they were more of a challenge but because there were more of them; he didn't have too much use for holier-than-thous. Incidentally, the Bible itself has more than once appeared on lists of banned books.)

Nevertheless, I don't think writers can scream very hard about their books being removed from schools. The students should do the screaming if they want the books, and a system in which parents were not allowed to protest about what their children are being taught would be a fascist dictatorship. The only way to fight this trend is by counter-protest, and it remains to be seen whether enough people feel strongly enough about that corollary to free speech, free reading, to make this effective. But libraries are another matter. Libraries are for adults, and no one has a right to remove anything from them without the consent of the community at large.

The other kind of suppression is semi-political and is, in my view, more dangerous. There are two cases before the courts right now on which I can't comment. Suffice it to say that if the plaintiffs win them the effect will be to scare publishers away from anything with serious political comment. In fact these cases, although they have not yet been decided, are already having this effect. The novel takes as its province the whole of life. Removal of the right to comment on politics will gut it.

If you think Canada is really a country dedicated to democracy and the principle of free speech, remember the War Measures Act. Remember the letters to the editor. Remember how few people spoke out. We are a timorous country, and we do tend to believe that what those in authority do *must*, somehow, be justified.

What we're facing, then, is a literary world split between huge entertainment-package blockbusters written by "elements" and deemed



both money-making and politically innocuous by the powers that be, and a kind of publishing underground to which the rest of us will be banished. The literary audience, which has never been a mass one, will either content itself with the literary equivalent of Muzak—writing to suck your thumb by—or it will stop reading altogether. Some bright soul will put together a mail-order operation, perhaps. As for the writers, they will either become “elements” or they will fulfill my nightmares about the creative writing students. They will stop writing for readers *out there* and write only for readers *in here*, cosy members of an in-group composed largely of other writers and split into factions or “schools” depending on who your friends are and whether you spell I with a capital I or a small one. This tendency will merely support the average serious reader’s impression that such writing has nothing to say to *him*. This is already happening to poetry, though in Canada, which as we all know is a cultural backwater, it hasn’t happened quite as thoroughly yet.

You may have thought I was going to say something about Canadian novels, and how we all ought to read them because, although nasty-tasting, they are good for us because they tell us about ourselves. I didn’t do that because I think the problem is far larger than Canada; although the trends I’ve outlined will be reflected in Canada too, if they continue unchecked. Of course in entertainment packages it doesn’t matter a hoot whether the “element” is Canadian or not, and the citizenship of great white sharks is irrelevant. But in serious literature there is always a voice, and there is no such thing as a voice without a language and without an accent. All true namings have an accent, and accents are local. This does not make their naming of the world less true, however, but more true. Those who have maintained over the years that “Canadian” and “universal” are mutually exclusive may soon find themselves proved right, because the only universal things around are going to be entertainment packages, and you can bet your bottom dollar they won’t be Canadian.

If you doubt what I say, take a look at the current state of criticism, both in this country and elsewhere in the Western world. The critic is that curious creature, a reader-writer, and he reflects trends even more accurately than *Toronto Life*. In his popular form he’s supposed to function as a kind of stand-in for the average, intelligent reader, or so I was told at school. He’s supposed to keep us informed about what’s going on in writing, what writers are producing, and what effect these productions had on him as a reasonably experienced reader. Once upon a time in Canada, criticism was either non-

existent or serious, because there were very few Canadian books and very few people read them, and those who did and cared enough to take the time to write about them were dedicated souls. In fact, twenty years ago it would not have been an exaggeration to say that the level of criticism was quite far above what was being criticized. Now we have both popular and academic critics. Popular book criticism takes place in the back rows of something called the entertainment section. Too frequently, entertainment editors try to match books up with reviewers who are guaranteed to hate them, because a peevish view filled with witticisms at the writers' expense is thought to amuse the readership and increase circulation. Snide gossip and tittle-tattle have become regular features of such entertainment sections. As for the academic community, that segment of it that concerns itself with Canadian writing, it's heavily into metonymy and synecdoche, but they don't have a lot to do with what writing is about, unless you stop at the craft and don't bother at all with the vocation or the art.

A country or a community which does not take serious literature seriously will lose it. *So what?* say the Members of Parliament, the same ones who object to the creeps in long underwear. *All we want is a good read. A murder mystery, a spy thriller, something that keeps you turning the pages. I don't have the time to read anyway.*

Well, try this. It could well be argued that the advent of the printed word coincided with the advent of democracy as we know it; that the book is the only form that allows the reader not only to participate but to review, to re-view what's being presented. With a book, you can turn back the pages. You can't do that with a television set. Can democracy function at all without a literate public, one with a moral sense and well-developed critical faculties? Can democracy run on entertainment packages alone?

And in whose interest is it that participatory democracy continue to function anyway, even in the imperfect way that it does? Not that of governments, which would like to see a combination of bureaucracy and oligarchy, with the emphasis on the bureaucracy. Not that of big business, which would like a quiescent labour market stuffed to senility with entertainment packages. Canada could easily pass legislation that would protect the book industry we now so tenuously have. Quotas on paperback racks, like the radio quotas that have done so well for the record industry; a system of accredited bookstores, like the ones in, dare I mention it, Quebec. It wouldn't be difficult, but who cares enough to make it happen?

I will leave such questions with you, since you are, after all, the audience. It will not be by the writers, who are too few in number to have any influence at the polls, but by the audience itself that such questions will ultimately be answered.

## NOTE

1. This essay was delivered as a public lecture at Dalhousie University as part of the annual Dorothy J. Killam Lecture Series, October 8, 1980. The general theme of the series was "The State of the Arts".