

*The Essential Gesture:
Writers and Responsibility*

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When I began to write, at the age of nine or ten, I did so in what I have come to believe is the only real innocence — an act without responsibility. For one has only to watch very small children playing together to see how the urge to influence, exact submission, defend dominance, gives away the presence of natal human ‘sin’ whose punishment is the burden of responsibility. I was alone. My poem or story came out of myself I did not know how. It was directed at no one, was read by no one.

Responsibility is what awaits outside the Eden of creativity. I should never have dreamt that this most solitary and deeply marvellous of secrets — the urge *to make* with words — would become a vocation for which the world, and that lifetime lodger, conscionable self-awareness, would claim the right to call me and all my kind to account. The creative act is not pure. History evidences it. Ideology demands it. Society exacts it. The writer loses Eden, writes to be read, and comes to realize that he is answerable. The writer is *held responsible*: and the verbal phrase is ominously accurate, for the writer not only has laid upon him responsibility for various interpretations of the consequences of his work, he is ‘held’ before he begins by the claims of different concepts of morality — artistic, linguistic, ideological, national, political, religious — asserted upon him. He learns that his creative act was not pure even while being formed in his brain: already it carried congenital responsibility for what preceded cognition and volition: for what he represented in genetic, environmental, social, and economic terms when he was born of his parents.

Roland Barthes wrote that language is a ‘corpus of prescriptions and habits common to all the writers of a period’.¹

¹Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*.

He also wrote that a writer's 'enterprise' — his work — is his 'essential gesture as a social being'.

Between these two statements I have found my subject, which is their tension and connection: the writer's responsibility. For language — language as the transformation of thought into written words in any language — is not only 'a' but *the* corpus common to all writers in our period. (Perhaps to a lesser extent this has been so in others, but for reasons arising out of those periods and not ours.) From the corpus of language, within that guild shared with fellow writers, the writer fashions his enterprise, which then becomes his 'essential gesture as a social being'. Created in the common lot of language, that essential gesture is individual; and with it the writer quits the commune of the corpus; but with it he enters the commonalty of society, the world of other beings who are not writers. He and his fellow writers are at once isolated from one another far and wide by the varying concepts, in different societies, of what the essential gesture of the writer as a social being is.

By comparison of what is expected of them, writers often have little or nothing in common. There is no responsibility arising out of the status of the writer as a social being that could call upon Saul Bellow, Kurt Vonnegut, Susan Sontag, Toni Morrison, or John Berger to write on a subject that would result in their being silenced under a ban, banished to internal exile, or detained in jail. But in the Soviet Union, South Africa, Iran, Vietnam, Taiwan, certain Latin American and other countries, this is the kind of demand that responsibility for the social significance of being a writer exacts: a double demand, the first from the oppressed, to act as spokesperson for them, the second, from the state, to take punishment for that act. Conversely, it is not conceivable that a Molly Keane, or any other writer of the quaint Gothic-domestic cult presently discovered by discerning critics and readers in the United States as well as Britain, would be taken seriously in terms

of the interpretations of the 'essential gesture as a social being' called forth in countries such as the Soviet Union, South Africa, etc., if he or she lived there.

Yet those critics and readers who live safe from the realm of midnight arrests and solitary confinement that is the dark condominium of East and West have their demands upon the writer from such places, too. For them, his essential gesture as a social being is to take risks they themselves do not know if they would.

This results in strange and unpleasant distortions in the personality of some of these safe people. Any writer from a country of conflict will bear me out. When interviewed abroad, there is often disappointment that you are there, and not in jail in your own country. And since you are not — why are you not? Aha . . . does this mean you have not written the book you should have written? Can you imagine this kind of self-righteous inquisition being directed against a John Updike for not having made the trauma of America's Vietnam war the theme of his work?²

There is another tack of suspicion. The London *Daily Telegraph* reviewer of my recent book of stories said I must be exaggerating: if my country really was a place where such things happened, how was it I could write about them? And then there is the wish-fulfilment distortion, arising out of the homebody's projection of his dreams upon the exotic writer: the journalist who makes a bogus hero out of the writer who knows that the pen, where he lives, is a weapon not mightier than the sword.

One thing is clear: ours is a period when few can claim the absolute value of a writer without reference to a context of responsibilities. Exile as a mode of genius no longer exists; in place of Joyce we have the fragments of works appearing in *Index on*

²American society does not demand this 'orthodoxy' of its writers, because (arguably) its values are not in a crisis of survival concentrated on a single moral issue. Which does not authorize self-appointed cultural commissars to decide whether or not writers from other countries are fulfilling their 'essential gesture' in their own societies.

Censorship. These are the rags of suppressed literatures, translated from a Babel of languages; the broken cries of real exiles, not those who have rejected their homeland but who have been forced out — of their language, their culture, their society. In place of Joyce we have two of the best contemporary writers in the world, Czeslaw Milosz and Milan Kundera; but both regard themselves as amputated sensibilities, not free of Poland and Czechoslovakia in the sense that Joyce was free of Ireland — whole: out in the world but still in possession of the language and culture of home. In place of Joyce we have, one might argue, at least Borges; but in his old age, and out of what he sees in his blindness as he did not when he could see, for years now he has spoken wistfully of a desire to trace the trails made by ordinary lives instead of the arcane pattern of abstract forces of which they are the fingerpainting. Despite his rejection of ideologies (earning the world's inescapable and maybe accurate shove over to the ranks of the Right) even he senses on those lowered lids the responsibilities that feel out for writers so persistently in our time.

What right has society to impose responsibility upon writers and what right has the writer to resist? I want to examine not what is forbidden us by censorship — I know that story too well — but to what we are bidden. I want to consider what is expected of us by the dynamic of collective conscience and the will to liberty in various circumstances and places; whether we should respond, and if so, how we do.

'It is from the moment when I shall no longer be more than a writer that I shall cease to write'.³ One of the great of our period, Camus, could say that. In theory, at least, as a writer he accepted the basis of the most extreme and pressing demand of our time. The ivory tower was finally stormed; and it was not with a white flag that the writer came out, but with manifesto unfurled and

³ Albert Camus, *Carnets*.

arms crooked to link with the elbows of the people. And it was not just as their chronicler that the compact was made; the greater value, you will note, was placed on the persona outside of 'writer': to be 'no more than a writer' was to put an end to the justification for the very existence of the persona of 'writer'. Although the aphorism in its characteristically French neatness appears to wrap up all possible meanings of its statement, it does not. Camus' decision is a hidden as well as a revealed one. It is not just that he has weighed within himself his existential value as a writer against that of other functions as a man among men, and found independently in favour of the man; the scale has been set up by a demand outside himself, by his world situation. He has, in fact, accepted its condition that the greater responsibility is to society and not to art.

Long before it was projected into that of a world war, and again after the war, Camus' *natal* societal situation was that of a writer in the conflict of Western world decolonisation — the moral question of race and power by which the twentieth century will be characterized along with its discovery of the satanic ultimate in power, the means of human self-annihilation. But the demand made upon him and the moral imperative it set up in himself are those of a writer anywhere where the people he lives among, or any sections of them marked out by race or colour or religion, are discriminated against and repressed. Whether or not he himself materially belongs to the oppressed makes his assumption of extra-literary responsibility more or less 'natural', but does not alter much the problem of the conflict between integrities.

Loyalty is an emotion, integrity a conviction adhered to out of moral values. Therefore I speak here not of loyalties but integrities, in my recognition of society's right to make demands on the writer as equal to that of the writer's commitment to his artistic vision; the source of conflict is what demands are made and how they should be met.

The closest to reconciliation that I know of comes in my own country, South Africa, among some black writers. It certainly cannot be said to have occurred in the position of two of Africa's most important writers from elsewhere, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. They became 'more than writers' in answer to their country's — Nigeria's — crisis of civil war; but in no sense did the demand develop their creativity. On the contrary, both sacrificed for some years the energy of their creativity to the demands of activism, which included, for Soyinka, imprisonment. The same might be said of Ernesto Cardenal. But it is out of being 'more than a writer' that many black men and women in South Africa *begin* to write. All the obstacles and diffidences — lack of education, of a tradition of literary expression, even of the chance to form the everyday habit of reading that germinates a writer's gift— are overcome by the imperative to give expression to a majority not silent, but whose deeds and whose proud and angry volubility against suffering have not been given the eloquence of the written word. For these writers, there is no opposition of inner and outer demands. At the same time as they are writing, they are political activists in the concrete sense, teaching, proselytizing, organizing. When they are detained without trial it may be for what they have written, but when they are tried and convicted of crimes of conscience it is for what they have done as 'more than a writer'. 'Africa, my beginning . . . Africa my end' — these lines of the epic poem (banned in South Africa) written by Ngoapele Madingoane epitomise this synthesis of creativity and social responsibility;⁴ what moves him, and the way it moves him, are perfectly at one with his society's demands. Without those demands he is not a poet.

The Marxist critic Ernst Fischer reaches anterior to my interpretation of this response with his proposition that 'the artist who

⁴Ngoapele Madingoane, *Africa My Beginning*.

belonged to a coherent society [here, read pre-conquest South Africa] and to a class that was not yet an impediment to progress [here, read not yet infected by white bourgeois aspirations] did not feel it any loss of artistic freedom if a certain range of subjects was prescribed to him' since such subjects were imposed 'usually by tendencies and traditions deeply rooted in the people'.⁵ Of course, this may provide, in general, a sinister pretext for a government to invoke certain tendencies and traditions to suit its purpose of proscribing writers' themes, but applied to black writers in South Africa, history evidences the likely truth of the proposition. Their tendency and tradition for more than three hundred years has been to free themselves of white domination.

Art is on the side of the oppressed. Think before you shudder at the simplistic dictum and its heretical definition of the freedom of art. For if art is freedom of the spirit, how can it exist within the oppressors? And there is some evidence that it ceases to. What writer of any literary worth defends fascism, totalitarianism, racism, in an age when these are still pandemic? Ezra Pound is dead. In Poland, where are the poets who sing the epic of the men who have broken Solidarity? In South Africa, where are the writers who produce brilliant defences of apartheid?

It remains difficult to dissect the tissue between those for whom writing is a revolutionary activity no different from and to be practised concurrently with running a political trade union or making a false passport for someone on the run, and those who interpret their society's demand to be 'more than a writer' as something that may yet be fulfilled through the nature of their writing itself. Whether this latter interpretation is possible depends on the society within which the writer functions. Even 'only' to write may be to be 'more than a writer' for one such as Milan Kundera, who goes on writing what he sees and knows from within his situa-

⁵ Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*.

tion — his country under repression — until a ban on publishing his books strips him of his ‘essential gesture’ of being a writer at all. Like one of his own characters, he must clean windows or sell tickets in a cinema booth for a living. That, ironically, is what being ‘more than a writer’ would come down to for him, if he were to have opted to stay on in his country — something I don’t think Camus quite visualized. There are South Africans who have found themselves in the same position — for example, the poet Don Mattera, who for seven years was banned from writing, publishing, and even from reading his work in public. But in a country of total repression of the majority, like South Africa, where literature is nevertheless only half-suppressed because the greater part of that black majority is kept semi-literate and cannot be affected by books, there is — just — the possibility for a writer to be ‘only’ a writer, in terms of activity, and yet ‘more than a writer’ in terms of fulfilling the demands of his society. An honourable category has been found for him, As ‘cultural worker’ in the race/class struggle he still may be seen to serve, even if he won’t march towards the teargas and bullets.

In this context, long before the term ‘cultural worker’ was taken over from the vocabulary of other revolutions, black writers had to accept the social responsibility white ones didn’t have to — that of being the only historians of events among their people; Dhlomo, Plaatje, Mofolo, created characters who brought to life and preserved events either unrecorded by white historians or recorded purely from the point of view of white conquest.⁶ From this beginning there has been a logical intensification of the demands of social responsibility, as over decades discrimination and repression set into law and institution, and resistance became a liberation struggle. This process culminated during the black uprising of 1976, calling forth poetry and prose in an impetus of

⁶ H. I. E. Dhlomo, *Valley of a Thousand Hills*, and others; Solomon T. Plaatje, *Mhudi, Native Life in South Africa, Boer War Diary*; Thomas Mofolo, *Chaka*.

events not yet exhausted nor fully explored by writers. The uprising began as a revolt of youth and it brought a new consciousness — bold, incantatory, messianically reckless — to writers. It also placed new demands upon them in the essential gesture that bound them to a people springing about on the balls of their feet before dawn-streaks of freedom and the threat of death. Private emotions were inevitably outlawed by political activists who had no time for any; black writers were expected to prove their blackness *as a revolutionary condition* by submitting to an unwritten orthodoxy of interpretation and representation in their work. I stress unwritten because there was no Writers' Union to be expelled from. But there was a company of political leaders, intellectuals, and the new category of the alert young, shaming others with their physical and mental bravery, to ostracise a book of poems or prose if it were to be found irrelevant to the formal creation of an image of a people anonymously, often spontaneously heroic.

Some of my friends among black writers have insisted to me that this 'imposition' of orthodoxy is a white interpretation; that the impulse came from within to discard the lantern of artistic truth that reveals human worth through human ambiguity, and to see by the flames of burning vehicles only the strong, thick lines that draw heroes. To gain his freedom the writer must give up his freedom. Whether the impulse came from within, without, or both, for the black South African writer it became an imperative to attempt that salvation. It remains so; but in the 1980s many black writers of quality have come into conflict with the demand from without — responsibility as orthodoxy — and have begun to negotiate the right to their own, inner interpretation of the essential gesture by which they are part of the black struggle.⁷ The black writer's revolutionary responsibility may be posited by him

⁷ Among the most recent examples, Njabulo Ndebele's *Fools*, and Ahmed Essop's *The Emperor*.

as the discovery, in his own words, of the revolutionary spirit for the present in the rescue — for the post-revolutionary future — of that nobility in ordinary men and women to be found only among their doubts, culpabilities, shortcomings: their courage-in-spite-of.

To whom are South African writers answerable in their essential gesture if they are not in the historical and existential situation of blacks, and if (axiomatic for them in varying degrees) they are alienated from their 'own', the historical and existential situation of whites there? Only a section of blacks places any demands upon white writers at all; that grouping within radical blacks which grants integrity to whites who declare themselves for the black freedom struggle. To be one of these writers is firstly to be presented with a political responsibility if not an actual orthodoxy: the white writer's task as cultural worker is to raise the consciousness of white people, who, unlike himself, have not woken up. It is a responsibility at once minor, in comparison with that placed upon the black writer as composer of battle hymns, and yet forbidding if one compares the honour and welcome that await the black writer, from blacks, and the branding as traitor, or, at best, turned backside of indifference that await the white, from the white establishment. With fortunate irony, however, it is a responsibility which the white writer already has taken on, for himself, if the other responsibility — to his creative integrity — keeps him scrupulous in writing about what he knows to be true whether whites like to hear it or not: for the majority of his readers are white. He brings some influence to bear on whites though not on the white-dominated government; he may influence those individuals who are already coming-to bewilderedly out of the trip of power, and those who gain courage from reading the open expression of their own suppressed rebellion. I doubt whether the white writer, even if giving expression to the same themes as blacks, has much social use in inspiring blacks, or is needed to. Sharing the

life of the black ghettos is the primary qualification the white writer lacks, so far as populist appreciation is concerned. But black writers do share with white the same kind of influence on those whites who read them; and so the categories that the state would keep apart get mixed through literature —an unforeseen ‘essential gesture’ of writers in their social responsibility in a divided country.

The white writer who has declared himself answerable to the oppressed people is not expected by them to be ‘more than a writer’, since his historical position is not seen as allowing him to be central to the black struggle. But a few writers have challenged this definition by taking upon themselves exactly the same revolutionary responsibilities as black writers such as Alex la Guma, Dennis Brutus, and Mongane Serote, who make no distinction between the tasks of underground activity and writing a story or poem. Like Brutus, the white writers Breyten Breytenbach and; Jeremy Cronin were tried and imprisoned for accepting the necessity they saw for being ‘more than a writer’, Their interpretation of a writer’s responsibility, in their country and situation, remains a challenge, particularly to those who disagree with their action while sharing with them the politics of opposition to repression. There is no moral authority like that of sacrifice.

In South Africa the ivory tower is bulldozed anew with every black man’s home destroyed to make way for a white man’s. Yet there are positions between the bulldozed ivory tower and the maximum security prison. The one who sees his responsibility in being ‘only a writer’ has still to decide whether this means he can fulfil his essential gesture to society only by ready-packaging his creativity to the dimensions of a social realism *those who will free him of his situation* have the authority to ask of him, or whether he may be able to do so by work the Western liberal George Steiner defines as ‘scrupulously argued, not declaimed . . . informed, at each node and articulation of proposal, with a just

sense of the complex, contradictory nature of historical evidence'.⁸ The great mentor of Russian revolutionary writers of the nineteenth century, Belinsky, advises, 'Do not worry about the incarnation of ideas. If you are a poet, your works will contain them without your knowledge — they will be both moral and national if you follow your inspiration freely'.⁹ Octavio Paz, speaking from Mexico for the needs of the Third World, sees a fundamental function as social critic for the writer who is 'only a writer'.¹⁰ It is a responsibility that goes back to source: the corpus of language from which the writer arises. 'Social criticism begins with grammar and the re-establishment of meanings'. This was the responsibility taken up in the post-Nazi era by Heinrich Böll and Günter Grass, and is presently being fulfilled by South African writers, black and white, in exposing the real meaning of the South African government's vocabulary of racist euphemisms — such terms as 'separate development', 'resettlement', 'national states', and its grammar of a racist legislature, with segregated chambers for whites, so-called coloureds and Indians, and no representation whatever for the majority of South Africans, those classified as black.

If the writer accepts the social realist demand, from without, will he be distorting, paradoxically, the very ability he has to offer the creation of a new society? If he accepts the other, self-imposed responsibility, how far into the immediate needs of his society will he reach? Will hungry people find revelation in the ideas his work contains 'without his knowledge'? The one certainty, in South Africa as a specific historical situation, is that there is no opting out of the two choices. Outside is a culture in sterile decay, its

⁸ George Steiner, reviewing E. M. Cioran's *Drawn and Quartered* in *The New Yorker*, April 16, 1984.

⁹Vissarion Belinsky, 1810–1848. The quote is from my notebooks, and I am unable to verify its original source.

¹⁰Octavio Paz, 'Development and Other Mirages', from *The Other Mexico: Critique of the Pyramid*.

achievements culminating in the lines of tin toilets set up in the veld for people 'resettled' by force. Whether a writer is black or white, in South Africa the essential gesture by which he enters the brotherhood of man — white is the only definition of society that has any permanent validity — is a revolutionary gesture.

'Has God ever expressed an opinion?' — Flaubert, writing to George Sand. 'I believe that great art is impersonal. . . . I want neither love nor hatred nor pity nor anger. The impartiality of description would then become equal to the majesty of the law'.

Nearly a century passed before the *nouveau roman* writers attempted this kind of majesty, taking over from another medium the mode of still-life. The work aspired to be the object-in-itself, although made up of elements -words, images - that can never be lifted from the 'partiality' of countless connotations. The writers went as far as it is possible to go from any societal demand. They had tried so hard that their vision became fixed on Virginia Woolf's mark on the wall — and as an end, not a beginning. Yet the anti-movement seems to have been, after all, a negative variation on a kind of social responsibility some writers have assumed at least since the beginning of the modern movement: to transform the world by style. This was and is something that could not serve as the writer's essential gesture in countries such as South Africa and Nicaragua; but it has had its possibilities and sometimes proves its validity where complacency, indifference, accidie, and not conflict, threaten the human spirit. To transform the world by style was the iconoclastic essential gesture tried out by the Symbolists and Dadaists; but whatever social transformation (in shaping a new consciousness) they might have served in breaking old forms was horribly superseded by different means: Europe, the Far, Middle, and Near East, Asia, Latin America, and Africa overturned by wars; millions of human beings wandering without the basic structure of a roof.

The Symbolists' and Dadaists' successors, in what Susan Sontag terms 'the cultural revolution that refuses to be political' have among them their '... spiritual adventurers, social pariahs determined to disestablish themselves ... not to be morally useful to the community'—the essential gesture withheld by Céline and Kerouac.¹¹ Responsibility reaches out into the manifesto, however, and claims the 'seers' of this revolution. Through a transformation by style—depersonalized laconicism of the word almost to the Word — Samuel Beckett takes on as his essential gesture a responsibility direct to human destiny, and not to any local cell of humanity. This is the assumption of a messenger of the gods rather than a cultural worker. It is a disestablishment from the temporal; yet some kind of final statement exacted by the temporal. Is Beckett the freest writer in the world, or is he the most responsible of all?

Kafka was also a seer, one who sought to transform consciousness by style, and who was making his essential gesture to human destiny rather than the European fragment of it to which he belonged. But he was unconscious of his desperate signal. He believed that the act of writing was one of detachment that moved writers 'with everything we possess, to the moon'.¹² He was unaware of the terrifyingly impersonal, apocalyptic, prophetic nature of his vision in that ante-room to his parents' bedroom in Prague. Beckett, on the contrary, has been signalled to and consciously responded. The summons came from his time. His place — not Warsaw, San Salvador, Soweto — has nothing specific to ask of him. And unlike Joyce, he can never be in exile wherever he chooses to live, because he has chosen to be answerable to the twentieth-century human condition which has its camp everywhere,

¹¹ Susan Sontag, 'Approaching Artaud', from *Under the Sign of Saturn: ... authors ... recognised by their effort to disestablish themselves, by their will not to be morally useful to the community, by their inclination to present themselves not as social critics but as seers, spiritual adventurers and social pariahs*'.

¹² Franz Kafka, from a letter to Max Brod, quoted by Ronald Hayman in *Kafka*.

or nowhere — whichever way you see Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, and Lucky.

Writers who accept a professional responsibility in the transformation of society are always seeking ways of doing so that their societies could not ever imagine, let alone demand: asking of themselves means that will plunge like a drill to release the great primal spout of creativity, drench the censors, cleanse the statute books of their pornography of racist and sexist laws, hose down religious differences, extinguish napalm bombs and flame-throwers, wash away pollution from land, sea, and air, and bring out human beings into the occasional summer fount of naked joy. Each has his own dowsing twig, held over heart and brain. Michel Tournier sees writers' responsibilities as to 'disrupt the establishment in exact proportion to their creativity'.¹³ This is a bold global responsibility, though more Orphic and terrestrial than Beckett's; more human, if you like. It also could be taken as admittance that this is *all* writers can do; for creativity comes from within, it cannot be produced by will or dictate if it is not there, although it can be crushed by dictate. Tournier's — this apparently fantastical and uncommitted writer's — own creativity is nevertheless so close to the people that he respects as a marvel — and makes it so for his readers — the daily history of their lives as revealed in city trash dumps. And he is so fundamentally engaged by what alienates human beings that he imagines for everyone the restoration of wholeness (the totality which revolutionary art seeks to create for alienated man) in a form of Being that both sexes experience as one — something closer to a classless society than to a sexually hermaphroditic curiosity.

The *transformation of experience* remains the writer's basic essential gesture; the lifting out of a limited category something that reveals its full meaning and significance only when the writ-

¹³ Michel Tournier, *Gemini*.

er's imagination has expanded it. This has never been more evident than in the context of extreme experiences of sustained personal horror that are central to the period of twentieth-century writers. The English critic John Bayley writes of Anna Akhmatova:

A violently laconic couplet at the end of the sections of *Requiem* records her husband dead, her son in prison. . . . It is as good an instance as any of the power of great poetry to generalize and speak for the human predicament in extremity, for in fact she had probably never loved Gumilev, from whom she had lived apart for years, and her son had been brought up by his grandmother. But the sentiment [of the poem] was not for herself but for 'her people', with whom she was at that time so totally united in suffering.¹⁴

Writers in South Africa who are 'only writers' are sometimes reproached by those, black and white, who are in practical revolutionary terms 'more than writers', for writing of events as if they themselves had been at the heart of action, endurance, and suffering. So far as black writers are concerned, even though the humiliations and deprivations of daily life under apartheid enjoin them, many of them were no more among the children under fire from the police in the seventies, or are living as Freedom Fighters in the bush, than Akhmatova was a heart-broken wife or a mother separated from a son she had nurtured. Given these circumstances, their claim to generalize and speak for a human predicament in extremity comes from the lesser or greater extent of their *ability to do so*; and the development of that ability is their responsibility towards those with whom they are united by this extrapolation of suffering and resistance. White writers who are 'only writers' are open to related reproach for 'stealing the lives of blacks' as good material. Their claim to this 'material' is the same as the black writers' at an important existential remove nobody would discount. Their essential gesture can be fulfilled only in the integ-

¹⁴ John Bayley, *London Observer*, Oct. 31, 1976.

ity Chekhov demanded: 'to describe a situation so truthfully that the reader can no longer evade it'.¹⁵

The writer is eternally in search of entelechy in his relation to his society. Everywhere in the world, he needs to be left alone and at the same time to have a vital connection with others; needs artistic freedom and knows it cannot exist without its wider context; feels the two presences within —creative self-absorption and conscionable awareness —and must resolve whether these are locked in death-struggle, or are really foetuses in a twinship of fecundity. Will the world let him, and will he know how to be the ideal of the writer as a social being, Walter Benjamin's storyteller, the one 'who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story'?¹⁶

¹⁵ Anton Chekhov, quoted by Isaiah Berlin in *Russian Thinkers*.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*.