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**AUTHORS, SPEAKERS,  
READERS, AND MOCK READERS**

*Walker Gibson*

It is now common in the classroom as well as in criticism to distinguish carefully between the *author* of a literary work of art and the fictitious *speaker* within the work of art. Most teachers agree that the attitudes expressed by the "lover" in the love sonnet are not to be crudely confused with whatever attitudes the sonneteer himself may or may not have manifested in real life. Historical techniques are available for a description of the sonneteer, but the literary teacher's final concern must be with the speaker, that voice or disguise through which someone (whom we may as well call "the poet") communicates with us. It is this speaker who is "real" in the sense most useful to the study of literature, for the speaker is made of language alone, and his entire self lies on the page before us in evidence.

Closely associated with this distinction between author and speaker, there is another and less familiar distinction to be made, respecting the *reader*. For if the "real author" is to be regarded as to a great degree distracting and mysterious, lost in history, it seems equally true that the "real reader," lost in today's history, is no less mysterious and sometimes as irrelevant. The fact is that every time we open the pages of another piece of writing, we are embarked on a new adventure in which we become a new person—a person as controlled and definable and as remote from the chaotic self of daily life as the lover in the sonnet. Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are recreated by the language. We assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away.

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author/speaker  
real/mock reader

I am arguing, then, that there are two readers distinguishable in every literary experience. First, there is the "real" individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, and whose personality is as complex and ultimately inexpressible as any dead poet's. Second, there is the fictitious reader—I shall call him the "mock reader"—whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation.

The mock reader can probably be identified most obviously in sub-literary genres crudely committed to persuasion, such as advertising and propaganda. We resist the blandishments of the copywriter just in so far as we refuse to become the mock reader his language invites us to become. Recognition of a violent disparity between ourself as mock reader and ourself as real person acting in a real world is the process by which we keep our money in our pockets. "Does your toupee collect moths?" asks the toupee manufacturer, and we answer, "Certainly not! My hair's my own. You're not talking to *me*, old boy; I'm wise to you." Of course we are not always so wise.

Consider the mock reader in a case only slightly less obvious, the following opening paragraph from a book review of Malcolm Cowley's recent collection, *The Portable Hawthorne*:

Our thin self-lacerating and discontinuous culture automatically produces such uneasy collaborations as this one between Mr. Cowley, the hard-working scribe and oddly impressionable cultural sounding board, and the publishing industry with its concept of the "Portable." The Hawthorne who emerges has had such a bad fall between stools, or clichés, that he appears almost as giddy and shattered as we....

The assumptions buried rather shallowly in this passage can very easily be brought to light. A nimble and sympathetic conversation is passing back and forth here—as always—between the speaker and the mock reader, a conversation that goes in part something like this:

You and I, in brave rebellion against the barbarousness of a business culture, can see this book for what of course it is—an "uneasy collaboration" and a defamation of that fine Hawthorne whom you and I know and love. We would not be content, would we, to be mere "scribes"; how stupid other people are to think that industry alone is sufficient. You and I are quickly able to translate "oddly impressionable" into what of course more literally describes the situation, though we were too polite to say so—namely, that Cowley is a weak sister. Nothing "odd" about it—you and I know what's going on all right.

It is interesting to observe how frankly the speaker throws his arm around the mock reader at the end of the passage I have quoted, as the two comrades experience their common giddiness at the appalling qual-

← acceptance?

ity of this book. Remember that the *real* reader has in all likelihood not even seen the book yet, and, if he takes his own mock-reader-personality seriously enough, he probably never will.

An opening paragraph from another book review requires us to take on another character:

I never got around to the early books of the Pasquier series, Georges Duhamel's multigeneration history of a French family, but after reading "Suzanne and Joseph" (Holt), the two-volume novel that closes the series, I can't see any very pressing reason for flying in the face of prevailing opinion about M. Duhamel. He is, as has been claimed by such admirers of his as Kate O'Brien and Sean O'Faolain, quite a good writer. He deals in honored narrative methods and old truths, and he turns out the kind of novel that can be recognized from afar as *A Story*. . . .

Again, some obvious portion of the between-the-lines dialogue between speaker and mock reader might be paraphrased as follows:

You and I are persons of leisure and taste, but unostentatious about it; we make no pretense of having Big Ideas, and we "can't see any very pressing reason for flying in the face of prevailing opinion" (you'll excuse my casual, homely phrase) merely because it is prevailing. We favor comfort, after all, and we won't lament over the things we never got around to. On the other hand we recognize competence and talent when we see it; we'll certainly listen to whatever Kate O'Brien and Sean O'Faolain have to say; and though we are enlightened enough to realize that *A Story* (you'll appreciate my capitals) won't in itself do in this complex age, nevertheless the honored methods and old truths are after all the Honored Methods and Old Truths. . . .

Here again it is worth pointing out that many successful readers of this passage—perhaps most of them—never even heard of Kate O'Brien or Sean O'Faolain. It is possible to imagine a reader saying, "I never heard of Kate O'Brien; this review isn't addressed to the likes of me; I'll read something else." But a more plausible response, I believe, would be this: "It's true I never heard of Kate O'Brien, but in my status as mock reader I'm going to pretend that I have; after all, it's obvious how highly I would think of her if I had heard of her."

It will surprise no one to learn that the first passage was taken from a recent issue of the *Partisan Review*, and that the second is from the *New Yorker*. Perhaps it is fair to say that the mock readers addressed by these speakers represent ideal audiences of the two periodicals. In any case it seems plain that the job of an editor is largely the definition of his magazine's mock reader and that an editorial "policy" is a decision or prediction as to the role or roles in which one's customers would like to imagine themselves. Likewise, a man fingering the piles at a magazine stand is concerned with the corollary question, Who do I want to pretend I am today?

Pretense?

(The mock reader of this article numbers among his many impressive accomplishments the feat of having participated at various times as mock reader of both the *New Yorker* and the *Partisan*.)

It is evident that imaginative literature too makes similar demands on its readers. There is great variation from book to book in the ease and particularity with which one can describe the mock reader, but he is always present, and sometimes is so clearly and rigorously defined as to suggest serious limitations on the audience. The mock reader of the opening paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby*, for instance, is a person determined within fairly rigid limits of time and space.

In my younger and more vulnerable years my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.

"Whenever you feel like criticising any one," he told me, "just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had."

He didn't say any more, but we've always been unusually communicative in a reserved way, and I understood that he meant a good deal more than that. In consequence, I'm inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me and also made me the victim of not a few veteran bores. The abnormal mind is quick to detect and attach itself to this quality when it appears in a normal person, and so it came about that in a college I was unjustly accused of being a politician, because I was privy to the secret-grievings of wild, unknown men. Most of the confidences were unsought—frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon....

Here the mock reader must not only take in stride a series of "jokes" formed by some odd juxtapositions—vulnerable years, not a few veteran bores, etc.—but must also be quick to share the attitudes and assumed experiences of the speaker. For instance, the speaker by overt statement and the mock reader by inference have both attended a particular kind of college in a particular way; notice how "in college" appears grammatically as a dependent phrase within a dependent clause, supporting the casual, offhand tone.

Of course we remember, you and I, how it was in college, where as normal persons we certainly had no wish to be confused with campus politicians, yet were even warier of the wild unknown men, those poets, those radicals and misfits. You and I understand with what deliberate and delicate absurdity I make fun of both the wild unknown men and the formal-literary language to which you and I have been exposed in the course of our extensive educations: "an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon."

It is probable that *Gatsby* today enjoys a greater reputation among real-life wild unknown men than it does among the equivalents of Nick Carraway's class. Somehow many people are able to suspend their an-

tagonisms against Nick's brand of normalcy in order to participate in the tone. Yet it is neither necessary nor desirable to suspend all one's judgments against Nick and his society, for in so far as Nick himself is self-critical, of course we can and must join him. And, finally, Nick is not the speaker at all, I think, but a kind of mock speaker, as our mock reader is a more complex and discerning person than Nick himself. There is another speaker somewhere—almost as if this novel were written in the third person—and it is from this other speaker that the mock reader ultimately takes on some important attitudes. They speak right over Nick Carraway's head.

You and I recognize the weaknesses in Nick, do we not: his snobbery and his facile assumptions. But we like him pretty well, after all—and it's a question whether his shallowness is really his fault. . . .

The concept of the mock reader need not be "taught" in so many words to be useful to the teacher of literature. The question the teacher might well ask himself is no more than this: Is there among my students a growing awareness that the literary experience is not just a relation between themselves and an author, or even between themselves and a fictitious speaker, but a relation between such a speaker and a projection, a fictitious modification of themselves? The realization on the part of a student that he is many people as he reads many books and responds to their language worlds is the beginning of literary sophistication in the best sense. One crucial objective of the teacher, I take it, is simply the enlargement of his "mock" possibilities. But this is not to imply that one reading experience is as good as another or that there are not value discriminations that are appropriate among various mock readers. In fact, the term may be particularly useful in recognizing just such discriminations and in providing one way of pointing out what we mean by a bad book. A bad book, then, is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play. If this seems to say little more than "A bad book is a bad book," consider an example:

Alan Foster wanted to go to Zagazig. He wasn't exactly sure why, except that he liked the name, and after having spent four months in Cairo Alan was ready to go places and do things. Twenty-two years old, tall, blond, with powerful shoulders and trim waist, Alan found no difficulty in making friends. He had had a good time in Egypt. Now he wanted to leave Cairo and try out Zagazig.

What is so irritating about this? Many things, but if we isolate the third sentence and describe its mock reader, we can begin to express why this is bad writing. For the mock reader of the third sentence is a person for whom there is a proper and natural relation between powerful shoulders and making friends. No student in a respectable English course, I as-

sume, should be willing to accept such a relation except perhaps as part of an irony. Only by irony could this passage be saved. ("You and I recognize that he makes friends all right, but what friends! This parody of a matinee idol is of course an ass.") No such irony is perceptible, however; the mock reader is expected to make one simple assumption only, and if the real reader has any sophistication at all, the passage collapses. It collapses precisely because the real reader finds in the mock reader a fellow of intolerable simplicity.

It is a question of rejecting the toupee ad, of recognizing that one's hair is one's own. However, the possibility must immediately suggest itself that a skillful control of tone could persuade us in an instant to don a fictitious toupee and to feel in all possible vividness the tug of a textile scalp against our own suddenly naked head. It is, finally, a matter of the details of language, and no mock reader can be divorced for long from the specific words that made him.

And the question remains: By what standard does one judge mock readers, how does one arrive at the decision that this one or that one is intolerable? Often it is as easy as in the case above—a case of oversimple assumptions. But obviously the problem is larger than that, and the tremendous importance, as it seems to me, of distinguishing for students between the mock world of the literary experience and the real world of everyday experience must not obscure the fact that in the end our appeals for decisions of value are toward sanctions of society in a very real world indeed. ~~For the student the problem of what mock reader—or part of a mock reader—it is proper for him to accept, and what to reject,~~ involves the whole overwhelming problem of learning to read and learning to act. No terminology can remove his hesitations over attempting the enormously difficult job of becoming the mock reader of *Paradise Lost*, or *Antigone*, or Wallace Stevens. The student's hesitation is no more than a part of a larger question that possibly no teacher can presume to answer for him: Who do I want to be?