VIII • The Lonely Embraces of Artists

With Stephen Dedalus’s visual and verbal embrace of the wading girl and the spiritual ejaculation that culminates it, we have fully arrived at one of the most fascinating and important ways that some of us have found to remain simultaneously together and apart. It is a way that is especially attractive to artists and that reveals much about the nature and consequences of their loneliness. It is fascinating because, depending upon the perspective and mood from which it is viewed as well as upon inherent qualities, it can be seen as an act that is predominantly worshipful or predominantly exploitative, as being akin to mystical experience or mostly to voyeurism, as exhibiting the maturest sort of recollection in tranquillity or the crudest sort of adolescent self-indulgence, as reflecting mainly the loneliness of the observer or mainly his arrogance. It is important because it touches so closely those awesome general issues of the ethics of any imaginative seizure and the appropriate relations for any subject and object.

Although I think these comments are true enough to excuse their pretentiousness, it is also true that I am fascinated by such lonely verbal embraces because they have so many reverberations off my own relinquished and remaining areas of adolescence, and because I believe that despite their inevitable element of voyeurism, such embraces can sometimes be an important way of acknowledging the autonomy, inviolateness, even sacredness of the other, of recognizing that even love may sometimes properly take on, perhaps require, the look of distance.

Unlike those poor divided creatures of Plato’s Symposium, Stephen Dedalus does not rush toward this other incomplete creature he has been yearning to be united with. He does not fling his arms around her neck hoping somehow to be rolled back into one with her. He does not, like many sixteen-year-
olds might, even sidle obliquely in her direction hoping to manage a casual encounter. Instead “he turn[s] away from her suddenly and set[s] off across the strand,” his cheeks “aflame,” his body “aglow,” his limbs “trembling.” “On and on and on he strode, far out over the sands, singing wildly to the sea, crying to greet the advent of the life that had cried to him” (p. 172). As we read what follows, shall we think of the girl as left behind, intact, exquisite, inviolate in the space surrounding her, or as used, ingested, transformed into catalyst and food for Stephen’s present excitements and future growth?

Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him, the angel of mortal youth and beauty, an envoy from the fair courts of life, to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory. On and on and on and on!! (P. 172)

Before long she seems to vanish completely as Stephen lies down in a lonely nook on the beach so that “the peace and silence of the evening might still the riot of his blood.” There he feels above him “the vast indifferent dome and the calm processes of the heavenly bodies; and the earth beneath him, the earth that had borne him, had taken him to her breast” (p. 172). He closes his eyes, falls asleep with strange and lovely images that fuse the motions of world, colors, lights, and flowers, and awakes recalling not the girl but “the rapture of his sleep.”

But how shall we regard his treatment of the girl? Without that young artist to paint her so exquisitely, to worship her with his eyes (however voyeuristically, however much the worship derives from self-adulation), she might never have become distinguishable from all the other children on the beach—in another sense, would never have gained existence at all. It is the intensity of his awareness of her that has marked her off so distinctly, etched her so sharply in our memories and provided the music that helps make her so lovely. True,
he has transformed her into a bird; but it is also true that the birdhood is part of the essence by which we know her and by which she gains her memorableness.

Her distinctness and impact depend also upon her separateness from Stephen, upon the distance between them. The separateness allows space for the experience to echo in, within Stephen and the reader both. An actual encounter would have broken the space and the spell. (I am especially glad for her sake that he did not actually go to her, for then she would have had to deal with the [for her] flesh-and-blood young man who does not know how to behave very well toward actual young women. He might, as in his encounter with Emma at the end of the book, have acted in such a way as to deliberately confuse her, and then feeling “sorry and mean” have turned off “that valve at once and opened the spiritual-heroic refrigerating apparatus, invented and patented in all countries by Dante Alighieri” and talked rapidly of himself and his plans [p. 252].)

What has always struck me most, however, about Stephen’s experience with the wading girl is the loneliness that suffuses the entire episode. Always a rather lonely young man, he has recently decided not to enter the priesthood as he had always thought he would; and on the day the episode occurs, while his father is in a pub talking with a tutor trying to get information for him about the university, he has walked off alone toward the sea. On his walk he passes a group of Christian Brothers and experiences a sense of his difference and separateness from them and then meets a group of swimming schoolmates with whom he banters a little. But soon he leaves them behind too, feeling “apart from them and in silence” (p. 168), and makes his way alone farther along the strand. Immediately before he sees the girl, he has asked himself “Where was he?” and answered: “He was alone. He was unheeded, happy and near to the wild heart of life. He was alone and young and wilful and wildhearted, alone amid a waste of wild air and brackish waters and the sea harvest of shells and tangled and veiled grey sunlight and gay clad lighted figures of children and girls and voices childish and girl-
ish in the air” (p. 171). The girl too is depicted in the opening sentence of the paragraph that introduces her as standing “alone and still,” and the same phrase opens the second paragraph about her. Even if one views this emphasis chiefly as a technique for freezing the moment, stopping the camera, so to speak, to give impact and importance to the event, the loneliness and separateness are deeply there; for there can be no connection, not even the possibility of it, when the camera stops and the people are frozen into place. Immediately after his vision, as we have seen, Stephen wanders off alone and spends many hours in what appears to be both terrestrial and cosmic solitude.

At the end of the book, he is preparing to leave his friends, his country and his home. In a final conversation with his friend Cranly he pronounces bravely:

Look here, Cranly, he said. You have asked me what I would do and what I would not do. I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning. (Pp. 246-47)

A moment later he adds: “I do not fear to be alone or to be spurned for another or to leave whatever I have to leave.” When Cranly responds, “—Alone, quite alone, You have no fear of that. And you know what that word means? Not only to be separate from all others but to have not even one friend,” Stephen says he “will take the risk” (p. 247).

Much of what both drives Stephen into his aloneness and helps sustain him in it, of course, is his dream of becoming a great artist; and by what is not merely a curious coincidence, in view of his name and the affinity birds seem to have for this book, he thinks of his quest in terms that are already perhaps too familiar. As he passes his schoolmates shortly before his vision of the wading girl, they call out to him “—Stephanos Dedalos! Bous Stephanoumenos! Bous Stephaneforos!” and his strange name seems more than ever a prophecy to him.
Now, at the name of the fabulous artificer, he seemed to hear the noise of the dim waves and to see a winged form flying above the waves and slowly climbing the air. What did it mean? Was it a quaint device opening a page of some medieval book of prophecies and symbols, a hawklike man flying sunward above the sea, a prophecy of the end he had been born to serve and had been following through the mists of childhood and boyhood, a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being? (P. 169)

A moment later “a wild spirit passed over his limbs as though he were soaring seaward . . . and his soul was in flight . . . soaring in an air beyond the world. . . . An ecstasy of flight made radiant his eyes and wild his breath and tremulous and wild and radiant his windswept limbs” (p. 169). Joyce interrupts this flight and his own rhetorical one with a sudden

—One! Two! . . . Look out!
—O, cripes, I’m drownded!
—One! Two! Three and away!
—Me next! Me next!
—One! . . . Uk!
—Stephaneforos!

But Stephen remains aloft. His throat aches “to cry aloud, the cry of a hawk or eagle on high, to cry piercingly of his deliverence to the winds. . . . Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of his freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable” (pp. 169–70). (What a distance from that little boy who early in the book hid under a table listening to his mother say, “O, Stephen will apologise,” and Dante say, “O, if not, the eagle will come and pull out his eyes” [p. 8]).

The book ends with these chords in Stephen’s diary:

16 April: Away! Away!
The spell of arms and voices: the white arms of roads, their promise of close embraces and the black arms of tall ships that stand against the moon, their tale of distant nations. They are held out to say: We are alone. Come. And the voices say with
them: We are your kinsmen. And the air is thick with their company as they call to me, their kinsmen, making ready to go, shaking the wings of their exultant and terrible youth.

26 April: Mother is putting my new second hand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.

27 April: Old father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead.

Whatever else one wants to think about Stephen’s and Joyce’s flight—whether or not one feels they have paid sufficient attention to their drowning brother below, even if one has, like myself, drowned in Finnegans Wake and sometimes thinks it a kind of forgery that will lead all fiction to a watery grave, even if one is angry or crude enough to attribute, as I do not, Joyce’s actual blindness to his having flown too close to the sun—one cannot deny that this Icarus, unlike Auden’s and Bruegel’s, has made a fine flight.

I do not think I have anything very useful to say about the trajectory of the flight itself, but I would insist that it is not sustained, as Stephen says, only by the “arms” of “silence, exile, and cunning,” or by the kind of eaglehood implied when Stephen seems to celebrate the artist who “like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails” (p. 215). It is sustained also by the “arms” and “embraces” he notes in his diary on 16 April and the kind of verbal embrace he has been able to give the wading girl. I would argue also that although each epiphany leaves Stephen lonelier than the last, as Harry Levin has noted, it is also true that his loneliness helps produce the epiphanies, that they assuage his loneliness, and that, as for many artists, they are the kind of embrace he seems to thrive on. Moreover, as was true of those lonelinesses described earlier by Graham Greene, Mrs. Ramsay, and Elizabeth Bowen, Stephen’s has generated a tenderness that he can more easily express in his epiphanies than in his actual
encounters. Along with all the self-indulgence of his own flight, his embrace of the girl is perhaps most marked by such tenderness.

Let me turn to another romantic young man, William Wordsworth, and to an embrace embodied in a somewhat different form—a poem: “The Solitary Reaper.”

Behold her, single in the field,
Yon solitary Highland Lass!
Reaping and singing by herself!
Stop here, or gently pass!
Alone she cuts and binds the grain,
And sings a melancholy strain;
Oh listen! for the Vale profound
Is overflowing with the sound.

No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome notes to weary bands
Of Travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands;
A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
In springtime from the Cuckoo bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

Will no one tell me what she sings?—
Perhaps the plaintive numbers flow
For old, unhappy, far-off things
And battles long ago;
Or is it some more humble lay,
Familiar matter of today?
Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain,
That has been, and may be again?

Whate’er the theme, the Maiden sang
As if her song could have no ending;
I saw her singing at her work,
And o’er the sickle bending—
I listened, motionless and still;
And, as I mounted up the hill,
The music in my heart I bore,
Long after it was heard no more.
It is a lovely poem, probably too fragile to withstand the kind of questions I cannot keep from giving it, most of which are embraced by the general question whether the poem might not be more accurately titled "The Solitary Reaper and the Solitary Gleaner." No more than Stephen does this apparently solitary observer approach the girl; in fact, the embrace is even less reciprocal, for unlike the wading girl who is aware of Stephen's gaze and gazes back at him, this girl remains oblivious of her observer, who watches and listens, motionless and still, and then departs, carrying away her music in his heart. Again I wonder to what extent I have been involved in an act in which an other has been honored and left inviolate in her private space and to what extent an act in which she has been spied upon and exploited for the excitation of her beholders. And more than in Stephen's case I am implicated, for the narrator has urged me to "Behold her," "to stop here, or gently pass," and to "listen." Even if he had been less explicit, his tone of intimacy would produce a similar effect. He assumes my identification with him. I am not supposed to feel, as I am with Stephen, that the artist's response is at all egotistic or excessive. I can take comfort, of course, in the fact that we have been gentle and respectful voyeurs, more ruminative than sensual. We have not snapped her photo for an advertisement—for a brewery or the Scottish Tourist Agency. Still, she is unaware of being observed and listened to. I am not at all sure she would like it if she knew.

What shall I make of the fact that the narrator does not know what she is really singing about? I do not want him to go up to her with a tape recorder as do some modern hunters of rural songs. I do not like to think of him approaching and saying: "Pardon me, young lady. Are you singing of 'old, unhappy, far-off things' or 'some more humble lay' about your 'natural sorrow, loss, or pain' of today?" But I wish he were not quite so nonchalant about the issue, which from her point of view may matter a great deal. She may not share the narrator's ability to take comfort from suffering, to turn "melancholy" and "plaintive" strains into "welcome notes" and to find a voice carrying such tones "thrilling." This is probably somewhat unfair, especially in view of his
"Mount[ing] up the hill," and of his use of the word "bore" in the next-to-the-last line, which do suggest he is carrying some weight; but I cannot overcome my uneasiness about Wordsworth's ability "to find / strength . . . In the soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering." It is fair to say that the poem does turn painful and unhappy things into a lovely music, both hers and the poet's. And even if I do not let myself be thrilled, I am coaxed into accepting that transformation. One cannot quite say that her song and his have become euphemisms for suffering, but they are a form of unguent and anodyne.

Again, much of the impact of the scene comes from the aloneness of the participants—despite my presence, alone at the beginning, alone throughout the embrace, and alone at the end as he wanders off. Were he not alone, neither she nor her music would have the same space to reverberate in. The narrator does not say he is lonely in his aloneness, but one feels quite sure that it is largely his loneliness that so heightens his awareness of her, sharpens her poignance for him, and perhaps even adds a touch of tenderness toward her.

In this poem he is more explicit:

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.
Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,
They stretched in never ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I at a glance
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves beside them danced; but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee;
A poet could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company;
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. 

Here the poet has achieved two kinds of lonely embraces (three if one counts the writing of the poem), first gazing and gazing at the “crowd,” the “host” of daffodils, gay in their “company,” and then using them often when in vacant or in pensive mood as company for his heart to dance with. The inward eye provides the bliss of solitude in part because it can bring such company, in part because it can do so without sacrificing the solitude.

I want to be mean enough to suggest that even here there is a kind of exploitation: the daffodils have been made into dancers and a “show” for him and brought him “wealth”; and he uses them to brighten his life. But of all the kinds of exploitation done to flowers, it is surely among the least pernicious, for he has not cut them, dug them, hybridized them, forced them into bloom on his window sill, or planted them in his own garden. He has not even taken possession of them as he does of the little Celandine or given it the responsibility of engendering thoughts that lie too deep for tears. He is not, as I am doing here, planting his flowers partly to take their place in a later bouquet.

Again it is the aloneness, and loneliness, that heightens the awareness of the other and permits the closeness of the embrace. Wordsworth has said that poetry “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” and involves a contemplation of the emotion until the tranquillity disappears and the emotion itself actually comes to exist in the mind. When he engages in that activity, the poet is also and again alone, embracing not an other but only his own emotion, the figure or flower that generated it, present only at the distance of a flash upon an inward eye.

So far the embraces have been relatively uncomplicated. The lonely artist has gazed at his object, seized some of the
wealth it has had to offer, and gone off alone with his plunder. A more puzzling encounter is the one in Virginia Woolf's story "An Unwritten Novel," the title of which seems both an invitation and a warning. The story begins with the sentence "Such an expression of unhappiness was enough by itself to make one's eyes slide above the paper's edge to the poor woman's face—insignificant without that look, almost a symbol of human destiny with it." The setting, we soon learn, is the compartment of a train on its way to the seaside resort of Eastbourne, and the woman is sitting opposite the narrator, who is observing her from behind a newspaper. She reports that the woman "shuddered, twitched her arm queerly to the middle of her back and shook her head" and that she moved her head from side to side "with infinite weariness." The narrator's *Times* is "no protection against such sorrow as hers. . . . She pierced through my shield; she gazed [how the lonely ones love that word] into my eyes as if searching any sediment of courage at the depths of them and damping it to clay. Her twitch alone denied all hope, discounted all illusion" (p. 9). When the other passengers have all left, there are a few moments of literal encounter as the "unhappy woman" speaks of "stations and holidays, of brothers at Eastbourne, and the time of year" and then, looking out the window, mutters several fragmentary thoughts including "My sister-in-law." This last is spoken with a bitterness of tone "like lemon on cold steel," and as she spoke "she fidgeted as though the skin on her back were as a plucked fowl's in a poulterer's shop-window" (p. 10). When she falls into silence, seeming again "the most unhappy woman in the world," the narrator tries to prompt her with the phrase "Sisters-in-law," "for if there were a reason [for her unhappiness], and if I knew the reason, the stigma was removed from life."

The woman responds only by pursing her lips and rubbing hard with her glove at a spot on the window pane "as if she would rub something out forever—some stain, some indelible contamination." The spot remains, however, and she sinks back in her seat "with the shudder and the clutch of the arm I had come to expect."
At this point, how fully or literally, how much from empathy or identification, it is hard to tell, the narrator repeats the woman’s actions. “Something impell[s]” her to rub at a speck on her window with her glove, a speck that remains:

And then the spasm went through me; I crooked my arm and plucked at the middle of my back. My skin, too, felt like the damp chicken’s skin in the poulterer’s shop-window; one spot between the shoulders itched and irritated, felt clammy, raw. Could I reach it? Surreptitiously I tried. She saw me. A smile of infinite irony, infinite sorrow, flitted and faded from her face. But she had communicated, shared her secret, passed her poison; she would speak no more. Leaning back in my corner, shielding my eyes from her eyes, seeing only the slopes and hollows, greys and purples, of the winter’s landscape, I read her message, deciphered, reading it beneath her gaze. (Pp. 10–11)

Immediately following this, the narrator leaps into vivid imagining of what the woman’s experience is going to be when she arrives in Eastbourne, or, to be more accurate, renders her own stream of consciousness as she invents the story. “Hilda’s the sister-in-law. Hilda? Hilda? Hilda Marsh—Hilda the blooming, the full bosomed, the matronly,” she begins and develops events in considerable detail as the woman, whom she names Minnie, arrives alone by taxi at Hilda’s house, is patronized by her sister-in-law, is greeted stiffly by Hilda’s children, and climbs to a little bedroom looking out over the roofs of Eastbourne where she unpacks “a meagre nightgown” and “furred felt slippers,” “avoid[s] the looking-glass,” and finally sighs and sits by the window (pp. 11–12). After some uncertainty as to what she is thinking about—“(Let me peep across at her opposite; she’s asleep or pretending it; so what would she think about sitting at the window at three o’clock in the afternoon? Health, money, bills, her God?)”—the narrator has her pray and perhaps “rub the pane too, as though to see God better” and decides she is praying because she believes she has committed some crime, perhaps dallying to look at some ribbons twenty years ago and rushing home, “but too late. Neighbors—the
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doctor—baby brother—the kettle—scalded—hospital—
dead—or only the shock of it, the blame? Ah, but the detail
matters nothing! It’s what she carries with her; the spot, the
crime, thing to expiate, always there between her shoulders.
‘Yes,’ she seems to nod to me, ‘it’s the thing I did’ ” (p. 13).

The narrator traces Minnie’s consciousness as she takes a
walk, feels herself stared at, decides to return to her sister-in-
law’s by a back way, and begins to feel that everything she
sees is somehow saying her name, when suddenly Minnie
fools her by thinking “Eggs are cheaper,” and the narrator
comments, “That’s what always happens! I was heading her
straight for madness, when, like a flock of dream sheep, she
turns t’other way and runs between my fingers. Eggs are
cheaper. Tethered to the shores of the world, none of the
crimes, sorrows, rhapsodies, or insanities for poor Minnie
Marsh; never late for luncheon; never caught in a storm
without a mackintosh; never utterly unconscious of the
cheapness of eggs. So she reaches home—scrapes her boots”
(pp. 14–15).

Then there follows this most interesting passage, interest­
ing not only in its metaphors of flowers and flight (so unlike,
and yet not totally unlike, Vittorio Mussolini’s flight above
the rose) and in its emphasis upon the narrator’s aloneness,
but also in her odd sense of separateness and connection with
Minnie (“I, too, on my flower”).

Have I read you right? But the human face—the human face at
the top of the fullest sheet of print holds more, withholds more.
Now, eyes open, she looks out; and in the human eye—how
d’y you define it?—there’s a break—a division—so that when
you’ve grasped the stem the butterfly’s off—the moth that hangs
in the evening over the yellow flower—move, raise your hand,
off, high, away. I won’t raise my hand. Hang still, then, quiver,
life, soul, spirit, whatever you are of Minnie Marsh—I, too, on
my flower—the hawk over the down—alone, or what were the
worth of life? To rise; hang still in the evening, in the midday;
hang still over the down. The flicker of a hand—off, up! then
poised again. Alone, unseen; seeing all so still down there, all so
lovely. None seeing, none caring. The eyes of others our prisons,
their thoughts our cages. Air above, air below. And the moon and
immortality. . . . [author’s ellipsis] Oh, but I drop to the turf!
Are you down, too, you in the corner, what’s your name—
woman—Minnie Marsh; some such name as that? There she is, tight to her blossom; opening her hand-bag, from which she takes a hollow shell—an egg—who was saying that eggs were cheaper? You or I? Oh, it was you who said it on the way home, you remember. . . . (P. 15)

Most fascinating of all, perhaps, is that sudden metamorphosis from butterfly to hawk—a bit of a Robinson Jeffers's hawk, celebrating its aloneness and freedom from human entrapment ("None seeing, none caring. The eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages"); a bit of a voyeuristic Goethe eagle, who carries his prey into the realm of the good, the noble, and the beautiful; a hawk that finally drops to the turf, a bit shaken by her flight, to rejoin her human companion.

The narrator then goes on with her story of Minnie Marsh. She gets her back to Hilda's house, has her open the door and put her umbrella in the stand and then becomes sidetracked by a need to invent in some detail a commercial traveler named James Moggridge who takes his meals with the Marshes on Thursdays and is hidden behind the aspidistra in the living room as Minnie enters. The narrator goes so far as to set in motion a Moggridge household and tries to create a wife for him but fails—or decides not to—that she describes with wonderful whimsy: " . . . and his wife a retired hospital nurse—interesting—for God's sake let me have one woman with a name I like! But no; she's of the unborn children of the mind, illicit, none the less loved. . . . How many die in every novel that's written—the best, the dearest, while Moggridge lives. It's life's fault" (p. 17). A moment later, however, the narrator accepts the claims of life and art and enters Moggridge with a strangely Whitmanesque sort of penetration: "I come irresistibly to lodge myself somewhere on the firm flesh, in the robust spine, wherever I can penetrate or find foothold on the person, in the soul, of Moggridge the man. The enormous stability of the fabric; the spine tough as whalebone, straight as oaktree; the ribs radiating branches; the flesh taut tarpaulin; the red hollows; the suck and regurgitation of the heart; while from above meat falls in
brown cubes and beer gushes to be churned to blood again—and so we reach the eyes” (pp. 17–18). Having reached his eyes, she has them look through the aspidistra at Minnie, who strikes him as a “wretched, elderly female,” but he responds to her twitching with a bit of sympathy. Moggridge soon rushes off, however, despite the narrator’s attempt to hold on to him, at which point there is a curiously sober passage that perhaps indicates something of the importance these verbal embraces actually have for Virginia Woolf. Just after Moggridge departs, she writes, “We shall never meet again. Moggridge, farewell!” (p. 18), and postpones her imaginative flight back to the top of the house where Minnie is waiting, to think:

How the mud goes round in the mind—what a swirl these monsters leave, the waters rocking, the weeds waving and green here, black there, striking to the sand, till by degrees the atoms reassemble, the deposit sifts itself, and again through the eyes one sees clear and still, and there comes to the lips some prayer for the departed, some obsequy for the souls of those one nods to, the people one never meets again.

James Moggridge is dead now, gone forever. (P. 19)

With this she returns to Minnie, who is sobbing over the emptiness of her life and feeling that she can face it no longer. But the narrator then remembers some of Minnie’s smaller consolations and has her pick up her glove with the worn thumb and begin darning it. From this point until the train arrives in Eastbourne, the narrator is very much attached to Minnie and on her side. She comments on how firm her stitches are and on how proud she must be of her darning; she wants nothing to disturb her as she dars. When Minnie has finished her mending, and with pursed lips and chin held high seems to be preparing to go downstairs to have things out with her sister-in-law, she writes: “Here’s the crisis! Heaven be with you! Down she goes. Courage, courage! Face it, be it! For God’s sake don’t wait on the mat now! There’s the door! I’m on your side. Speak! Confront her, confound her soul!” (p. 20).

Suddenly the train is at Eastbourne and the narrator is
startled out of her imagining by the presence of the “actual” woman (“Oh, I beg your pardon! Yes this is Eastbourne”). She helps the elderly woman with her luggage, and chats with her, thinking, “But Minnie, though we keep up pretences, I’ve read you right—I’m with you now”; and when the luggage is all on the platform, “But why do you look about you? Hilda won’t come to the station, nor John; and Moggridge is driving at the far side of Eastbourne” (pp. 20–21). The woman says she will wait by her bag, “‘that’s safest. He said he’d meet me. . . . Oh, there he is! that’s my son’ ” (p. 21; author’s ellipsis), and the two walk off together. At first the narrator is confounded: “Surely, Minnie, you know better! A strange young man. . . . Stop! I’ll tell him—Minnie! Miss Marsh! . . . Oh, but it’s untrue, it’s indecent. . . . Look how he bends as they reach the gateway. She finds her ticket. What’s the joke? Off they go, down the road, side by side. . . . ” Then she is dismayed: “Well, my world’s done for! What do I know? That’s not Minnie. There never was Moggridge. Who am I? Life’s bare as bone” (p. 21).

And then there is this remarkable paragraph with which the story ends, remarkable, in part, because again one can hear in this so very English lady’s voice so much of what Whitman liked to think of as his own American voice.10 But remarkable for many other reasons including what strikes me as a note of nervousness, even desperation, along with the whimsy and elation of its tone.

And yet the last look of them—he stepping from the kerb and she following him around the edge of the big building brims me with wonder—floods me anew. Mysterious figure! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where tonight will you sleep, and then, tomorrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges—floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that. The white light splutters and pours. Plate-glass windows. Carnations; chrysanthemums. Ivy in dark gardens. Milk carts at the door. Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons; you, you, you. I hasten. I follow. This, I fancy, must be the sea. Grey is the landscape; dim as ashes; the water murmurs and moves. If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it’s you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it’s you I embrace, you I draw to me—adorable world! (P. 21)
Obviously this is a story that will support a wide variety of interpretation and rumination, especially about its commentary on the relations between art and life, fiction and reality. It can, after all, be viewed as a story by a real author about a fictional author who is writing a novel about a woman with whom she is sharing a train compartment, a woman who is fictional to the first author and real to the second, whose fictional re-creation of her turns out to be incorrect—and so on. With enough ingenuity one could play the mirror images against one another in a way to dazzle oneself with one’s own cleverness. Those who know Virginia Woolf’s essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” may find it hard not to relate the story to the concerns she expresses there about the problems of character portrayal. And those who know her story “The Looking Glass” might wish to compare the two stories, particularly in relation to the way the two narrators react to their incorrect imaginings and to the change in the second narrator’s feeling about her imaginative seizure—from an impatient sense that her “quarry” concealed so much that “one must prize her open with the first tool that came to hand—the imagination” to the view that such talk of “‘prizing her open’ as if she were an oyster” is “impious and absurd.”

What interests me most here, however, is the spaces between all the women, the ways both authors (Virginia Woolf and her fictional narrator) have accomplished their embraces from a distance, and the ways the other person (object?) is handled and mishandled. To some extent, perhaps more than I have conveyed in my summary, the story is playful, both in tone and plot, in many respects a traditional comedy. It is built on error that is corrected by a sudden reversal, and both characters achieve happy unions, the woman with her son, the narrator with her unknown figures and adorable world. But it has its darker side, one that I believe is not only the product of my own less than rose colored glasses.

The woman in the carriage looks to the narrator like “the most unhappy woman in the world.” She seems to move her head with “infinite weariness.” And she does suffer appar-
ently from a highly visible and unpleasant twitch. She makes a small effort to close the distance between herself and the narrator by chatting “palely and colourlessly,” but then subsides with a twitch into silence, which apparently lasts until they arrive at Eastbourne.

The narrator seems even less able to close the space between herself and the other passenger. At first she folds her newspaper into a “‘shield,’ impervious even to life.” Before she and the woman are left alone in the carriage, the other travelers in the compartment have left one by one except for one man. As the train enters the Three Bridges station, she wonders, “Was he going to leave us? I prayed both ways—I prayed last that he might stay” (p. 9). She apparently has nothing to say to her companion, whose conversation seems pale and colorless, except to prod her once with the phrase “sisters-in-law” in an effort to learn the reason for her unhappiness—not with any eye to give her sympathy, to say nothing of assistance, but because, as she puts it, “If there were a reason, and if I knew the reason, the stigma was removed from life” (p. 10).

When the woman does not respond, she leans back in her corner, shields her eyes from the woman’s eyes and in her aloneness, like artists and lonely children do, she invents imaginary beings to occupy her thoughts. By such an act, she does, in one way, people her world and reduce her isolation; but in the very act, she at the same time lengthens the distance between herself and the flesh-and-blood (though fictionally so for us) woman who actually shares her compartment. One cannot even say that her imagining has been a kind of connection with that woman or valid act of sympathy or empathy, for as the story makes so patently clear, the Minnie she has invented is not the woman who has been sitting opposite to her. At the end of the story, the narrator is elated, full of readiness for new verbal embraces (of the incorrect sort we have just witnessed?); but she is still alone. No one seems to have met her at the station.

Not only is the narrator’s connection with her imaginary figures greater than with her traveling companion, but she
has greater sympathy and concern for them. She seems far more upset by the departure of Moggridge or even of his wife ("that unborn [child] of the mind") from her life than she does by the departure of the woman. She is able to join and cheer for the fictive Minnie Marsh when she has imagined her into confronting her sister-in-law. But when her companion, whom she had thought perhaps one of the loneliest and unhappiest women in the world, turns out to be lucky enough to have a son to laugh with and walk down the road side by side with, she seems incapable even of a moment of pleasure for her, not even a glimmer of it. All she seems capable of feeling is distress at the dissolution of her imaginary figures and momentary collapse of her fictive world. When she does cheer up, there is still no sympathetic pleasure for the woman; the excitement is about the potentiality for creating and embracing new imaginary people.

In a way what I am doing here is absurd and unfair. Her quiet withdrawal when the woman refuses to tell her story is surely far better than Miss Lonelyhearts' response when he twists the arms of the old gentleman who refuses to tell his. Far better even if one thinks of her imaginings mostly as a form of voyeurism in which she is using the woman for purposes of emotional and intellectual self-excitation. I do not really wish her to be a Scobie, determined at all costs to be her sister's keeper. I do not even think she can be accused of turning "quite leisurely away from the disaster." But, at the same time, I have no satisfactory way of explaining to myself why the narrator, the author, and I myself have been permitted to move with quite so much ease, even pleasure, from an expression of unhappiness so great it seemed to announce the most unhappy woman in the world to the adoration of unknown figures in an "adorable world." It is possible that Virginia Woolf wants the reader to worry about this, but I do not think so. At the same time, however, I am not sure that I hope she did, for much about her life and death suggests those verbal embraces helped keep her alive so long as she was able to imagine them.
Whatever the form of these artists’ embraces, whether sharp and sudden epiphanies like Stephen’s or more extended observations like Wordsworth’s or Virginia Woolf’s, whether tinged with adolescent sexuality or more sober passions recollected in tranquillity, they seem marked by a peculiar aura of loneliness, a peculiar degree of fascination with the imaginary creations and a peculiar degree of distance from them. The artist cannot ever really touch those phantom creatures. Yet without them “life is bare as a bone.” And something similar is true of the verbal embraces of countless other artist figures, ranging all the way from such youthful dreamers as Thomas Wolfe’s Eugene Gant or Sherwood Anderson’s George Willard to such aged ones as Thomas Mann’s Gustave Aschenbach, who dies in the midst of such a lonely embrace.

None of this is surprising when we remember that art, especially writing, is a peculiarly lonely profession. The writer must do his work alone in a room, except for imaginary companions who cannot return his embraces, and who sometimes, like those of Baldwin’s Vivaldo Moore, do not even seem to trust him and refuse to surrender their privacy. Real people and real connections quite literally threaten to deprive the writer of his imaginary ones. One need not give that predicament quite so desperate a cast as Sherwood Anderson does in his story called “Loneliness,” where the child-man artist figure gives up his wife and children to live with his imaginary friends and, when deprived of them by another real person, whimpers and complains, “I’m alone, all alone here. . . . It was warm and friendly in my room but now I’m all alone.” One can put it as E. M. Forster does when he writes: “Estimable is mateyness, and the man who achieves it gives many a pleasant little drink to himself and others. But it has no traceable connection with the creative impulse and probably acts as an inhibition on it. The artist who is seduced by mateyness may stop himself from doing the one thing which he, and he alone, can do—the making of something out of words or sounds or paint or clay or marble or steel or film which has internal harmony and
presents order to a permanently disarrayed planet.” Or one can put it as lightly as Walter Ong does when he writes that “the person to whom the writer addresses himself normally is not present at all. Moreover, with certain exceptions . . . he must not be present. I am writing a book which will be read by thousands. So, please, get out of the room. I want to be alone. Writing normally calls for some kind of withdrawal.” The wives and children of most writers could give powerful though not quite so happy testimony about this very elementary condition—that writing is a solitary activity, to perform which the writer must cut himself off from actual people and spend a good part of his life with imaginary ones. I sometimes think one could almost define writers as being people who have made a profession out of loneliness, have continued into adult life and occupation the lonely child’s talent for making up imaginary companions. At the very least, they have converted loneliness into solitude. Not all feel quite so isolated as Hawthorne, whose testimony we read earlier, or as Joyce, who describes his youthful counterpart Stephen Hero as “very lonely,” as living a “strange life—without help or sympathy from anyone,” and as feeling “different from others,” “happy only when he was . . . alone or in the company of phantasmal comrades.” But I have never known a writer or read of one whose childhood was not marked by some special intimacy with loneliness.

Many writers, I believe, would assent to this revealing formulation of Rilke’s, assent with respect both to the origins of their need to become artists and their highest hopes for their art. Immediately preceding the passage in question, Rilke has been speaking, somewhat as Bertrand Russell did in “A Free Man’s Worship,” of the foreignness and indifference of Nature, a Nature who “knows nothing of us . . . whatever men may have achieved, no man has been great enough to cause her to sympathize with his pain, to share in his rejoicing.” And he continues:

The ordinary man, who lives with men, and sees Nature only in as far as she has reference to himself, is seldom aware of this prob-
lematic and uncanny relationship. He sees the surface of things, which he and his like have created through the centuries, and likes to believe that the whole earth is concerned with him because a field can be cultivated, a forest thinned, a river made navigable. His eye focused almost entirely on men, sees Nature also, but incidentally, as something obvious and actual that must be exploited as much as possible. Children see Nature differently; solitary children in particular, who grow up amongst adults, foregather with her by a kind of like-mindedness and life within her, like the smaller animals, entirely at one with the happenings of forest and sky and in innocent, obvious harmony with them. But just because of this, there comes later for youth and maiden that lonely period filled with deep, trembling melancholy, when they feel unutterably forlorn, just at the time of their physical maturing; when they feel that the things and events in Nature have no longer and their fellow men have not yet, any sympathy for them. Spring comes, even when they are sad, the roses bloom, and the nights are full of nightingales, even though they would like to die. . . . And, on the other hand, they see people, equally strange to them and unconcerned, with their business, their cares, their successes and joys, and they do not understand it. And finally, some of them make up their minds and join these people in order to share their work and their fate, to be useful, to be helpful . . . whilst the others, unwilling to leave the Nature they have lost, go in pursuit of her and try now, consciously and by the use of their concentrated will, to come as near to her again as they were in their childhood without knowing it. It will be understood that the latter are artists: poets or painters, composers or architects, fundamentally lonely spirits who, in turning to Nature, put the eternal above the transitory . . . and who, since they cannot persuade Nature to concern herself with them, see their task to be the understanding of Nature, so that they may take their place somewhere in her great design. And the whole of humanity comes nearer to Nature in these isolated and lonely ones. It is not the least and is, perhaps, the peculiar value of art, that it is the medium in which man and landscape, form and world, meet and find one another. In actuality they live beside one another, scarcely knowing aught of one another, and in the picture, the piece of architecture, the symphony, in a word, in art, they seem to come together in a higher, prophetic truth, to rely upon one another, and it is as if, by completing one another, they become that perfect unity, which is the very essence of a work of art.

From this point of view the theme and purpose of all art would seem to lie in the reconciliation of the Individual and the All, and the moment of exaltation, the artistically important Moment, would seem to be that in which the two scales of the balance counterpoise one another.19
Although the passage speaks eloquently enough for itself, I would underline its description of the adolescent sorts of forlornness and yearnings that help shape the artist and usually remain a part of his consciousness, what Weiss has called "loneliness's diffuse driving restlessness, its compulsion to locate an intimate other whose identity may as yet not be known," "that condition of objectless pining, of pining for a kind of relationship rather than for a particular person." That condition we have witnessed already in some of the verbal embraces of Joyce, Wordsworth, and Virginia Woolf, that "desolation of loneliness" of Richard's in The Morning Watch that found so delicious the "sad and soaring weight" of the images and meanings of Christianity. The passage illuminates also some of the consequences of the artist's loneliness for art itself, which I shall want to touch on shortly—the extent to which it defines experience in terms of drama and polarities, to which it is informed by yearnings for connection and unity, and to which such connection or "reconciliation" is presumably achieved in a "moment," a moment and reconciliation, we should notice, that is in virtually the same breath spoken of as a "perfect unity" and a balancing of counterpoised scales. The passage also, though more delicately than is often true, reveals one of the more ugly consequences of the artist's lonely origins and later separateness, his contempt for ordinary life and the ordinary man.

Perhaps equally illuminating, if not more so, in the unself-consciousness of its adolescent egotism, is this effusion of Moustakas:

I want to begin with the lonely child in me. Standing alone. Walking on the edge of darkness. Entering the night. Sitting quietly in the sunlight. I can remember and I can feel the sense of being separate, of wanting to be separate and know me. Sometimes the only way was to escape into the woods, a woods sparsely populated with dwarfed, shaggy trees. Yet when I closed my eyes and sat silently, I could feel the wind; I could hear the chirping of the birds; and I could imagine the beauty of the forest, the mountains, and the sea. Sometimes I watched the movements of the clouds and, through my own self, created images, shapes, and forms that brought a sense of wonder into my life. In that solitude, a spirit arose, a passionate urgency to be who I am—in poetry, in dance,
in story and song. It was not only my own unfolding, my own
destiny that was at stake, not only my own listening to me, but it
was also my awareness of misfortune—the poverty, sickness, and
death in the world—and my fervor to create a truly human, full
life everywhere. I wanted to laugh, to create joy, to plunge into
the moment fully, to savor everything; but I was also aware of
how long it takes to finally make it, to fully encounter life. I felt I
would have to wait forever. I was impatient to live now, but there
were always barriers to overcome and caution on all sides.
Then somehow the exciting moment arrived and at last I
entered wanting to remain there forever. For a time I experienced
the enduring nature of life and felt the timeless quality of love and
its spontaneity and freedom; I felt reborn into a real knowledge of
myself and others. That was it—to have the serenity and the pas­sion all at once. . . .

“To have the serenity and the passion all at once,” the
simultaneous possession of the self and others. Put so it
sounds intolerably greedy. But that is what Stephen Dedalus,
Wordsworth, and Virginia Woolf’s narrators wanted in the
episodes we have viewed, and found a way of getting through
their lonely embraces. Probably it is what most writers have
sought, and to some degree received, from their art. And
readers too.

There has been more than enough talk already of the
alienation of the artist in this century, but I do not think
enough recognition has been given to the inevitable isolation
and separateness of any artist, even the most gregarious and
socially integrated, and to the effects of such aloneness upon
the works of art themselves. The bare fact that writers are
people who have chosen a peculiarly lonely profession and
are engaged in a verbal and imaginative seizure of the world
more than in an actual one would, alone, suggest that there
would be profound biases in the ways they think, feel,
and write about nearly all the crucial aspects of human
experience.

Many of these effects I have already touched upon, per­
haps belabored: the attractiveness of verbal and imaginative
embraces with their affinities on the one hand with voyeurism
in which the other is used essentially to excite the observer and, on the other, with a respectful, sometimes tender or even reverential maintenance of distance in which the other retains a kind of inviolability; the attraction of the unknown other who can be embraced without consequences and the ease with which others are abandoned; the way in which the embraces serve both to alleviate and preserve the aloneness; the tendency of some artists to be more concerned with their own consciousnesses and internal dramas than with the external events that they are witnessing or participating in.

Let me wallow briefly in some further speculations. To what extent does the artist's loneliness account for his frequent reliance upon epiphanies and moments of connection or unity? In his fine study of the epiphany in the modern novel, Morris Beja explains the increasing reliance on the epiphany as due in part to the "contemporary preoccupation with the sense of isolation, the despair of ever having true contact with another human being, the fear of always remaining an outcast and stranger among the rest of mankind," and goes on to say that "no one theme is more important than this in the epiphanies experienced by such outsiders as Marcel, Stephen Dedalus, Joe Christmas, Eugene Gant, and Septimus Warren Smith (or the six characters in search of an end to loneliness in The Waves)." But I do not think he sees quite how fully the epiphany suits the condition and needs of any writer. Since that condition is one of separateness, the connections established are likely to be no more than matters of moments—moments felt as possessing peculiar intensity not only because of their brevity but because they break the loneliness and are in such startling contrast to it. The loneliness also provides the space and quiet in which the revelation can reverberate and the time and space for it to be savored. The "moment," itself, is separated and isolated—lonely, so to speak—insofar as it is a moment thrown out of connection with the flow of time or even separated out from oblivion. Epiphanies also have the advantage of usually not requiring any action. From a certain point of view, they can be seen as helping artists avoid the complex-
ities and responsibilities of connection. They carry off their rich emotions with no possibility of real intrusion by a real other, and they can indulge themselves, as a Thomas Wolfe or a Virginia Woolf so often do, in the sense of the ephemerality of the connection—which they much more than life or time have manufactured. Like writing itself (and reading also), such moments offer a safe and separated kind of connection. Stephen need not worry about what to say to the wading girl. Thomas Wolfe’s young heroes can embrace their fellow men from behind the insulation of a moving train. I am being unfair, I know, but I cannot forget how easy it is to have epiphanies. There is a kind of lonely adolescent (I was one of them) who requires only a little darkness, a setting where he is on the outside looking in, or inside looking out, and an unknown other, and no possibility of actual involvement, to feel a sense of profound kinship with that other or even all mankind, and to tremble with pride at his capacity for heightened awareness. Beja notes the extent to which the epiphanies of Thomas Wolfe and his heroes are self-deceiving, self-congratulatory, and unconvincing, his compassion “more rhetorical than real,” but he does not seem to see that what they are exhibiting is only a peculiarly transparent form of an activity at which many writers and adolescents excel.

I wonder too about the extent to which the loneliness and separateness of the writer is responsible for certain kinds of distinctness gained by the other in most epiphanies and moments of connection. I am thinking of the sharpness and clarity of the wading girl in Portrait, or the way Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay and two of their children appear to Lily Briscoe in To the Lighthouse during a sudden moment in which they have taken on special meaning and weight: “... There was a sense of things having been blown apart, of space, of irresponsibility as the ball soared high and they followed it and lost it and saw the one star and draped branches. In the failing light they all looked sharp-edged and ethereal and divided by great distances” (pp. 110–11), or of the kind of distinctness
that, as we shall see later, nearly everyone and everything has
for Agee in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a distinctness
that surely is gained in part by his sense of the profundity of
the gap between himself and the tenant farmers. Without the
spaces in these encounters, the other would not appear so
sharp and clear; the loneliness, especially of the adolescent
sort, adds the sharpness and poignance, and sometimes a sen­sory distinctness that must come from that sexually tinged
longing that is so much a part of the adolescent’s “deep
trembling melancholy.” It is the adolescence, also, that often
helps fuse the sexual and religious poignancies, as occurs
when Stephen encounters the wading girl or when Sally Seton
kisses Clarissa Dalloway on the lips and there is a “radiance,”
a “revelation,” a “religious feeling” (MD, pp. 52–53).

I wonder too if there are not connections to be discovered
between the kinds of distinctness produced by the artist’s
states of separateness and connection and the kinds of trans­figurations of nature William James describes as occurring in
the eyes of melancholics and those who have undergone con­version experiences and entered the faith or “assurance state,”
a state often preceded by a melancholy sense of separateness
and isolation: for the newly enlightened “an appearance of
newness [that] beautifies every object; the precise opposite of
that other sort of newness, that dreadful unreality and
strangeness, which is experienced by melancholy patients”26
where the world “looks remote, sinister, uncanny. Its color is
gone, its breath is cold, there is no speculation in the eyes it
gleses with.”27 That religious kind of newness and beauty
seems present in Stephen’s vision of the wading girl, whom he
does after all regard with worshipful eyes and who causes his
soul to cry out “Heavenly God!” though the outburst is one
“of profane joy.” Something very like that other dreadful
strangeness characterizes the opening scene of the next
chapter in which he is sitting unhappily in his kitchen drain­ing “his third cup of watery tea to the dregs” and “chewing the
crusts of fried bread that were scattered near him, staring into
the dark pool of the jar. The yellow dripping had been
scooped out like a boghole and the pool under it brought back to his memory the dark turfcoloured water of the bath in Clongoes" (p. 174).

I wonder whether there is not a relation between the kind of space the writer occupies and the kind he sometimes gives his characters. Is it not likely that those whose temperament and profession require a fairly large inviolable space around themselves would view others as possessing a similar sort of space and therefore even a kind of sanctity. And would not that aura of inviolability also make the viewing of the other more exciting, more voyeuristic, since one is looking into a private space. I should think the writer would have a special anxiety about this also because like other lonely people he would himself both want his space to be violated and dread it. For those like Hawthorne, Virginia Woolf, and Agee, for whom both the other and the self seem particularly inviolate and mysterious, I imagine such relations work with special force.

It would seem likely, in fact, that the temperamental and professional aloneness of writers would have a profound effect on the ways they treated all matters involving separateness and connection and lead to a deep preoccupation with those matters. One might expect that the loneliest (Hawthorne? Melville? Conrad? James? Kafka? Joyce? Woolf?) would define their fictional worlds largely in terms of those dimensions. One might expect many writers to place an exaggerated emphasis both on the dangers of connection and upon the value of imaginative connection. It would seem likely that their stories and novels would be informed with marked ambiguities and ambivalence with respect to this issue, that both loneliness and connection would be shown as damaging, and that they would dramatize connections revealing odd mixtures of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It is not surprising that a reading of all the fiction written since the Victorian period and even including much before then would probably lead a Martian to conclude that nearly all connection between humans was extremely difficult, that it nearly always involved great pain or brought disastrous conse-
quences, and that it was best achieved in the imagination when there was no actual encounter between the parties.

Nor is it surprising that so many writers exhibit a fear of action and a bias in favor of contemplative over active people. It is understandable that they write books like *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *The Secret Agent*, *Nostromo*, *Heart of the Matter*, and *The Idiot*, to say nothing of *Don Quixote*, where efforts to intervene in the lives of others are shown to be disastrous, or books like *The Plague* and *Diary of a Country Priest* where those who do help others in meaningful ways are destroyed in the process. Even George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, who does eventually learn to give without destroying others or herself, is shown, finally, both as a failed Saint Teresa and a failure in curious ways of her own.

And one would expect to find, as we so clearly do, a great many artists attacking the world and ordinary life—as repressive, stultifying, dishonest, prison-like, injurious to sensitive selves. This has been so persistent and obvious a phenomena, expressed with everything from the violence of a Jeffers to the passionate aplomb of Wordsworth's “The world is too much with us,” that illustration is hardly necessary. But let me offer one; a passage from a letter from Flaubert to Louise Colet:

> Humanity hates us; we do not minister to it and we hate it because it wounds us. Therefore, we must love one another in Art, as the mystics love one another in God, and everything must grow pale before that love. Let all life's other lamps (which stink, one and all) vanish before that great sun. In an age when common bonds are snapped, and when Society is just one huge brigandage (to use official parlance) more or less well organized, when the interests of flesh and spirit draw apart like wolves and howl in solitude, one must act like everyone else, cultivate an ego (a more beautiful one naturally) and live in one's den. The distance between myself and my fellow men widens every day. I feel this process working in my heart and I am glad, for my sensitivity towards all that I find sympathetic continually increases, as a result of this very withdrawal.  

Such a diatribe requires no answer perhaps, apart from the observation that such distance also led Flaubert—if one is to ponder over his “Madame Bovary, c'est moi”—into a curi-
ously close (incestuous? hermaphroditic? masturbatory?) verbal embrace.

✦

I think that the questions and observations I have been making in the past several pages or so are valid and worth further exploration, but I am also uncomfortable about them, and feel that I have been engaged in an unsympathetic sort of exercise in which the writer has become a subject of study, potentially statistical, rather than a human, and his loneliness and disconnection a causative factor rather than a condition of a person. For most writers, writing is a way of connecting, of easing a loneliness that may be in part self-imposed and treasured, but also painful. Probably they would not write if they had no desire for connection.

Many writers—perhaps most—also see their writing as something that may help reduce the loneliness and separateness of others. Too many have expressed such a hope to give other than the briefest sampling. Of the most modest such statements I know of, I like especially E. M. Forster’s “only connect” and Anderson’s quiet “Perhaps I was vain enough to think that these stories told would, in the end, have the effect of breaking down a little of the curious separateness of so much life, these walls we build up about us.”29 Of the more famous and grandiloquent ones—by Blake, Shelley, Whitman, and Faulkner, among others, I think I am at least put off by the rhetoric of Conrad’s statement that, confronted by the enigmatic spectacle of life,

the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal. His appeal is made to our less obvious capacities: to that part of our nature which, because of the warlike conditions of existence, is necessarily kept out of sight within the more resisting and hard qualities—like the vulnerable body within a steel armor. . . . He speaks to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity and beauty and pain; to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts,
to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear, which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.  

Of all such statements, I am most moved by this quiet one by Eudora Welty, which grows richer each time I read it and whose final sentence expresses what to me usually seems the best of all possible wishes:

We come to terms as well as we can with our own lifelong exposure to the world, and we use whatever devices we may need to survive. But eventually, of course, our knowledge depends on the living relationship between what we see going on and ourselves. If exposure is essential, still more so is the reflection. Insight doesn’t happen often on the click of the moment, like a lucky snapshot, but comes in its own time and more slowly and from nowhere but within. The sharpest recognition is surely that which is charged with sympathy as well as with shock—it is a form of human vision. And that is of course a gift. We struggle through any pain or darkness in nothing but the hope that we may receive it, and through any term of work in the prayer to keep it.

In my own case, a fuller awareness of what I needed to find out about people and their lives had to be sought for through another way, through writing stories. But away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this, anyway. That my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight.

I hope, finally, to be able to say something directly about the capacity of writing—and reading—to realize such hopes of crossing distance. But first I must face, or at least turn toward, the way in which art may seem to keep at a distance what needs to be close, its power to translate suffering into beauty or at the very least into some tolerable form.