

# Notes for the Writer

Ivo Andrić

It is the lot of the writer to have to deal constantly with details, with petty affairs and the narrowest possible of vistas. However ample and rich and various the work that the writer is creating, however much he reaches for the heights and the breadths, his work is nevertheless fettered to the individual detail, to one scene, one person, a single word. And as soon as the writer attempts to work broadly, having the whole if it his mind, with free and open vistas in front of his eyes, everything becomes shallow and turbid, all at once both details and the whole start to go wrong and get lost. Yet as soon as he comes back to the individual scene, the individual word and sentence, and starts working on them, refining them, he feels that the unity and wholeness of his work invisibly, yet perceptibly, fit together and grow, become brighter and more perfect, with every stroke of the pen. And when the work is once finished, then it becomes anyway quite distinct and separate from the consciousness of the writer, takes on a completely new significance for him, quite different from what it had while the work was going on. It might perhaps be said that for the writer, the work dies on the day he finishes it. Afterwards, what is left is the book.

\*

The main power and the real root of every tale, every individual scene in it, is to be found in a single good thought, a single true image. In this nexus of sentences, it is what the queen is to the hive. When it appears to you, you have to leave everything else and go after

it. In it there is the seed and the germ of everything else. For, the value of that rapidly and illegibly written sentence does not inhere in it alone, but in the copiousness and the facility with which, afterwards, the images and thoughts invisibly linked with it swarm, after it and before it.

\*

In every description or scene, irrespective of their lengths (of three sentences, or three pages), there is always a single phrase on which the whole of the description depends, lost and invisible within it like a fertilising seed. The writer often thinks for days, weeks, of how to express and convey a single psychic motion or a single uncommon scene. He himself feels them well, and sees them clearly, but does not know, and that is the main thing, how to make them accessible, understandable and visible to the reader. From his own point of view, he grasps it all, clearly and vibrantly, but the moment he goes and looks from the reader's point of view, the whole of the image becomes hazy and illogical, and dissolves into confused details. This can trouble and dishearten a writer for a long time, but if he remains faithful to the endeavours of his thinking and the work of his imagination, in one illuminated moment he will find those few words with their clear thread of meaning. And after that, it is all easy, clear and simple, word follows word, sentence fits into sentence. Suddenly, the whole of the image is there before the reader (for it is all about the reader!), real, alive and natural, the only way it can be.

For the reader, the whole of the text is uniform and moulded from a single piece, but the writer, on every re-reading, can feel and recognise those few words of inspiration. He can see them (and only he!) as a little built-in dynamo that brings to life and sets in motion the entire moribund mass of sentences and viewpoints.

\*

There are plenty of days, even whole weeks, when I work little and really achieve nothing, when it seems to me that I have never written anything good or intelligent, and that I never will.

\*

Look at the people working around you; and let's not take any very complex jobs or callings as examples, let's look, say, at a man rowing or digging. How much skill, patience and persistence he needs. Well, is our work inferior to his?

The trouble is that in our work neither good will nor conscious effort can be decisive to the same extent as in the case of the digger or the rower.

\*

After all, even the best writer can only occasion those sensations in the reader that the reader already has without previously being aware of them, that is, he can open up in front of the reader only those vistas that the reader is capable of perceiving.

\*

For some people, words are hard, opaque and immobile things, like a

# m DOSSIER: IVO ANDRIĆ o

wayside stone, and for others, they are transparent, multi-hued, light and variable, like crystals, dew and clouds.

\*

For even a moderately sized tale, and very often for a very short one, quite often enormous effort and very great patience are required. Every attempt to get the thing to end facily and rapidly leads only to failure and disappointment. It is more or less the same as with a pile of stones that have to be taken to another place, some distance off. Only patiently and slowly, stone by stone, can such a job be performed. Nothing can be gained by either cunning or precipitance.

\*

The work of the imagination, difficult and dangerous, always and everywhere, much more so than is usually thought, has one particularly unpleasant and dangerous aspect. — After a long period of hard work, the nerves get into a very particular state which is not of tiredness, rather of exhaustion. You don't feel like sitting or sleeping, you are quivering all over, you want talk, light, and diversion. If an artist does not find at such moments at least something of what the whole of his being is searching for, then he can fall into a fit of brooding, a depression, during which time seems endless, and the earth a desert.

These are tormenting and dangerous moments, when you fall like a plane in a stall.

\*

Over and over again I am convinced that no tale of any slightly larger size can be written at a single stroke, like a letter to a good friend, it has to be done bit by bit, from detail to detail, scene to scene, observation to observation. And without any particular order, sometimes from the end, sometimes from the beginning, sometimes from the end of the tale. For this time and patience are needed. You have to devote the whole of your power and the whole of your attention to every single detail, work on it without thinking

about what came before, or what will come after it, as if it were the only thing that existed.

\*

I have complained about all kinds of things in life, as most people (weak people!) do, of petty illnesses and troubles, the hundreds of difficulties that we meet along our way every day of our lives. I have complained about them all, as others do, sometimes more and sometimes less than others, but there is one thing I have never complained about: the great and sustained difficulty I have with writing tales. And this has always been the biggest and most difficult thing in my life.

\*

When describing things, people or events, one has to operate only in essences. Via forms and the changes in them, but only in essences. You have to speak from the centre of the thing being described; not from the surface, and still less from the point of view of the writer, but from the very heart of what you have chosen as your subject, and what the reader has to see, grasp and feel. — In the writer, there is often that human, that too human, tendency to want to leave the lonely, difficult and dark place from which he speaks, and to cross over to the other, easier, side, to look at his subject at least once with the eyes of the reader. But every such act of desertion is avenged, for at the very same moment "the story dies" and the sorcery loses its power. The miracle and its worshippers both disappear. All that is left is the heavy knowledge and the enormous effort required for the writer to get back to his unenviable position. The biggest and strangest tale is the writer himself. (He is the fire, everything he writes is just sparks. Fire, but on condition that he remains within things, speaks from them, not involved in their superficial and ephemeral games, taking part in nothing.)

\*

Every night I lie in my bed, tired of the day gone by, anxious about the one

that will dawn the following day, reconciled to the knowledge that I am a poor devil, that little has been given to me in the way of days and assets, little joy and still less ability to take joy. I have never fallen asleep without thinking that the blanket on me is only lent, and that the very warmth of the bed on which I lie is given me only briefly for my enjoyment. But this never stopped me from falling happily asleep, or sleeping soundly. It has never once filled me with grief, or bitterness, or envy. On the contrary, realising that everything about me is little, brief and meagre, I have thought long and often about other people and countries, where there is plenty and joy, and where everything endures, overflows and abounds. And thus, as an unearned reward, I had at the same time the immutable wealth of the world, and my own brief, scant and meagre life that is dear to me.

\*

It is not possible to say briefly and simply what it is that gives conviction and credibility to what we describe, that especial stamp by which the reader accepts it as reality, knows it, takes it in, remembers it.

It is not scientific accuracy, nor the faithfulness of description to details, nor is it the reliability of the data, nor the vivacity of the speech nor the beauty of the style. On the contrary, there are sentences, points of view and observations that are lacking in all this, and yet for some reason or other convince, entrance and capture the reader, and remain in his memory, permanent psychological, historical and human documents, while whole books fade and vanish without trace. For example, in the memories of Prota Mateja, alongside many inaccuracies and mistakes as to dates and facts, there are some convincing and stirring passages of this kind.

When in May, 1804 the Serbs marched on Belgrade, the Valjevo army, with which the Prota was, met Karageorge. "I was transporting the army and the cannon. The army was singing, merrily at that. But when Master Black

# m DOSSIER: IVO ANDRIĆ o

George went by, and with the whole of the army on parade: "Welcome to you, brothers!" he called, and when they saw him, and heard his words: "Welcome to you, brothers of mine, Serbian heroes!" there was not a soldier that didn't sing out and many an old man cried tears of joy, to have seen and heard them at last. And by my Deep, I would say that not only did the soldiers sing, but the forester and every leaf on the trees took up the human voice and sang forth, and so with song we came to rest at Ostružnica on May 8."

The realistic and somewhat dry style of the *Prota* is not changed even here. Singing in this case was an important part of the military and political reality, which was the main thing for him, and he described it just as in all the other passages he describes the exhausting marches, the altercations and the pointless waiting. Not a trace of literature. Who sang, what was sung, how it was sung are not said. From popular speech, however, the image of the forester and the leaf on the tree is borrowed, to preserve in it this important psychological moment when people, in their collective enthusiasm and elan spread their arms and are livelier in their movements, when the chest fills, the eyes gleam and the mouth opens all by itself and lets forth its voice in the unstoppable need to shout and to sing. The biological factor of rapture, of the combat and the victory which it senses it is ripe for.

\*  
A certain Roman statesman said to his fellow-citizens: "Oh, Romans, how many days and nights I endeavoured to deserve a word of praise from you! A man does invest so much effort for those he despises."  
For writers who claim they despise the public.

\*  
In the literary discussions of our youth the following words were often heard: "Nothing of this is going to last!" or "This will last!" and so on. This is no longer said. Fear of certain words is

one of the signs of age or ageing. We do not say anything, because we know, or suspect, that nothing lasts. We have arrived at the place from which this can be seen. All things simply are, endure, and disappear. Everything that we have dreamed of and done, hale and pale in the battle with oblivion. This evening too my mind extends to the times in which there will be no trace of us or our works, to people who will not be called by the same name as us, who will not speak our language, and here too hopelessly seeks a hint of my dream, a sound of my music.

\*  
The writer, when he is in his right place, is the inner voice of things and the interpreter of the relations among them; he gives them a character, a name and the right place in the universe he creates himself and which we, the readers, willingly accept.

\*  
The reader must be amazed at nothing. His thinking goes along with events, develops, grows, falls, pauses. Looking back, peering into the future, linking what has been with what is to come, wondering and prating about events and the causes of them, all this undoubtedly means a poor writer, a writer, that is, who is not a writer, who is doing a job for which he has no vocation, talent or sense. A writer has no feeling, he is feeling. What is called sensibility is the death of every art.

\*  
The wittiest and most accurate words are not heard among people, but in silence, over the thirsty page. The loveliest characters and lands are seen not in the world, but in loneliness, in a closed space without gleam or outlook. It is here that the singularity of the pains and the onerous dualism of the writer's vocation lie. The writer is racked between doing and observing. And since as we have seen he can be without neither one nor the other, in other people's eyes he seems sometimes alien to the world of action, sometimes disloyal to the world of

thought.

Observation of the world and knowledge of life are absolutely necessary to the writer, but only as a condition. In fact, both the world and life are created in good moments, when you are alone, calm and imperceptible, with your paper and your gift of seeing and hearing, closed off and dumb, to define and allot, helpless and alone, to grant and to shine, poor and modest.

\*  
The satisfactions that a writer can have from his own work are more infrequent than the reader imagines, and if they do exist, they are of a completely different nature. Readers, placed in the antipodes of the writer, are completely wrong. This is as if someone were to imagine that the sun could enjoy the beauty of its own setting.

Of the few pleasures that a man has from his own works, one is the finding of analogies with other writers, accidental encounters with similar thought processes and the same solutions. A reader cannot have this enjoyment, firstly because he is placed differently with respect to these solutions, secondly because he will at once think of a borrowing, someone taking something from someone else. However, it is not a case of borrowings, but of fortuitous similarities, only the writer knowing that it is not a plagiarism at issue.

In my piece of prose "Mara, milosnica" there is a passage in which Velipasha, sitting at a session of the Majlis, instead of listening to the arguments and objections of the Bosnian beys, looks pensively through the window at the summer clouds and listens...

Today, reading Saint-Beuve, I found this verse:

*Laissez moi .... écouter ma blessure.*

\*  
I don't think there is a writer who has never had the thought: how shall I appear in the eyes of the reader in a hundred years time? I have had this thought too, but the question never referred to the essence, always to the external form, language, style, spell-

ing and grammar. Because about what I have written, I have no fear or concern; there might be sinful and improper things, but there are no mistaken or insincere things. But when it is a question of the externals, then I have the occasional doubt and anxiety. (I say occasional because if it were to happen very often one would not be able to compose two complete sentences.) While I am putting a word or a turn of events down on the page, I suddenly see them printed in some literary magazine, but in inverted commas, as the present generation ironically prints certain words and viewpoints of Milovan Vidaković or Simo Milutinović. And I can see the face of the reader of 2038 bent over my words, with a slight sneer but no expression of malice. Then I would like quickly to rub out or retract everything I have written, but seeing it is impossible, I too bend and laugh with the reader, quietly and harmlessly, I laugh at my own piece of writing, but at the same time at what was written a hundred years earlier, and what will be written a hundred years later, I laugh at all writing, and every written word and expression, every reader and every judgement, and, finally, at smiling and laughter.

November 4, 1938

\*

Write fast or slow, vigorously or cautiously, as your thoughts take lead you and your feelings carry you, and don't stop without a need, and do not break the magic of the moment of inspiration that will perhaps never return. Write without wretched compunction and false shame, with the simple sincerity of nature itself. Write, and know that a moment has been given you from the ocean of time, as has the thought, image or word in it that will never come to either you or anyone else ever again in that shape. Write freely and unconsciously, the way your

breathe. But...

But, when this moment has gone, pure, precious, fleeting and inexplicable as the moment of fertilisation, and when you come face to face with your manuscript, which has now got its own place in this world of ours, in which, with all the unease and disorder, order and responsibility nevertheless rule, then come to it without blind parental love, cold and inexorably stern, sparing neither it nor yourself, grudging neither strength nor time. Bend every sentence ten times over your knee, stand on every word with the whole of your strength, test its carrying power, because it is from these fragile words and feeble sentences that a bridge has to be built that will unerringly and imperceptibly take the reader over the abyss of senselessness and lack of awareness into a land of life and reality, which you have managed to depict for him and for others. Test your sentence with eyes and ears, rinse your mouth with it several times, as a wine merchant does when he wants to buy a certain wine. Say it silently, under your breath, and aloud, say it five or ten times (and yet don't count!) in various moods, and at various times of the day. Think about it before sleeping, and at night when you wake up and lie awake. (Is there anything better and more sensible a man could employ his sleeplessness on?) Ask whether people who speak your language at a certain time of their life would really utter your sentence and acknowledge it as theirs. Say it for them, and find out whether it is true and accurate, whether there is anything missing, or if it is overloaded. And when you find that everything is as it should be and decide that you are pleased with your own work, still do not stop; now do not stop, for there is nothing in the work of the writer more dangerous and unsafe than this self-satisfaction. It is a poor counsellor and a perfidious guide, that has taken many the wrong way. Do not forget for a moment that

your work needs a reader to cheer and to satisfy, and that you are a writer, and that in the reader's satisfaction alone do you have the right to seek your own or, to put it better and more accurately, that it is not at all a matter of your satisfaction. Bear in mind that you are a harbinger of truth, that is, of reality. Through you, the message of that great human reality is transmitted. It has picked you out from among other people to the extent (and only to the extent) that it has confided to you the important mission of putting the image and meaning of a certain truth in front of the eyes of people who speak your language, a reality that they would otherwise never see in its entirety or completely understand.

\*

When a writer in the course of his narration abandons the tone of the narrator, neglects the action, and starts holding forth about his hero in abstract words, explaining and imaging those views and intentions of his that cannot be gathered from his actions, that is the end of artistic creation and endeavour for the writer, the end of artistic enjoyment for the reader. — It is as if we were looking at some life-size portrait, taking up the best position and an adequate distance, and before we had put our impressions in order and arrived at a judgement, the figure being observed were suddenly to come to life, to abandon the pose given him by the painter, to come down out of the frame, walk up to us, take us under the arm and start talking with us about colours, lines and the whole of the technique and the contents of the work of art which we were looking at in him until that moment, and which of course we can no longer see.

In other words, it is unnatural, and self-contradictory.

*Translated by Graham McMaster*