

DOUGLAS BARBOUR / Errata-tat-tat

(in order, one sentence from each section)

Now, what about readers of literature? There is no audience, but there is the text; one is alone except for the text. Of course, any text is an intertext. The art in fiction, as in poetry, is that part of language that is not communication. Here is the difference between the serious artist and, say, the politician, the businessman, or the social scientist: the more the serious artist gets to know about people, the less able he is to manipulate them. This is how intertextuality works best, as a series that looks accidental, that makes an order by apparent coincidence, synchronicity, let us say. In the latter days of realism too many authors quit paying attention to writing as they attended to the world as referent. Maybe you can get the world right in your book for one sentence, and (but) then the world changes sentence by sentence because now your sentences are in it. Book as intricate know rather than blacktop driving. The next sentence is the next sentence to read, continuity, conjunction, narrative. The story proposes destinations but nobody gets to them. Any stray material, once absorbed, becomes part of the solution. In the event of a poem the time is determined and the space varies; in the event of a novel, the opposite is our experience. The enemies of 'self-indulgent' writing favour standard practices, including things like description. We always have to put up with the social responsibility of the terms—how they would sneer when they assigned you to the 'avant-garde,' or the 'experimental.' It seemed the logical way to escape common thought, which must be not good enough, and it was an instinct. That's thinking, not thinking about. Realism is a belief as well as a practice, and reality is aware by now of how it approaches, and thus where to go and hide. We now choose our traditions. An experiment proceeds from a theoretical position, and results most often in a mental product to be discarded or amended. Socially and politically I believe that I am a romantic leftist; but when it comes to the composition of literature I am an elitist. There are many readers who are made anxious by writing that is open. Some of them say that any text is defiled as soon as it is written down; that is a credo for some people. They looked forward to our dispensing with the page, to the time when we would sit and think, and be regular writers. That is a great story. Writing can be so nice when it is a snap. It just goes to show how easy description is when you've got a prairie. Not to get somewhere, let us say, but to be

getting there. Robert Kroetsch said, "The minute you ask answerable questions, you're beat as a novelist." What a strange and problematic position to be in! So I believed it. A gift from the gods is not a license to rule. The problem with the historians, or let us say the way they chose to work, is this: they did not study what people are, but what they did. We tried history, and it beat us; that's why we came here. The best poetry is written in fear. Most of what we might discover is bypassed when we treat human sentences as message-bearers, dispensable when they reach their target. The writer's words call the fictional place into being. Nature is not a teacher. That's probably true. Read on. There is something interesting about literary history as opposed to normal history. I am interested in forgetting. But of course the whole book, written after that walk, is made of looking back. In these days people call that "signature." Margaret Laurence loved attaching other people's words to her books. Mother Earth or mother tongue. Here is the anti-teleological anarchism the nationalists and other totalitarians hate. Obvious symbolism, for example—overly muscular workers, flags carried into the wind—promotes the arrival of cynicism with the advent of maturity, an unfortunate coincidence. We are probably saying that in our century, since the advent of aerial bombardment and International Modernism, inherited literary tradition has gone the way of inherited rule. In doing all this, we probably become educated, in a way. We no longer read the metanarrative of the gods, nor even of the modernist substitution, the authority of art. Often, I think, the serious writer must ask himself whether writing is a useful way to spend his time. He is never there any more. *The Martyrology* is a shipment that will never get here from headquarters. In fiction, narrative is produced by the turning of the page, which is an option every time. It frightens them. I remember that in American war movies the G.I.s were always saying they had just gone through hell, whereas in a British one Jack Hawkins would emerge from a collapsed and flaming field hospital and murmur, 'Gerry's a little restless tonight; bit of a rum go, wot?' But what would you do if you turned to a page, and it was a mirror? That is to say, the writer laid down those sentences, those lines, and now the reader picks them up from their surface. Storytellers said 'Once upon a time' to put listeners into hypnotic alpha-rhythms, and 'they lived happily ever after' to ease them out. In moments such as that, literate people start to look for meaning. Yes, there is a type of chic cynicism there, but also a modesty that becomes the serious poet. This is the meaning of a life-poem, that each moment is a reading in all directions, that you cannot outlive the closure. In

Lawren Harris's paintings we knew we were not looking at what the land looked like—we were looking at what painting looked like if one did it without interruption of sentimental attachment. Now consider fiction. Growing up when I did and where I did, I had the hunger for the sure hand of the realist text. I cannot shake the notion that there are essentially two views of poetry. A snow carnival and a prohibition carnival—very Canadian paradoxes. That is why authors have always said that they do not fully understand their own works. It may be related to the fact that when you read a book, narration is made by exercising the option of turning the page, every time. Here is the trouble with confessional poetry: the confessional poet replaces poetry's past with his own. When you are trying to pull the wool over the eyes of your parent or your spouse, that person will often refer to your invention as a 'likely story.' Speaking of marriage, as he always was doing, he said that love and strife kept things in balance. I am presented a choice. But I have to say this. To me it means more than it means anything. The trees in Northern Ontario (it is western Ontario, but that name is saved for southern Ontario) are pretty small. I will remind myself to write local histories for foreigners. So we can read them, of course, before it is too late. I just loved the rare crisp new textbooks, any subject. One loves only form, said Olson, and form comes into being when the thing is born. I am a west coast member of Oulipo. The Open Road is still free from the friendly squares. Some writers are very good with titles. What would I rename *The Dead Sailors*? Well, Toronto's official art believes itself to be Canada's official art. The tracker, with an occluded wisdom, can read something that is invisible to the rest of us. And there are so many more books, already in one's rooms, or within walking distance. It was a fine romance, the affair between the reference and the designated world. What are you looking at, they will ask you in college, and you will say that you can supply only the name of something you think you are looking at. You do not need a reference to nature to create non-nature, or art. The tradition is formed from an accretion of the avant-garde. Ezra Pound's translations, as much as his poems, work to make ground for subsequent artists to work upon as do his essays—a plan, a project). Pound is apart (and consequently beyond), one of the few titans who stand astride all the rest of the work being done in this age. Ezra Pound once said to his daughter Mary: 'I don't want you to understand; I want you to learn the damn thing!' What of a writer who delays closure?

Hey George, always shooting as the hippest.