

# The Reader as Author

GILLIAN BEER

**Contributor:** Dame Gillian Beer is King Edward VII Professor Emeritus at the University of Cambridge and a former President of Clare Hall. She is a Fellow of the British Academy and of the Royal Society of Literature as well as an invited member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and of the American Philosophical Society. A number of universities have given her honorary doctorates including Oxford, the Sorbonne, Harvard and St. Andrews. Her books include *Darwin's Plots* (third edition, CUP, 2009), *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford University Press, 1996), *Virginia Woolf: the Common Ground* (Edinburgh University Press, 1996) and *Jabberwocky and Other Nonsense: the collected and annotated poems of Lewis Carroll* (Penguin Classics, 2012). She is General Editor of *Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth Century Literature and Culture*.

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In Milton's great seventeenth-century epic poem *Paradise Lost* both God and Satan are described as 'author'. As the story of creation is re-told God is called 'author and end of all things' while elsewhere Satan is 'the author of all ill'. The difference is marked: Satan can start things but not control their outcome; God is the aim as well as the origin. His authorship describes an arc from initiation to willed conclusion.

Human authors are much more like Satan than God: they can start things but not control consequences. Once the book is published it goes out of their control, into the anonymous realm of the reader. Publishing, making public, both inscribes the name of the author in the work (if he or she wishes) and yields it up. In recent years we have seen an effort by both authors and publishers to prolong the hold of the person behind the work on the market by which the work is distributed: readings, signings, appearances, interviews have all foregrounded the continuing presence of the author. The link between human person and made work has gathered intensity exactly in the face of new technology that more and more disperses authority: not only copyright but the intactness of text as a good are now in question. But readers flock to hear, see, and meet the author.

In the course of our conversations we shall, I am sure, encounter authoring in a number of different roles and modes, some of them overlapping:

- Authoring as performance
- As labour
- As commodity
- As necessity
- As nexus
- As impersonation
- As retrospective invention
- As transaction
- As possession
- As conversation
- As God

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Some of you will have further suggestions for that list. In my argument here I concentrate on the author/reader relationship, and particularly on the reader as author. The reader shares the weight of literary labour with the author, but sometimes the reader's burden is very light (an adventure story that makes you turn the pages fast) and sometimes very large, though the writer's is yet larger (Proust would be an example, or Kant). The degree to which the reader is responsible for the text also varies considerably by genre. Dramatic productions import settings and intonations that are generated by the particular director and actors. Stage directions stabilise interpretation to some degree (Juliet is undeniably on a balcony; the characters in 'As You Like It' are in the forest of Arden, pictured in a variety of styles by each stage designer). In the theatre we are submitted not only to the initiating words of the play but the visual imagination of director and designer – and the darkened but present company of others in the audience. Actors and audience breathe in common.

In reading a novel, however, the single reader generates the images. We each import landscapes from our own particular repertoire of places; we endow the characters with faces and bodies from the range of our particular awareness – and all this despite, or alongside, any indications offered by the author. To that degree any fiction or memoir is composed jointly by writer and reader. The reader's childhood in particular provides places, sounds, scents, haptic images, that bury themselves deep in the author's text and are released by that one reader alone. Film versions of novels constrain that individual response and compose an often irritating alternative scenery to the one long held. Moreover, film versions show us characters from the outside, with faces. Consciousnesses that we may have long occupied from the inside, without ever asking exactly what they look like, are now separated from us in our role as spectators. In solitary silent reading the blurred exterior of characters is part of imaginative indwelling by the reader. However, it is now the case that many readers come to novels by means of film so that the scenery and faces with which their reading is informed have already been defined by others, rather than generated out of their own memories. Equally, novels of the nineteenth century were often illustrated, for example those of Dickens, so a collaborative image between writer, illustrator and reader, might be formed: whether those images defined the reader's inner theatre is now impossible to know.

Does the reader have equal freedom to compose in all written texts? No. Fiction may be the freest. Memoir is constrained by the evidence of the lives of others; poetry by the intricate mesh and crossing of systems: line ending, cursive syntax, rhyme, metrical demands keep the reader from straying on the loose even while their complexity energises the imagination to perceive gaps through which further meaning strains to become present. Argued non-fictional prose calls in evidence, logical sequences, to temper the reader's attempts at free association.

I've always enjoyed Vernon Lee's remarks in her essay 'On Style':

But the instrument played upon by the Writer, namely, the mind of the Reader, has not been arranged for the purpose of thus being played upon, and its strings do not wait to vibrate in obedience to the Writer's touch, but are always on the point of sounding and jangling uninvited.

That mismatch or slippage between writer and reader gives much of the zest to reading. Even within the sentence different voices play their responses in the reader's head: recalcitrant, collusive, open, curious, and enquiring. We want to know. We want to believe – but we relish doubting. Part of the reader's power is in resisting. In descriptions of reading practice we hear

much about immersion, but the sceptical dance of thoughts as they touch the page is also implicit in the choreography of the text.

But who is this 'we', this 'I': this self? The reader is both a silent individual bringing the text into being anew – and differently – in this particular place, moment, and society, and also a product of the language of the text, not to be identified entirely with the person who goes about her business in the daily world. Moreover the reader is multiplied; the person generated by differing texts through the same pair of eyes is not identical. As we read Jane Austen we may find ourselves light-footed, observant, quick to perceive absurdity, always abreast of the jokes. That is, we are endowed by the writing with enhanced capabilities, *with which we read* – one of the reasons Jane Austen is permanently so popular. She flatters the reader by making us, while we are reading, more perspicacious than our ordinary lives suggest we can possibly be.

Do such effects persist? – that's a troubling and persistent question: does reading George Eliot enhance our compunction and our insight in our daily lives? Is there positive feedback from the activity of the reader? Is ethics served by reading? Or is it the flare of senses that survives: reading Gerard Manley Hopkins or John Keats, Elizabeth Bishop or Leonora Carrington, is it the richness of sense pleasure that most continues and awakens our future? These large questions surround my argument today but must be set at a distance beyond the hour so that I may concentrate on the differing modes in which the reader acts with and as author, and the differing degrees to which the reader *resists* and so composes an ulterior world.

For example, does the reader believe and invent differently between fiction and memoir? Memoirs offer the hope of special knowledge, of facts, of face-to-face encounter, of insight into another's life, perhaps also of assimilation into it too – hence the fascination of celebrity autobiography. Crucially, we know that this is a story about another person, told by that person; it is not ours: distance is implicit and it may temper, or inflame, the reader's desire for possession. First person telling and authoring promises the most intimate relation to the writer and can accommodate, without denying, the unreliability of that presence. Memoir in particular reveals, exactly because it attempts to disguise, the *fictive* nature of the dialogue between writer and reader. We appear to be in conversation. Collaboration is implicit. We listen. But we are not heard. The book does not listen to us.

It may even be, then, that the dialogue provoked by both memoir and fiction could be described as a dialogue of the reader with herself, the harmonics multiplied and prompted by the writer. The dialogue could not take place without the writer having written, and the text enduring, but there is no direct two-way response between text and reader. If this seems obvious, consider how much of the labour of authorship is focused on disguising the *lack* of direct two-way communication. The reader is inveigled into believing that we have entered the text and become part of it. We can certainly roam in it at will but it will not listen to our voices. To that degree, the writing is obdurate and the reader is a creature of the text. But such a description is too brutal to be sufficient.

In this collaboration or struggle, how do writers make use of the reader's doubting self? Crime-writers rely on it. We know that tricky clues are being offered that we must beware. And a feature of fiction now rather out of fashion – the happy ending – overwhelms doubt in gratification, though Jane Austen two pages from the end in *Northanger Abbey* takes the risk of drawing our attention to our own fore-knowledge and our scepticism:

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the

bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.

The shrinking number of pages is an effect now somewhat muffled by Kindle.

The reader has means to assert his or her own authority, some subtle, some blunt. For example, the apparent collaboration of the author with the reader in prolepsis has some contradictory effects. Prolepsis, being told ahead of the event, entangles the reader as well as giving us authority. Knowing in advance what is about to happen makes us also understand our helplessness as the book moves towards its determined happening. The only way out is to shut the book. Indeed, I've been driven to that vain but satisfying refusal by certain powerful books that tell us what we can't escape: Hardy's novels do it and so does Orhan Pamuk in *Snow*. Necip will die, his beautiful blue eyes blasted – and quite soon. 'No he won't, not in my time', I thought, and closed the book for ever. I've not been able to forget the coming murder, but I've refused to take part in it. I quail before the author, crowned with his Nobel prize, but I am here the obdurate reader as alternative author. I cannot and would not cancel the book, but I can refuse the author's authority. The book survives the truncated reading. Indeed, perhaps I have worsted myself and remember that promised death the more vividly because I did *not* read it. The recalcitrant reader parts company with the author and trudges down her own path but finds it winds back into his domain: stand-off, impasse, honours-even, perhaps.

These general reflections can take us now into the next phase of this argument about the roles of the reader in authoring a text to concentrate on two examples that will, I hope, illuminate the differing relations of the reader. In one case, that of Charles Darwin in *On the Origin of Species*, the first person of the author is given prominence and becomes a means to persuade the reader of the book's argument, through virtual witnessing and through a shared liberal discourse that places scientific materials at the reader's disposal for assessment. In the other, Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass, and what Alice found there*, the author is affirmed as a companionable oral voice in the written text, evoking a storyteller addressing the reader, while the actual writer is hidden behind complex onomastics: not Charles Lutwidge Dodgson but Lewis Carroll. Both writers have produced intimate texts that have yielded prolific and contrasting after-stories.

Darwin is a strong example of placing the author as person in the text. That declared presence shifts relations with the reader in a number of strikingly different directions. Darwin was already a well-known travel writer when he published the *Origin*, as well as an admired scientist who had published important volumes on geology, crustacea, and plants. The publication of what we now call *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), twenty years before the *Origin*, marks his emergence as an individual author. Originally the work was the third volume of *Journal of Researches*, under the editorship of Fitzroy, captain of the *Beagle*, and was the ship's official account. Darwin's volume, unlike those by Fitzroy, attracted general readers, was published separately, was pirated (a mark of popularity), and went into a second somewhat revised edition in 1845. So readers approaching the *Origin* in 1859 already had an image of the author as travel companion and explorer, an image established twenty years previously. He opened pathways for us to accompany him to exotic places and little known tracts of the world and of natural phenomena. A favourite, almost magical, word for him, both in the *Voyage* and the *Origin*, is 'When'. The temporal marking leads the reader to follow a trajectory that makes room for both Darwin's experiences and our imagining, in an achieved accord, even as he recognises the blankness that precedes the experience: 'all these together produced a scene no one could have imagined'. In the passage below, the sequence of 'when' marks not only

temporality but extreme shifts of perspective for the reader's seeing eye. He and his guides are high up in the Chilean Cordillera,

When about halfway up we met a large party with seventy loaded mules. It was interesting to hear the wild cries of the muleteers, and to watch the long descending string of the animals; they appeared so diminutive, there being nothing but the bleak mountains with which they could be compared. When near the summit, the wind, as generally happens, was impetuous and extremely cold. On each side of this ridge we had to pass over broad bands of perpetual snow which were now soon to be covered by a fresh layer. When we reached the crest and looked backwards, a glorious view was presented. The atmosphere resplendently clear, the sky and intense blue, the profound valleys; the wild broken forms; the heaps of ruins, piled up during the lapse of ages; the bright-coloured rocks, contrasted with the quiet mountains of snow; all these together produced a scene no one could have imagined. (p.306-307)

The verbless sequence in that final sentence holds time still; the reader composes a scene stretched beyond our previous imaginative capacities, both independent of and in accord with Darwin's account.

As we open the *Origin*, his writing presents us with a discourse very different from that we are now accustomed to in scientific papers. First person is prominent. Active verbs are frequent. The first sentence of the introduction reads

When on board HMS Beagle, as naturalist, I was much struck by certain facts in the distribution of the inhabitants of South America, and in the geological relations of present to the past inhabitants of that continent.

And the first chapter opens:

When we look to the individuals of the same variety or sub-variety of our older cultivated plants and animals, one of the first points that strikes us is, that they generally differ more from each other than do the individuals of any one species or variety in a state of nature.

First person singular becomes first person plural. The reader is now set alongside, in company with the writer, and invited to bring our own observations into accord with what he declares. Retrospectively, whether or not we already possessed this observation of the greater differentiation within domestic as opposed to wild varieties, we have been granted a knowledge that seems rooted in our memory, rather than learnt for the first time now. Again, he uses that 'when', inviting the reader to compose a parallel journey, through evidence that Darwin will provide.

Darwin is composing a companionate reader as defence against the sceptical or hostile reader also implicit in his argument. He is seeking to produce an ally: ideally an independent, never compliant companion. Darwin claimed that the *Origin* composed 'one long argument'. Argument presumes an interlocutor, perhaps antagonist, or one capable of being persuaded. Certainly a shadow extra Other creeps in with that 'we', another one not wholly to be identified by the reader with him- or herself. The reader resists; the reader complies; the reader identifies; the reader re-makes the text, not only in the light of the evidence provided but also in the presence of an unuttered speaking voice, now speaking inside us. The author as adversary

equals the reader as adversary: the two entwine and collaborate, *within the reader*.

Advancing new ideas one is bound to be in contention with the reader; seeking to persuade, to refute, to be present: Darwin as author is everywhere present. He takes us into the intimate theatre of his relations with ants and aphids:

One of the strongest instances of an animal apparently performing an action for the sole good of another, with which I am acquainted, is that of aphides voluntarily yielding their sweet excretion to ants: that they do so voluntarily, the following facts show. I removed all the ants from a group of about a dozen aphids on a dock-plant, and prevented their attendance during several hours. After this interval, I felt sure that the aphids would want to excrete. I watched them for some time through a lens, but not one excreted; I then tickled and stroked them with a hair in the same manner, as well as I could, as the ants do with their antennae; but not one excreted. Afterwards I allowed an ant to visit them, and it immediately seemed, by its eager way of running about, to be well aware what a rich flock it had discovered; it then began to play with its antennae on the abdomen first of one aphid and then of another; and each aphid, as soon as it felt the antennae, immediately lifted up its abdomen and excreted a limpid drop of sweet juice, which was eagerly devoured by the ant. (p.157-158)

The account leads up to an assertive sentence 'Even the quite young aphides behaved in this manner, showing that the action was instinctive, and not the result of experience.'

The reader impersonates the writer during the experiment, a kind of Gulliver among the Lilliputians, somewhat ill at ease but encouraged by the empathetic language. The length of the intense intervention by the human figure over several hours, speeded up for us by reading process, but marked by all the exigencies to which he is driven, also gives the reader a sense of command, even of superiority. Darwin failed to tickle the aphids accurately enough. They did not believe he was an ant. They would not cooperate. But that failure means that the experiment succeeded in demonstrating what he hoped to show.

The detailed re-performance of the experiment in writing also frees the reader to question to what precise degree the hair mimicked the antennae. Our dissident observations are dramatised in the course of the experiment. Thus, despite our seeming independence as virtual witnesses and sceptical observers, we are led to concur in the outcome. The effect of neutrality, as we observe the observer, persuades us of the falsifiability of the events, if not of the abstraction. We can go and tickle aphids ourselves if we wish. The homely play set in the midst of expansive generalisations helps to yoke the reader to Darwin's side of the argument:

But as the excretion is highly viscid, it is probably a convenience to the aphids to have it removed; and therefore probably the aphides do not instinctively excrete for the sole good of the ants. (p.158)

So this appears to be a highly collaborative text, with that repeated 'probably' in the sentence quoted above, for example, inviting us in to the process of surmise and conclusion.

But a further curious thing has happened to Darwin as Author in relation to his readers. He is disengaged from us and is accorded powers beyond those of description. This provides an example of the confusion between *explanation* and *origination* that is implicit in authorship. Darwin wishes to tell how things have been, and are. He seeks to describe a history of the world without humankind at its centre. But he is understood as himself generating that history, even as being its initiator in a form of godhead, 'author of all things'. He stands in for God and that

insistence is reinforced by the constant representing of him as an old patriarch with a beard whereas when these ideas first came to him and were developed he was an intense eyed young man.

In a further radical twist, it would seem that multiple readers have re-invented the Author who was Darwin in their own image: anarchists and fascists, socialists and free market capitalists, atheists and mystics have all had recourse to his ideas to prove their contradictory ideologies. How is this possible? I have written at large on this question in *Darwin's Plots* and *Open Fields*. I have argued there that Darwin's open liberal non-mathematical language, directed first to his immediate scientific peers but open to reading by any intelligent person, allowed unused or unrecognised aspects of his metaphors (the Great Family, the Descent of Man) to be claimed to feed stories of the rise or the fall of the human, either the level affinities between all forms of life extant and extinct or the survival of the fittest. Natural Selection itself has three elements that will not quite lie level: hyperproductivity, variability (expansion, excess) and selection (controlling, honing). Until the 1870s most of Darwin's publication and research was on geology, barnacles, animal and plant life across the aeons. In his new history of the world there was no special or central place for the human. That void where the human usually stands in writing was rapidly filled up, then and since, by human readers bent on producing their own utopias and dystopias. So although Darwin in the *Origin* drew any actual reader close in to a phenomenological companionship with his own written-speaking presence as Author, the book has proliferated reader-led diverse significations ever since.

In Lewis Carroll we meet a writer who delighted in his youth in multiple initial pseudonyms (V.X., B.B., F.L.W., J.V., F.X., Q.G., K., R.W.G and for more serious poems C.L.D.), until he settles on a heteronym, Lewis Carroll, composed with considerable sleight-of-hand out of his own family name Charles Lutwidge Dodgson : Charles = Latin: Carrolus, becomes Carroll, and Lutwidge, less obviously, becomes Lewis. Dodgson drops away and flourishes alongside in quite a different domain. In his busy professional life as a mathematics and logic don at Christ Church Oxford he was the Reverend C. L. Dodgson and when he wrote testy satires about Oxford controversies he was anonymous. For example, in the poem on the 'Examination Statute' in Oxford each of the initial letters yields a hidden name needed to complete the metre: so, 'A is for A[cland], who'd physic the Masses, / B is for B[rodie], who swears by the gasses'. And so on until we reach the letter I, where the line simply runs 'I am the Author, a rhymer erratic' – no concealment and no revelation, simply *Identity* between initial, name, person, function, and origin: 'I am the Author', anonymous and absolute. Many readers are unaware that the euphonious Lewis Carroll is not the author's birth name – or should we say rather that Lewis Carroll is the Alice author, leaving Charles Dodgson to be another author entirely, writing his works on Euclid and logic.

By a happy chance, though probably nothing more, it is also the case that the letters of Alice's name are hidden in that of Lewis Carroll, as girl's names are often hidden in his acrostic poems. Charles Dodgson also uses his nom-de-plume as a defensive weapon in his attempt to keep his two identities separate, refusing to answer letters from strangers addressed to Lewis Carroll. But he made use of the famous authorial pseudonym to gain publicity when he wrote periodical literature in defence of the anti-vivisection movement.

Carroll first wrote a short form of the work later known as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. This was *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*, which he gave as a Christmas present to young Alice Liddell who had asked him to write down the stories he invented spontaneously on their boating expeditions with friends. The oral and the written, and the tug between them,

endure as a principle source of jokes and insight in the three books (*Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* followed six years later).

The move from *Under Ground* to *Wonderland* involved the primary shift from a single known reader to the anonymous cluster of any and every young or older person. In revising for publication Carroll increases the second person speech tags addressed to the child reader ('you see') and he intensified the vocabulary, to substitute for the speaking voice of the familiar author. Thus he also kept a place open in the text for the adult reader, perhaps reading aloud to the child reader. So in *Under Ground* at the start Alice 'full of curiosity' 'hurried across the field' after the White Rabbit. In *Wonderland*, 'burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it'. Carroll also adds a good many jokes, exclamation marks, and italics for intonation, as well as some of the most famous incidents; in the later version he paces and punctuates events much more exactly, so that as readers we accompany Alice through the process of deciding to drink from the bottle that will make her larger or smaller. Thus the impossible world becomes probable. The speaking voice inside our heads is both our own and the voice of a storyteller addressing us, and each of us is both story-teller to the child reader and child again – or child for the first time half-auditing that other conversation. That is, there is a secondary conversation between writer and adult reader only partly audible to the prime child reader, whom we also impersonate. Yet that child reader is also listening hard to all the interwoven debates. The Alice books are composed for many readers in two waves: read as a child and then read later, as a concentration of child and adult at once, producing strange harmonics. 'For, you see, so many out-of-the-way things had happened latterly, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible.' (13)

The question of names and naming ripples through the Alice books, forming part of a playful and profound enquiry into identity. The reader is freed to slip the changes of fixed identity. Alice fears she might have turned into dreary Mabel, so depleted and ignorant she feels herself to be in the strange culture of Wonderland. She is not prepared to return home as Mabel.

No, I've made up my mind about it: if I'm Mabel, I'll stay down here! It'll be no use their putting their heads down and saying 'Come up again, dear!' [I shall only look up and say 'Who am I, then? Tell me that first, and then, if I like being that person, I'll come up: if not, I'll stay down here till I'm somebody else. (p. 19)

And in *Looking Glass* the questions of naming, species, and estrangement come together in the scene where she enters the wood where things have no names. She worries about the possibility of losing her personal name, and then her class type-name 'Miss'. As the aphasia deepens she enters the shade of a ... "I mean to get under the– under the– under *this*, you know!" putting her hand on the trunk of the tree. What *does* it call itself, I wonder? I do believe it's got no name – why, to be sure it hasn't!" (p.153)

She stood silent for a minute, thinking: then she suddenly began again, "Then it really *has* happened, after all! And now, who am I? I *will* remember, if I can! I'm determined to do it!" But being determined didn't help her much, and all she could say, after a great deal of puzzling, was "L., I *know* it begins with an L!" (p. 153)

L for her surname Liddle, or according to that law where memory starts with consonants rather than vowels, her own name 'Alice', or even that other name, the initial letter of the author of her being, Lewis Carroll.



In that condition of non-entity she meets a young deer, a fawn; by then both have lost their species identity. Now they know only affection and friendship until they reach the edge of the wood where the fawn springs away startled: "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight. "And dear me! you're a human child!" (p.154) This utopic episode relies on losing, not gaining, language and reference. Yet the complex resonances produced by mingling adult and child reader leave the reader free to move across boundaries and to fill words to their utmost capacity. The reader here is *in conversation with*, as well as *engrossed in*, signification. We seem to have invented a world as we read, and discovered multiple fractious identities. In a letter late in his life Charles Dodgson wrote to a group of young girl readers who had asked him about the meaning of his later poem *The Hunting of the Snark*,

As to the meaning of the Snark? I'm very much afraid I didn't mean anything but nonsense! Still, you know, words mean more than we mean to express when we use them; so a whole book ought to mean a great deal more than the writer meant!

Lewis Carroll was authored by the *Alice* books as well as writing them. Charles Dodgson had gained a name in Lewis Carroll but found himself in danger of losing control of his own name. The author becomes a presence that threatens to swallow up the being of the initiator. But the precision and capaciousness with which the reader is invited to invent, augment, converse with the text, with herself or himself, in the *Alice* books, allows us to author them alongside and beyond the bounds of their initial author. So the *Alice* books are everywhere now in our culture: as ballet, film, advertisements, scientific terminology, graphic novel, computer game, and still as book. Readers and non-readers alike have claimed them as their own.

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