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The Writer as Reader – the Complexities of “as”

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Panel: Most Important Book on my Bookshelf

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The Writer as Reader – the Complexities of “as”

Lawrence K L Pun

“The Writer as Reader,” at first glance, seems a tautology self-explanatory and obvious on its own. We all read. We all write. But if writing is to “sponsor reflectiveness, to pursue complexity,” as Susan Sontag says, this clause requires more contemplation.

To begin, I’ve already used Susan Sontag’s words, a sentence I read in her posthumously-published book *At the Same Time*. I do not have to do so; I choose to. Quotation is a well-established convention, particularly in essays and academic writing, sometimes to support your argument or sometimes simply to pay homage to writers you really admire – as I admire Susan Sontag for her wisdom and integrity. As you may know, the word “citation” can mean both “quotation” and “commendation.” But reading and writing is more than the practice of making allusion.

Reading Precedes Writing

To enter into our discussion, let me again use Susan Sontag’s words. In *At the Same Time*, Sontag says, “A writer is first of all a reader. It is from reading that I derive the standards by which I measure my own work and according to which I fall lamentably short. It is from reading, even before writing, that I became part of a community—the community of literature—which includes more dead than living writers.” This suggests a relationship between reader and writer which do not occur, as the title of the book suggests, at the same time. Reading is *a priori*, whereas writing is *a posteriori*. Or put simply: reading precedes writing. It is not just a matter of human development that we acquire our reading literacy prior to writing caliber. It is, rather, a determination. Having been nourished and fascinated by the wise words of so many writers, one, perhaps without warning, decides to change one’s position, one’s identity, from observer to participant, from consumer to producer, from reader to writer, from appreciator to one hoping be appreciated rather than neglected. But this change of position (some would see it as a leap) is not necessary; one can remain a keen reader for his or her lifetime without the thought of taking up writing as a vocation. We all know that a truly enthusiastic reader is no less respectable than a writer.

Taking this line of readers proceeding to writers, one tends to talk about influence. Writers are often asked: What writers influence you the most (especially during your early periods of writing)? An exemplary exposition can be found in Joyce Carol Oates’ *The Faith of a Writer - Life, Craft, Art*, in which the prolific author recounts in detail the influence of certain writers on others (especially the chapter “To a Young Writer”), in such a clarity that literature seems to form a line

of ancestry. While tracing influence has value on its own, a clear lineage seems dubious to me. Influence is more like an enigma that exists always in a vague form. Talking about the world of books that influence him, Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski says: "It's not true that it was only a world of Camus and Dostoevsky. They were a part of it, but it was also a world of cowboys and Indians, Tom Sawyer and all those heroes. It was bad literature as well as good, and I read both with equal interest. I can't say whether I learnt more from Dostoevsky or from some third-rate American writer who wrote cowboy adventures. I don't know. And I wouldn't like to make any such classifications." Perhaps this rings more true in our postmodern context, where the boundary between high and popular culture blurs.

At the Same Time

But reading and writing are more a matter of order and influence. We are simultaneously readers and writers. Things become more complicated when we, as writers, read our own works. Sontag, in John Darnton's collection *Writers on Writing*, again makes writing subservient to reading: "To write is to practice, with particular intensity and attentiveness, the art of reading", or, as Ibsen inscribed: "To write is to sit in judgment on oneself."

You are the first reader of your own work. In terms of judgment, you are in fact assuming a different role, that of the critic's. It is through self-criticism that one continues to rewrite before publication. However, a writer may not be a good reader of his or her own work. We may lose track of our work, being sometimes too benign, keeping redundant words which we feel painful to kill, and sometimes too cruel, tearing apart manuscripts which are good indeed. We know what is best, and yet we are inaccurate readers of our own work. "Insiders lose the way," therefore writers turn to a close friend or a wise editor as an external judge before making work public. Once published, there are writers who decline to return to their works for years. Some even buried them. Jorge Luis Borges, when asked about his earlier fictions, replied: "I destroyed them. They are poorly written." So the writer-as-reader is indeed a complex species of animal.

Far more complex is that the existence of writer and reader in one's body and soul is not symbiotic. The two disturb one another. I always think that this disruptiveness is the essence of a writer. As a writer, you live while you watch yourself living. You write while you watch yourself writing. You are simultaneously the director and the actor. You are the performer and the audience at the same time. You enter constantly into an internal dialogue. Writers are by nature "schizophrenic," not in any psychotic sense, but in the sense that you can't help splitting yourself into two, distancing yourself on a higher level as a reader of your own being, a quality of "self-reflexivity" deemed necessary for writers. The writing self's "heightened awareness of being" counteracts the living self's "forgetfulness of being" (in Heidegger's term). All writers

lead double lives in this respect.

Writer as a “non-reader”

I may have gone too far discussing the intrinsic qualities of writers. Let me return to reading and writing in a textual sense. Can a writer be a “non-reader”? Susan Sontag, again in *Writers on Writing* tells a story I find particularly interesting. While speaking to V. S. Naipaul, she once mentioned a nineteenth-century English novel she loved, a very well-known novel that she assumed everyone who cared for literature as she did would admire. It turned out that Naipaul had not read it. Seeing the surprise on Sontag’s face, Naipaul added sternly: “Susan, I’m a writer, not a reader.”

Naipaul’s point seems contrary to the customary conception of writers. While it is hard to imagine a choreographer who is not a spectator, a composer who is not a listener, a director who is not a film buff, it is not impossible to conceive of a writer who is not an expert reader. In the sphere of words, art practice and art appreciation may differ more. I know a writer who deliberately shunned books for a year – as a kind of retreat after long years of being submerged in books. I know some Chinese writers who were not very well educated and had been deprived of chances to read books, who wrote masterpieces by simply drawing from deep life experiences.

I am not trying to downplay the importance of reading. But if reading is a window leading us into the lives of others, experience is our own treasure house (imagination is another character of the Writing “Trinity”, which allows us to transcend reading and experience for some moments; but for the limit of scope let me just mention it in passing). Contemporary Chinese writer Yu Wah once said, in a book entitled *The Power of Literature*: “I think reading is very important, but not as important as life experience. My life experience shapes me into the type of writer I am.” A Chinese proverb says, “Better to walk ten thousand miles of road than to read ten thousand scrolls of books.” It seems that even many generations ago, the Chinese recognized the disparity between reading and life experience. Of course, the two are not antithetical. As a writer, I always aspire to immerse myself in both senses.

That being said, I must add that while reading can be pursued through our own efforts, life experience cannot be attained the same way. To a certain extent, we are thrown into and live in a certain time and space, bounded by a social ethos and cultural context larger than our own. The venerated co-founder of the International Writing Program, Nieh Hauling, once remarked to Lo Yi-chin and me that we are the fourth generation of Chinese writers visiting Iowa. The fourth generation, compared to the generations that preceded us, lives in a time of peace and prosperity, a time that also seems uneventful, a time free of the political turmoil of Taiwan’s White Terror

or China's Cultural Revolution. In this global era, our lives are specially fitted to be cogs in the machine of our capitalist and consumerist society. We are blessed but pale. It is in this larger paleness that reading plays an even greater role in our lives. If the leg of our experience shrinks, we must strengthen the leg of reading to compensate. Whether we will become a generation of "lame" writers, I don't know. I confess that I am of the reader-as-writer sort, fretting about words in books. I believe, however, that "armchair writers" can still be a good breed, reflecting on mundane lives and ordinary people. I cherish each moment I am able to leave my armchair to wander as a flâneur, if not a pilgrim, as I do now during my expedition to Iowa in this precious moment.