

Author Envy

THE ART OF SURVIVING ONE'S OWN PERSONALITY

SPEND enough time around writers and you're certain to hear it. Often it's barely caught at the tail of a comment, or in certain murmurings, or else heard in an outright hiss or snarl. It can wear the cloak of sarcasm or ridicule or calm contempt; some cloak or other is required because writers, like everybody else, won't admit to it, such is the shame, the self-squashing of the admission. You might detect it at that narcotizing pageant called AWP or at any wholesale gathering of writers: Among the various strata of talent and ambition there's that murmur, that hiss again, a facetious barb. I don't mean from the attendees, lurching toward their first book deal. The attendees of writers conferences, I've found, excepting the occasional repellent nag, are dutifully gracious, earnest, modest in the right moments. I mean the established writers, the workshop conductors or presenters, Cains leering at Abels, authors with a handful of books who have been tagged with the shrugging slur "midlist," or those such as myself who hardly qualify as even that.

In his 1625 essay "Of Envy," Francis Bacon makes some wittily instructive distinctions between different brands of this persistent green pest. At the start he pairs envy with love because "both have vehement wishes"—both are blood-borne, engined from the gut—and then he points out that "Scripture calleth envy an *evil eye*," meaning that the envious look upon the envied with wishes of ruin: Nothing makes the envious happier than to behold the envied in tatters. ("Evil eye" is a nod to the Latin for envy, *invidia*, the literal meaning of which is "to look upon," which is why in Dante's *Purgatorio* the envious have their eyes sewn closed.) Someone who "is busy, and inquisitive, is commonly envious," says Bacon, while someone who "mindeth but his own business" doesn't "find much matter with envy." You can do a quick survey to see how many among us are capable of minding our own business.

Bacon is clear on another point: "Where there is no comparison, no envy." Writers are comparing creatures; we can't help ourselves. We're forever squinting at others in the same genre or gender or age bracket: measuring, tallying, keeping score. Bacon also believes that those who have had "great travels, cares, or perils" will be mostly



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immune to envy, the suggestion being that only those with paltry substance in their lives are petty enough to want what others have. “Nothing increaseth envy more, than an unnecessary and ambitious engrossing of business”: In other words, writers, if we’re overly focused on the publishing business, on who’s publishing what, where, and for how much, on those garlanded ones hogging the applause, instead of focusing on our craft and art and devotion to literature, then envy has probably already eaten into us, weakening our once-firm foundations.

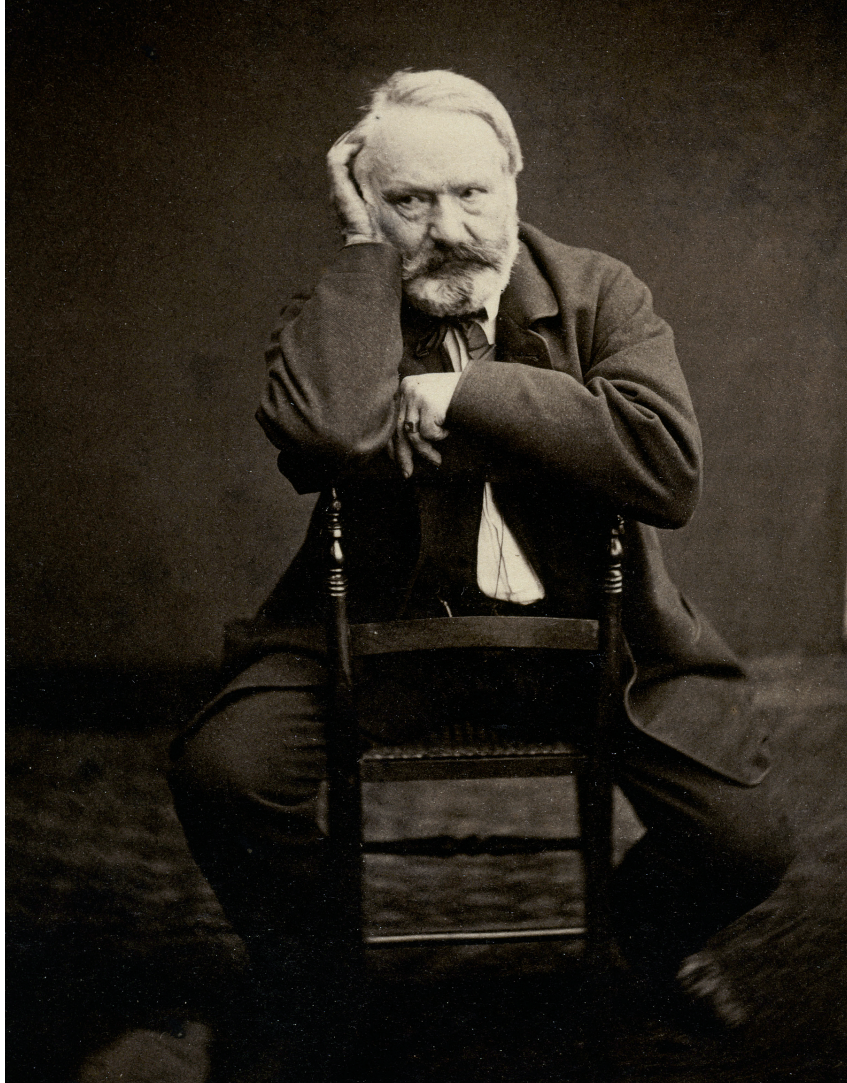
You’ll no doubt find envy festering in every field—I imagine gardeners and grocers must have it too—but if in the arts writers are a particularly envious lot, it might be because their art is not valued by the dominant culture. The movie, music, and TV folk get all the cash and cachet—unless you’re a perpetual best-seller, though if you want their cash you’re going to have to get their prose too, and that’s a self-demotion some of us won’t brook. What’s more, some writers know that there are only so many awards, fellowships, and publications to go around: In a culture in which everyone, it seems, is a writer and not many are readers, there isn’t ample oxygen to sustain too many successes.

There’s something else: Writers, like academics—and for decades now that’s been a distinction without much difference—are easily pricked by envy because the criteria for success seem bewilderingly arbitrary, contradictory, even outright unlitrary. You’d think that the first benchmark for any successful book would be the beauty of its language and the wisdom of its mind—but no. There’s often an echoic canyon between excellence and success. This calls up envy as well as bitterness, envy’s grouching twin, in those authors who labor to make their books *dulce et utile*, in Horace’s formulation: lovely and useful—lovely in word and form, useful in their intelligence. It also calls up insecurity. You might have noticed that lots of writers suffer

from the seemingly paradoxical alloy of insecurity and narcissism, an alloy that enhances envy as nothing else can. I say “seemingly” because insecurity is not the inverse of narcissism; insecurity is its chief ingredient. This puts me in mind of that widely circulated crack, of uncertain provenance, about why academics can be so pettily vicious: “because the stakes are so low.”

Near the midpoint of his excellent 1997 biography of Victor Hugo, detailing Hugo’s exile on the isle of Guernsey, Graham Robb writes this: “Anyone who can imagine Victor Hugo sulking on a tiny island for eighteen years, consumed by impotent envy, has failed to grasp the great feat of mental management which makes his life an inspiring lesson in the art of surviving one’s own personality.” Such memorable constructions there: “impotent envy,” “mental management,” “the art of surviving one’s own personality.” And then Robb quotes Hugo: “The good thing about pride is that it saves you from envy.” *Pride goeth before destruction*, as Proverbs has it, though Hugo considered envy the thornier sin. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Parson calls envy “the worst sin there is” because it chafes “against all virtues and goodnesses.”

Boastful sinner Gore Vidal, with trademark sardonic bite, once uttered a line you’ve probably heard: “Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little,” which I suspect is an allusion, by a different angle, to one of François de La Rochefoucauld’s maxims: “Few are able to suppress in themselves a secret satisfaction at the misfortune of their friends.” Vidal also said: “It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail.” He is either knowingly or unknowingly quoting Iris Murdoch there, who was herself referring to La Rochefoucauld. Somerset Maugham has a version of the same quip. In Samuel Johnson’s imitation of the Roman poet Juvenal, *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, he asserts that the scholar’s life—read: the writer’s life—is assailed by, among other nuisances, “toil, envy, want.”



In his 1997 biography of Victor Hugo, pictured here in 1862 on the island of Guernsey, where he lived during his exile from France, Graham Robb writes, “Anyone who can imagine Victor Hugo sulking on a tiny island for eighteen years, consumed by impotent envy, has failed to grasp the great feat of mental management which makes his life an inspiring lesson in the art of surviving one’s own personality.”

Writers, you see, think about envy, and we think about it because of our susceptibility to its strafing, because it rankles us: envy itself, yes, but also our guilt-wet, know-better awareness of it. No writer *chooses* to be envious, no writer wants it, and yet there it is, bile and all.

In the narrative literature of the West, you’ll find envy almost everywhere you look. In *The Iliad*, the Greeks come within a battle of losing the war because Agamemnon cannot check his envy of Achilles (his thieving of Briseis from Achilles is motivated only partly by lust; the rest is pure envy). Dante has Virgil say that

envy was loosed upon the world from the hellmouth itself. There’s *Othello*’s Iago, of course, seething with triumphant iniquity. In Book I of *Paradise Lost*, a fusion of envy and revenge supply the motive for Satan’s swindling of Eve. In *David Copperfield* there’s Uriah Heap, that repulsive warp. As Joseph Epstein reminds us in his 2003 book, *Envy*, there’s John Claggart, the sinister scallywag from Herman Melville’s *Billy Budd*, “the greatest story in Western literature with pure envy at its center,” says Epstein. Consider the ways a mostly unconscious envy schemes in Jane Austen’s half dozen, or the muted envy in the undulating

trajectories of Dorothea and Lydgate in *Middlemarch*. Or consider how envy further pollutes the friendship of Richard and Vivaldo in James Baldwin’s *Another Country*.

Here are the opening lines of Dorothy Parker’s short story “The Bolt Behind the Blue”:

Miss Mary Nicholl was poor and plain, which afflictions compelled her, when she was in the presence of a more blessed lady, to vacillate between squirming humility and spitting envy. The more blessed lady, her friend Mrs. Hazelton, enjoyed Miss Nicholl’s visits occasionally; humility is a seemly tribute to a favorite of fate, and to be the cause of envy is cozy to the ego.

“Spitting envy” is quite a nice couple—think venom sprayed from fangs—and that final clause is a truth the envied know well. “Favorite of fate” cuts to the crux of the issue too, since by their own souring logic, the envious never have the good fortune of those they envy. There seems to be some cosmic decree against the envious ever getting the luck of the more successful. This is maddening. This just won’t do. But it does do, and it keeps on doing, and before long we have bitterness by the bucketful.

The Croatian-Austrian philosopher and Catholic clergyman Ivan Illich, in a prescient and newly relevant 1973 study called *Tools for Conviviality*, gives us a different take on envy. In a consumer society, says Illich, one inevitably falls into either of two camps: “the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy.” The capitalist system depends, at its very spine, upon competition, and because the book world is solidly part of that system, it’s scant wonder many writers often feel themselves competing: for publications, for prizes, for prestige. And of course the thing about competition is that for some to win, others must lose, and losing does nothing so well as cultivate envy for the victors. Whether those victors are, by chance,

more talented and deserving the envious never ask—because the envious are usually saddled with that other sin, too: pride. The Seven Deadly Sins are siblings, and so they frequently commune: One is always enlisting the aid of another.

Jealousy is widely employed as a synonym for *envy*, and the knowers at Merriam-Webster sanction this, though the second definition of *jealous*—suspicious and intolerant of rivals and infidels—is what we mean when we talk about what pesters the most notoriously jealous dupe in all of literature, Othello: We mean “the green-eyed monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on.” *Green with envy* should be *green with jealousy*, if we’re taking the Bard as our linguistic chaperone. The third definition of *jealous* is better covered by *covetous* and the first better served by *envious*. The word *jealous*, then, contains an ambiguity that can’t always be resolved by context; charge someone with jealousy and we’ll have to ask: Do you

mean suspicious of rivalry, or envious, or covetous, or all three?

Milton gives an effective example of where envy diverges from jealousy when Satan spies Eve and Adam embracing: “Aside the devil turn’d / For envy, yet with jealous leer malign / Ey’d them askance.” You get the meaning of *invidia* at work there: Satan can’t *look upon* Eve and Adam; a jealous askance is what he manages. We can be jealous and not envious, or else both at once, but when we’re envious only, that’s special: It means we badly want what others have and would welcome a drastic demotion for them as well. In that regard, as Saint Thomas Aquinas suggests at tedious length in his *Summa Theologiae*, envy is really the thin-lipped kin to *schadenfreude*, kin bothered by what Aquinas repeatedly dubs “sorrow,” though it’s a sorrow shot through with self-hatred. A sorrow aimed at others, if you will.

Both Aristotle and Aquinas believed that envy throbs most bitterly between those of equal abilities in the same field:

Writers don’t envy dukes and duchesses for being born well; they don’t envy lotto winners for their preposterous luck. They envy other writers just like them—except more successful. And that success somehow taunts them, deprecates them, diminishes their own value and promise. Envy is an unmistakable mark of unhappiness, and in America, where the Jeffersonian *pursuit* of happiness has been perverted into a *guarantee* of happiness, where happiness has become a creed without a course, awareness of one’s own daily letdown is a tormenting trial.

Envy is essentially self-pitying: It says, *What about me? Am I not important too?* The more others succeed, the happier they must be, and so the more we loathe them—and ourselves. So there’s a paradox at play here: In order to be envious of another, more successful writer, we must have self-regard enough to think we’re more deserving of that success; and yet we wouldn’t be susceptible to envy in the first place



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if we had a better relationship with self-esteem, envy being a species of masochism—masochism tinged by malice. In his one-off essay on Richard Wright, James Baldwin remarks on the “awful tension between envy and despair, attraction and revulsion,” which is the only accurate way to consider the issue of envy, by underlining its tense, antagonistic temperament.

In his charming essay on envy, Angus Wilson has this to say: “For some, such as actors and writers, Envy is so endemic that they have to adapt their lives to it. In these professions, there is no longer a concern to disguise the emotion, only to serve it up more palatably.” Some are bad at the disguise; Wilson admits he knows a writer who says to more successful writers: “I wished you dead when I read that good notice of your book last Sunday.” Too extreme, that death wish, but, you have to admit, not by much.

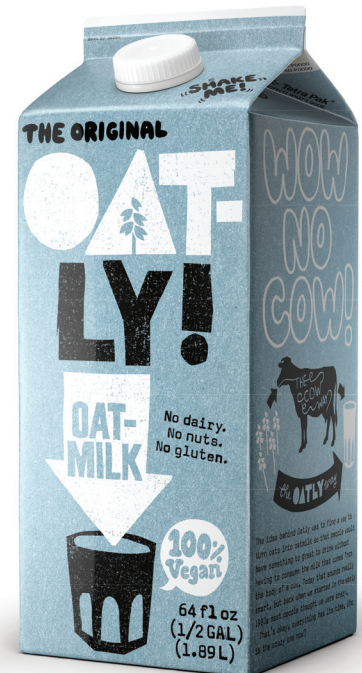
For writers, as must be the case for actors, musicians, and artists, the

issue of envy is shackled to the itch for fame. We all know that breed of writer who hustles after celebrity, passing more hours with Twitter than with Tolstoy. If we writers have entered into literature hoping for riches and fame, then we probably deserve to be disappointed on that score. There are riches and fame to be had in tech and TV, I hear. Literature, however, both the reading and the writing of it, finds those aspirations obscene precisely because they run counter to how literature works: by the facilitating of our silent realms, those inner reservoirs of stillness, the calm our ceaselessly noisome culture keeps trying to kill. Literature functions against the yelping herd. Cynthia Ozick has sharp lines we should tack above our desks: “Writers are what they genuinely are only when they are at work in the silent and instinctual cell of ghostly solitude, and never when they are out industriously chatting on the terrace.... The fraudulent writer is

the visible one, the crowd-seeker, the crowd-speaker.”

In his book on Charles Dickens, G. K. Chesterton describes fame as “the old human glory, the applause and wonder of the people,” and one suspects that it’s an atrophied selfhood that pines after glory and back pats: Something’s lacking in the soul if you need to inspire wonder in others. But the insistent psychology of ambition compels whole districts of us to think that if we don’t shoot for fame, if we aren’t engaged in a round-the-clock peddling of our attitudes and wares, holding our own whips in the hippodrome of self-promotion, then we’re sadly lacking and have earned whatever obscurity we’ve been stuck with. These days some writers will splash through the malarial swamps of social media with more gusto than they mobilize writing their books, and it shows. If writers quest for celebrity as much as or more than their fellow strivers in the arts, and if they’re more

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deflated when they don't attain it, that might be because writers are *isolatos*, solitary laborers whose gratification is delayed by publication, delayed by years in some cases.

I UNDERSTAND the pull of envy—I wouldn't be writing this if I didn't—but I don't always or fully understand a contemporary writer's envy for another contemporary writer. Whenever a serious writer succeeds, and especially if that writer is able to cross over from the literary grotto into the stadium of general renown, we should be buoyed by the fact that the success and popularity of a serious writer is still possible in a rabidly unserious culture such as ours. That's good news for all writers. My own envy, hitched to reverence, hues close to Freud and is usually aimed at Virgil and Goethe, Tolstoy and George Eliot, Dante and Milton, Austen and Baldwin—because I was formed by their parental tutelage, because I am not in possession of their

tremendous gifts, because they've said everything better than I've thus far been able to. One keeps working to be worthy of their example.

Some of those writers with all the laurels and grants and sales today will likely not be remembered in thirty years, never mind in three hundred, so you have to put it to yourself: What's your intention with literature? What do you *want* from it? Are you an artist because you cannot be otherwise, because it is essential to your soul and mind and your vista on our world, or because you want cheers from strangers and plaudits from the lit establishment? What we might traffic in is not envy for fellow writers who succeed but enmity for those pressures allied against all writers, those philistines and bureaucrats and ideologues who happily hammer away at the independence and efficacy of art. Perhaps don't rail against that writer you think is undeserving of an NEA fellowship; rail instead against those scurvy politicians

moiling to make the NEA a memory. Perhaps don't begrudge that novelist with the vulgar advance; despise instead our cyber lives denuding us of the very focus necessary to read a novel.

The success of other writers need not banish the rest of us to the failure bin—tweak your definition of success and failure. Literary critic Cyril Connolly calls a writer's failure "the only dignified thing," by which he means the dignity of failing by your own standards instead of succeeding by someone else's, by the culture's. If you want to be important to posterity, you might have to be unimportant to the present: All serious writers, in some way or other, are ill fit for their times. Envy takes the short view, literature the long. Here's Ralph Ellison in 1970, in correspondence with James Alan McPherson about Richard Wright and Langston Hughes—a word of simple finality for us: "I can only be myself. So that I don't have to envy other people. It seems to me a waste of time." ∞

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