

## CHAPTER 1

## Catching Miracles

THERE ARE PHRASES that call attention to themselves, that distract from the matter at hand and surprise even those who utter them. It's as if they've appeared out of thin air, like a miracle or a sudden revelation; as if they had readers before they had an author. It's there, in that moment of recognition, that the origin of literature lies. Phrases that are noticed, admired, and repeated become texts and begin to circulate, unattributed and unregulated. The author is lost from sight.

Today we've arrived at the opposite extreme. The author attracts attention even as the work is lost from sight. People would rather talk about writers than read what they've written. The spotlight is on TV interviews, celebrities, photographs, anecdotes, prizes, advances, and sales rather than on sentences, images, scenes, characters, or ideas that linger in the memory.

The first "texts" committed to memory—sayings, songs—were short, oral, and anonymous, possibly

preceding cave painting. The first literary writings—short and anonymous—appeared in Mesopotamia and Egypt four or five thousand years ago; they were spells, ritual chants, and invocations engraved on tombs. Three or four thousand years ago, again in Mesopotamia, the first long texts—*Gilgamesh*, *Enuma Elish*—were composed, still anonymous and oral. By the eighth century B.C., in Palestine, the prophet Amos was writing like an author addressing himself to the public, and by the seventh century B.C., in Greece, Hesiod was doing the same. Both Amos and Hesiod left some reference to themselves in their texts, which were no longer short, oral, or anonymous. One thousand years later, at the end of the fourth century, the *Autobiography* of Gregory of Nazianzus and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine took their authors as primary subject. In the eighteenth century, the very lives of Voltaire, Franklin, Johnson, Rousseau, and Goethe seem projects undertaken in order to create a persona. Today, the author as work, as larger-than-life character created for the purposes of myth and the market, is a common phenomenon.

Fame also dates back to prehistoric times. Poems about legendary characters composed by unknown authors grew famous. Then the writers themselves became legendary. The long evolution of fame stretches from anonymous creation to a

leading role for the author, from the spoken word to writing, from microtext to complete works.

Fame concentrates society's attention on a few names. This can be a good thing. It keeps us reading the great books, keeps us revisiting the great works of art. Authors fortunate enough to have caught—by chance, craft, or inspiration—a miracle in their writing should not complain too much. But fame can also be a bad thing. It keeps us focused on names, not on the living experience of great works.

Great works focus our minds, speak to the best in us, and spark our imagination. We feel more alive, more engaged in meaningful conversation with life. Reality makes more sense. We make more sense. It's as if we've experienced a miracle, as if we've been granted access to eternity. It's only natural to spread the word, to share the experience, to bring that higher level of living to ordinary life. As great writing leads to great writing, conversation about great works may itself become great—or it may just be noise about big names.

Fame (i.e., being talked about) can also seem like a passport to eternity, to an existence on a higher level, outside ordinary life. The sculptor becomes a sculpture created by others, a monument, an object of admiration and even idolatry, set upon a pedestal and excluded from ordinary give and take. Rilke said that Rodin was solitary

before he became famous, and more solitary after he became famous, because fame is the accumulation of misunderstandings around new names.

Nowadays experts sell secrets for the creation of useful misunderstandings and sculpt the would-be famous for the limelight. But there are no experts in the art of catching miracles.