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# Memory performance in William Golding's "Envoy Extraordinary"

**Abstract.** William Golding's fascination with history is evident both in his essays and his novels. In an essay titled "Digging for Pictures" he observes that one of the main driving forces in his work as an amateur archaeologist was his desire for "a connection with the past." Knowing Golding's preoccupation with history, it should come as no surprise that he is also deeply interested in the means by which people represent the past to themselves – both the distant past, which they did not witness, and the past that belongs to their subjective experience. The aim of this article is to analyse Golding's "Envoy Extraordinary", the third novella published in *The Scorpion God*. The article begins with the discussion of recollective memory, concentrating on the notion of "memory performance." It then applies this concept to the analysis of chosen passages from Golding's novella in order to show the relational aspect of memory. The discussion emphasizes the important role of emotions in the recollection process, both in spoken and written discourse: emotions make autobiographical discourse seem more authentic, and they provide narrative continuity between the subject's past and present selves. Those observations are made in the context of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions*, and Golding's autobiographical texts, most importantly, his essay "The English Channel" from his collection *The Hot Gates*.

**Keywords:** memory, recollection, emotions, Golding.

## *The Scorpion God* and "Envoy Extraordinary"

In 1971 Faber and Faber published William Golding's book titled *The Scorpion God*. The three stories collected in this volume take place in the distant past and in remote places: the title story is set in ancient Egypt, "Clonk Clonk" paints a vivid picture of prehistoric Africa, while the last story, "Envoy Extraordinary," takes its readers back to the Roman Empire. The three pieces of short fiction have a common theme, which is that of scepticism towards the notion of history as a narrative of social and cultural development. As James R. Baker comments, "they [the stories] are neither tragic nor purely comic" (64); indeed, their distinctive feature is their conflation of tragic and comic elements in a narrative which is both playful and somewhat cynical. Golding himself, in an interview with Baker, made a telling comment on the book. In response to Baker's observation that *The Scorpion God* creates the vision of history as a comedy, Golding offered the following comment: "You can't change history. You can't change what's happened, but you can have a little gentle fun at its expense" (159).

“Envoy Extraordinary,” with its witty dialogues and surprising plot developments, is perhaps the most amusing of all the three works. It had first been published in 1956 in a book titled *Sometime, Never*, together with the short fiction of John Wyndham and Mervyn Peake. Two years after its publication it was adapted by Golding into a play titled *The Brass Butterfly*, which was staged in the West End, with moderate success. The story starts with the arrival of the Greek scientist and inventor Phanocles, who presents the Emperor with three discoveries he claims will change the world: a steamboat, a bomb, and a printing press. As it soon transpires, the first two inventions prove instrumental in defeating Postumus, an ambitious and cruel heir apparent to the throne. While the sudden death of Postumus is the fulcrum of the plot, much of the story is devoted to conversations between the Emperor, Phanocles, and the Emperor’s beloved grandson, Mamillius.

Despite the fact that “Envoy Extraordinary” is a rather light-hearted piece, it raises a number of topics worth examining in more detail. One of these topics is the process of recollection, especially the role of memory in the creation of individual identity. This article will place special emphasis on the significance of emotions in what will be referred to as “memory performance”. This phenomenon will be discussed in the context of such works as *Confessions* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Golding’s essay titled “The English Channel”. In the conclusion, general comments will be made on the role of memory and imagination in the interpretation of literary works.

## **The recollection process in “Envoy Extraordinary”**

Since the notion of recollection has already been mentioned and will be referred to several times throughout this article, it is important to specify what exactly is meant by this term. According to William F. Brewer, “recollective memory” concentrates on “a specific episode from an individual’s past. It typically appears to be a ‘reliving’ of the individual’s phenomenal experience during that earlier moment” (Brewer, 60). Two elements of this definition must be considered here: first of all, the notion of “episode”, which suggests the narrative potential of a given memory.<sup>3</sup> What will be referred to as the episode is a series of events which constitute a self-contained whole in that they can be narrated as a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Secondly, and more importantly, it is argued in this definition that such a recollection is “a ‘reliving’ of the individual’s phenomenal experience”. It will be demonstrated in this article that this experience is based on evoking a given series of events privately or in the presence of others.

The narrative nature of memory is strongly connected with its affective aspect. This connection is highlighted by Mieke Bal, who observes that narrative memories can be distinguished by the fact that “they are affectively colored, surrounded by an emotional aura that, precisely, makes them memorable” (viii). Taking Bal’s definition as a premise, it may be argued that the recounting of such

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<sup>3</sup> The term memory, defined as that which is remembered from the past (for example an image or an episode), will be used interchangeably with *recollection*. Depending on the context in which it is used, *memory* will also refer to the faculty of storing and recalling information from the past.

episodes from one's past involves the construction of a story and the evocation of emotions accompanying it, the two processes being intertwined and simultaneous. When the recollection process is carried out in the presence of others, there is every reason to introduce the notion of "memory rehearsal"<sup>4</sup> or "memory performance."<sup>5</sup> The notion of performance was used by Mieke Bal in the already-quoted study, in which she notes that "cultural recall is not merely something of which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually perform, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and wilfully contrived" (ix). What Bal argues in the context of cultural memory is also true in the case of individual, autobiographical memory. Individuals also have a tendency to "perform" their memories in front of others, which is to say that they describe and frequently act out their memories, counting on their listeners' reaction. This is not merely an attempt to impress others, but is an important part of interpersonal communication. Bal acknowledges this fact when she argues that "ordinary narrative memory fundamentally serves a social function" (x). The following article on Golding's "Envoy Extraordinary" will make use of Bal's observation, especially her insistence on the interactive nature of the recollection process and the role emotions play in it.

As mentioned, Phanocles offers the Emperor three inventions which he considers groundbreaking: a steamboat, a bomb, and a printing machine. To Phanocles' surprise, the Emperor dismisses all three, but reacts enthusiastically to an object which the inventor presented as a curiosity – a pressure cooker. What the Greek considered an item of interest and merely an addition to his work earns him imperial admiration and ultimately elevates him to the rank of ambassador. Why does the Emperor take such great interest in this object? The answer to this question can be found at the end of the story, in which the Emperor, putting the invention to the test, orders fish to be prepared in the pressure cooker, and then invites Phanocles to supper. It soon becomes clear that the Emperor has little interest in the administration of his kingdom, but is solely concentrated on the task of reclaiming his memories. In this pursuit he has already tried rereading books from his childhood in order to evoke the pleasure which he felt when he first perused them, but is now looking for a more intense experience. As he explains to his baffled companion, he sees in the new invention his chance to reclaim his past. The experiment seems successful, as the taste of the specially-prepared trout enables the Emperor to recall an episode from his youth. In the following paragraph, worth quoting in full, he describes himself as a boy lying on the bank of a brook:

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4 The notion of "memory rehearsal" was used by Richard Walker. Walker and four other psychologists suggest five distinct motivations why people relive or "rehearse" their memories. The five different "rehearsal types" discussed are 1) Involuntary; 2) Maintain memory details (in other words, to keep the details of the memory accurate), 3) Re-experience the emotion; 4) Social communication (in order to share a given memory with others); 5) Understand the event (Walker *et. al.*, 762).

5 The notion of "memory performance" emphasises an aspect of memory which is not highlighted by Walker's notion of "memory rehearsal," namely the relational and interactive character of the recollection process. As this article will show, the recollection process, when re-enacted in front of an audience, can be viewed as a performance because its effects can be judged in terms of success and failure; in other words, the addressees of the autobiographical discourse can be persuaded by the truth value of a given recollection, or they may choose not to invest their trust in it.

It comes back to me. I am lying on a rock that is only just as big as my body. The cliffs rise about me, the river runs by me and the water is dark for all the sun. Two pigeons discourse musically and monotonously. There is pain in my right side, for the edge of the rock cuts me: but I lie face-downward, my right arm moving slowly as a water-snail on a lump of stone. I touch a miracle of present actuality, I stroke—I am fiercely, passionately alive—a moment more and the exultation of my heart will burst in a fury of movement. But I still my ambition, my desire, my lust—I balance passion with will. I stroke slowly as a drifting weed. She lies there in the darkness, undulating, stemming the flow of water. Now—! A convulsion of two bodies, sense of terror, of rape—she flies in the air and I grab with lion’s claws. She is out, she is mine—. (Golding 1987, 175)

The sensuous description strongly suggests that the dinner has led the elderly Emperor to a recollection wholly unrelated to the pleasures of the table, but the comment immediately following this fragment explains the scene: the old man is in fact reminiscing about a fishing trip during which he caught his first trout. The reader has good reason to laugh at this humorous denouement, but the Emperor’s excitement and admiration are in earnest. There is not a hint of irony in his acclamation of the pressure cooker as “the most Promethean discovery of them all” (Golding 1987, 175).

Interestingly, the Emperor makes no attempts to explain the significance of this episode to his companion. What is sought by the Emperor is the experience of reliving his past. He does so by re-enacting his memory in front of Phanocles, who, despite being silent and withdrawn, is given the important role of listener. The process of describing his recollection is also the act of its performance in front of his one-person audience.

The role of emotions in memory performance cannot be overstated, as they profoundly affect the temporal progression of one’s recollections. That intense emotions – be they positive or negative – have a decisive influence on the temporality of the episode recalled is convincingly shown in Patrick Colm Hogan’s cognitive study *Affective Narratology: The Emotional Structure of Stories*. By analysing the opening scene of *Anna Karenina*, Hogan shows the human tendency to organise recollections around emotionally charged details, such as objects or seemingly trivial, yet significant and consequential events: “In sum, our experience of time is not uniform. We encode experience into hierarchized units, organizing temporality first of all by reference to our emotional response” (66). Our tendency to dwell on emotional moments or “incidents” (32), as Hogan calls them, is also clear in Golding’s story. Indeed, the effectiveness of the passage quoted from “Envoy Extraordinary” largely depends on its uneven temporal landscape: the Emperor first slows down the flow of narrative time by focusing on a detailed description of landscape and then plunges the reader into action with shorter sentences, containing ellipses and words either denoting or connected with intense emotions. As a result, the reader is made witness to the state of waiting, rapture, and fulfilment, which the Emperor relives in the episode.

The process of performing his memory cannot be viewed only as the Emperor’s self-indulgent search for a powerful and emotional experience which will break the monotony and boredom of his life. Emotions have two distinct roles in the recollection process: first of all, they provide proof that the re-enacted scenes from one’s life are genuine; secondly, they provide continuity

between the subject's past and present selves. The first function of memory is best analysed in the context of Rousseau's autobiography, *Confessions*. In one of the most famous passages in *Confessions*, Rousseau pledges his sincerity on the basis of the emotions felt in the moment of writing. As he argues, his readers should not pay attention to the factual accuracy, but to the honesty inherent in his memoirs:

I easily forget my misfortunes; but I cannot forget my faults, and I forget still less readily my better feelings. Their memory is too dear to me ever to be erased from my heart. I may make factual omissions, transpositions, errors in dates; but I cannot be mistaken about what I felt, nor about what my feelings led me to do; and this is what principally concerns me here. (Rousseau, 270)

Rather than retrace events in his memory and relive emotions associated with them, Rousseau reverses this logic and chooses his emotions as the most important point of reference in writing his autobiography. In this task he turns to "the chain of feelings" (*îne des sentiments*), which he calls the "only one faithful guide" (Rousseau, 270). Commenting on the quoted passage, Suzanne Nalbantian draws the reader's attention to the word heart (*coeur*), which signals the emotional nature of Rousseau's memoirs. The use of this word, both in this fragment and others, has the effect of "focusing on the heart as the retainer of memory. Hence, if the heart is untouched, there is little memory" (Nalbantian, 28). Reversing this statement, it can be argued that if the heart responds with emotions, then the memories can be trusted. It can be argued that emotions re-enacted by the subject act as proof that the recollections are both significant and genuine. Since emotions are not prone to distortion or manipulation (As Rousseau argues, "I cannot go wrong about what I felt"), their sudden emergence demonstrates that the episode from one's life is trustworthy.

The logic which links emotions, memory, and autobiographical truth may be appealing, but it is also flawed: the emotions felt by the subject (writer or speaker) cannot be treated as an unambiguous connection with the past, because they may well be manipulated by the circumstances of enunciation. By the same token, distorted or even fabricated memories<sup>6</sup> are capable of provoking strong emotional reactions. Despite these arguments, it is true to say that people have the tendency to invest more trust in recollections which are emotionally charged.<sup>7</sup> It seems that this natural

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6 In the interesting study *Remembering Our Childhood: How Memory Betrays Us*, Karl Sabbagh demonstrates how people distort their childhood memories or even appropriate them from other sources. Sabbagh concludes his study by stating that "all memory, whatever age it is laid down or recalled, is unreliable." He adds that those distorted memories demonstrate the considerable influence of our present subjectivity on the re-enacted past: "we sculpt our memories to fit within the outline of who we are, who we would like to be" (194).

7 Psychological studies have demonstrated that people have the tendency to invest more trust in emotionally-charged memories than in those which are not accompanied by emotions. Christianson and Safer, summing up the research of many authors, note that "the more intense the emotional event, the more confident one was of the memory" (222). It is worth adding in this context that Christianson and Safer also observe that emotional events are better retained in memory than non-emotional ones. For more information see the article "Emotional events and emotions in autobiographical memories" by Sven-Åke Christianson and Martin A. Safer.

tendency is what stands behind memory performance, be it in the shape of spoken or written discourse. Viewed in this way, the process of remembering is based not only on the feeling of trust that the subject invests in his past, but also on the contention that this trust can be shared by the listener/reader. In other words, what the subject seeks to share is not only his emotions, but also his trust in the veracity of the episode recalled.

The recollection process is also significant for the formation of the subject's identity. It can be argued that memories which are emotionally charged are considered significant for the subject, or "precious", to quote the Emperor in Golding's story, because they encapsulate crucial information about one's subjectivity. The emotionally-charged rehearsal of essential moments in one's life is strong proof that one's former beliefs, convictions, and actions – in other words, the conditions and circumstances that formed one's past self – are still an important part of one's current subjectivity. In other words, by performing his memories, the subject demonstrates the continuity of his identity over time.<sup>8</sup> Viewed in the context of Golding's story, this act may be seen as the Emperor's attempt to overcome the distance dividing his past and present selves.

Performing his memories is one way in which the Emperor attempts to alter his subjective experience of time. Earlier in the story, he mourns the passing of the years, observing to his grandson, Mamillius: "Time slips through our fingers like water. We gape in astonishment to see how little is left" (Golding 1987, 118). While there is nothing that the Emperor can do to counteract the process of ageing, he can change – at least for a moment – his perception of time by imbuing it with subjective experience. That the Emperor is aware of such a possibility is demonstrated by the following words, which he directs to Phanocles before their shared supper: "If you can restore to me not the gratifications of an appetite, but a single precious memory! How else but by the enlargements of anticipation and memory does our human instant differ from the mindless movement of the nature's clock?" (Golding 1987, 174). The two mechanisms which the Emperor mentions – anticipating future events and looking back upon those which are long gone – have one important feature in common: they place the future as well as the past in the present moment of reflection/recollection, and by doing so they create the illusion – however momentary it may be – that the subject has command over his life.

A similar commentary on the role of memory in one's perception of time can be found in the already quoted study by Mary Warnock. Warnock refers to the theories of R.G. Colingwood, who in his work *Speculum Mentis*, published in 1924, argued that memory can be considered "the mind's triumph over time" (Quoted in Warnock, 135) because it is capable of evoking events in the past and making them part of the moment of recollection. Warnock concludes her discussion of Colingwood's work with the following words: "We turn our life into a story by remembering it,

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<sup>8</sup> A similar point is raised by Mary Warnock in her analysis of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. She argues that "the personality, the series of experiences and attitudes and emotions which go to make up one person, is not a coherent or continuously conscious whole, but fragmentary. Yet the broken and fragmentary self can be given a unity by the reliving of the past in the present" (Warnock, 99).

and any story, or history, is thus timeless; we can tell the story to ourselves again and again, and the truth it contains does not change” (135). While there is good reason to raise some objections with respect to Warnock’s argument – it is questionable whether the truth of a given episode really remains the same every time it is recalled – nevertheless it can be argued that the ability to tell and retell memories creates a precious sense of command over one’s past.

### **Memory performance in a narrative text**

It was argued in this article that since emotions have a crucial role in the validation of the subject’s memories, a convincing manifestation of these emotions is of the utmost importance. The nature of this performance will necessarily differ in the case of a live description or re-enactment of events – such as the one described in the episode quoted – and a narrative text, for example an autobiography.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, there is no reason to draw a strict boundary between the two, as certain notable similarities can be found. Indeed, it can be argued that the relationship between the two protagonists in Golding’s story can serve as a model for the author-reader interaction in a narrative text of autobiographical nature. The memory performance carried out by the Emperor is akin to that of an autobiographer, who tries to engage his silent audience, represented here by the passive and withdrawn Phanocles, with a description of episodes from his past. The image of autobiography which emerges from this short comment is that of an experiential narrative,<sup>10</sup> in which the author performs his memories in front of his readers, counting on their emotional reaction.

An interesting insight into the role of emotions in autobiographical narrative is offered by Jean Starobinski in his seminal essay “The Style of Autobiography”. In this study Starobinski raises a similar point, namely that emotions have for Rousseau the crucial role of confirming the authenticity of his autobiographical narrative. He writes: “the veracity of the narrative must be demonstrated with reference to intimate feeling, to the strict contemporaneity of emotions communicated in the writing” (81). Similarly to the protagonist of Golding’s story, Rousseau describes his memories by concentrating on the emotions he once felt, and proving that they still have the power to affect him. Whereas the Emperor is given the opportunity to affect his listener directly,

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<sup>9</sup> In his article on the notion of performativity Ute Berns divides the phenomenon into two basic forms. The first is a performance which is “the embodied live presentation of events in the co-presence of an audience at a specific place and time” (370) (this is referred to as “Performativity I”). According to this definition, Performativity I refers to situations in the real world or a theatre performance. This notion is juxtaposed with a wider definition of performativity as “non-corporeal presentation, e.g. in written narratives” (Performativity II) (Berns, 370). The Emperor’s act of describing his memories and displaying his emotions in front of his one-person audience can be considered in the light of Performativity I – it is not unlike a theatre performance.

<sup>10</sup> I am referring to the essay on autobiography “Full of Life Now” by Barret J. Mandel, in which the critic comments that autobiography is experiential in that it “shares experience as its way of revealing reality” (55).

Rousseau attempts to do so by means of a carefully crafted style of writing, whose purpose is to give the reader the impression of spontaneity and authenticity.<sup>11</sup>

### Memory performance in “The English Channel”

Memory performance is a notion which can be used in the discussion of Golding’s essay entitled “The English Channel.” The essay was first published in *Holiday* magazine, and later reprinted in his collection of non-fiction titled *The Hot Gates* (1965). It starts with his description of the English Channel, as seen from the window of an airplane. The view triggers a series of wartime memories, which provoke such emotions as apprehension and excitement. Taking care to suppress them (“After all, I am English. Mustn’t speak” (Golding 1965, 42)), Golding imagines himself addressing the passengers and telling them about his participation in the Normandy landings on D-Day. The short account – just over one page – concentrates on his experience on the night of the landings (5-6 June 1944). He describes his sense of excitement, responsibility, and fear lest he should fail to carry out his duties. This part of the essay ends with a short paragraph describing the targeting of a fighter plane and its destruction. Golding goes on to discuss the English Channel from the perspective of its geography, climate, as well as various stories connected with it.

“The English Channel” is interesting not least because it is so far the only published text in which Golding recalls the years he spent in the army. As mentioned, he imagines himself in the role of a speaker addressing his audience – his fellow passengers – and telling them about his war years. Despite his strong desire to share his memories, he decides to withhold them for the sake of what he sees as propriety. While the suppressing of his recollections highlights their confessional aspect – their intimate and emotional nature – it does not annul the communication situation he created at the beginning of the essay. Instead, the reader is encouraged to see himself in the role of listener and the addressee of his autobiographical discourse. In this way Golding creates a sense of spontaneity, not unlike that analysed in the context of “Envoy Extraordinary”. The intense emotions felt by the author in the course of the flight confirm the authenticity and the significance of his recollections. The affective aspect of his narrative also demonstrates that despite the passage of time, his war memories are still an important part of his identity.

The discussion of “The English Channel” will be concluded with a general comment on Golding’s strategy of narrating the past. Such essays as “The Hot Gates”, “Digging for Pictures”, “Egypt from My Inside”, and “The English Channel” have a similar construction: they are all based on the juxtaposition of the distant past (the Battle of Thermopylae in “The Hot Gates”, prehistoric times in “Digging for Pictures”, ancient Egypt in “Egypt from My Inside”, and D-Day in “The English Channel”) with a more recent one (Golding’s childhood in “Egypt from My Inside”, and his recent travels and fascination with history in the case of the other essays), or the present, namely the moment of writing. The to-and-fro movement between the time references shows the considerable

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<sup>11</sup> Starobinski in his analysis convincingly shows that Rousseau’s style is calculated to convey the experience of re-enacting his emotions, by means of which the writer attempts to validate his memories.

influence of history on the writer's subjectivity – the fact that he sees the present coloured by his perception of the past.

The temporal organization of the texts mentioned can also function as a device by which Golding distances himself from the past. In “The English Channel”, having described the strong emotions he felt on D-Day, he returns to more recent times, commenting on himself: “I find him funny now, that young man with the naval profile and the greening badge on his cap” (Golding 1965, 42). This rule is at work both in the context of events which he witnessed and those which are known only from historical records. The essay “The Hot Gates”, in which Golding relates his journey to Thessaly in Greece and describes the Battle of Thermopylae, is a good example of this tendency. His detailed relation of the journey includes a visit to the site of the battle, in which to his dismay he finds that “history has not left a trace of scar on this landscape” (Golding 1965, 15). This, however, does not stop him from his task of imagining the historical event. The outcome is that passages of detailed and vivid description are combined with comments which point to the impossibility of knowing the past. As a result, the experience of reading the essay is that of simultaneous proximity and distance with respect to the past.

### **Conclusion: empathy and responsibility in the interpretation of literary works**

The conclusion of this article will consider the role of memory and imagination in the reception of literary narratives. One of the most interesting studies to raise this topic is the previously-quoted *Affective Narratology* by Patrick Colm Hogan. In the conclusion to his study, Hogan reflects on the effect that stories, including literary narratives, have on the readers' subjectivity. He first notes that stories may affect readers by creating what he calls “emotional memories” (241) – recollections of intense emotions we felt in the course of reading a given story. Making sure not to overemphasize his point, Hogan nevertheless makes it clear that this impact, however limited it may be, can affect our attitude by conditioning our responses to particular life situations.

Hogan's second point, which is related to the first, is connected with the human capacity for empathy. The critic writes about “our willingness and ability to simulate other people's situations and thereby experience the emotions they [the fictional protagonists] are likely to be feeling” (243). He argues that narrative has a direct influence on the readers' empathy because it is capable of widening (as well as narrowing) our scope of “empathic associations” (244). Reading affects our imagination and appeals to our emotions, thus developing our ability to empathize with given individuals or social groups.

The notion of empathy described here, based on the reader's imaginative and affective involvement in the narrative text, is also present in Golding's essay, “Digging for Pictures”. Describing his work as an amateur archaeologist, Golding recalls finding the remains of a woman whose skeleton unambiguously points to the fact that she was murdered. Having made this shocking discovery, Golding describes a baffling sense of complicity and guilt: “There is a sense in which I share the guilt buried beneath the runway, a sense in which my imagination has locked me to

them” (Golding 1965, 70). Although the possible act of cruelty must have taken place in prehistoric times, Golding finds himself curiously implicated in it because of his emotional and intellectual involvement with the past.

Golding’s comment applies not only to the work of an archaeologist and historian, but also to that of a writer and reader. There is a sense in which the reception of the narrative text can be described as a sharing of emotions between the writer and the reader, not unlike that between the two protagonists of “Envoy Extraordinary”. An emotional reaction can consist in accepting or rejecting the writer’s vision, both of which necessitate the reader’s involvement in the events described. It can be concluded that the experience of reading is connected with the responsibility that the reader takes for the world they have created.

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