Words Matter: Friendship, Grief, and Maggie Nelson's Reckoning with Loss

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore how my friendship with the writer Maggie Nelson helped to sustain me in the two years immediately following a catastrophic accident that paralyzed me. In the years since, she has continued to help me reckon with profound loss, as her writing assures me that it is possible to represent both what has been lost and what remains. Odd as it may seem, of her many books, *Jane: A Murder* is the greatest comfort to me in its stark confrontation with irreparable loss and ongoing grief. Jane was her mother's sister, killed before Maggie was born.

My thinking about "feminist bodies" is indelibly marked by an injury I suffered shortly after I turned fifty years old, when I broke my neck in a cycling accident. As a result, my legs and trunk muscles are paralyzed—I cannot stand, nor can I sit upright without support. I have nearly full range of motion in my arms, though pitiful strength, and I use my partially paralyzed hands, but have no fine motor control. (The medical diagnosis is quadriplegia.) Damaged neuro-transmissions send biochemically induced electrical currents running through my body, a buzzing and burning that suffuses my tissues. Pointillist pain.

In what follows, I explore how my friendship with the contemporary writer Maggie Nelson has helped to sustain me, and how among her many publications, her 2005 book, *Jane: A Murder*, feels special to me. Maggie's representation of the after-effects of profound loss assures me that continuing grief can find words to speak its psychic pain, and that it is possible to describe both what has been lost and what remains.

The book was published two years after my accident. Those years of unprecedented closeness to Maggie were overcharged with emotion, especially with grief for all I had lost. Maggie understands the vulnerability of human bodies to life-altering and life-destroying injury, which she explores in *Jane: A Murder.* Those who live on need to find words for pain and grief that overwhelm the representational capacity of ordinary language. Maggie offers the needful words in a book that makes pain articulate and gives grief the power of address.

I have become alien to myself. An abyss opened between the bodymind I was and the bodymind that I became the instant my chin struck the pavement. No rehabilitation can return me to who I was or to the life I was leading—that is the definition of catastrophic injury. It overturns and upends, leaving nothing as it was before.

Psychic alienation is compounded by social alienation. The struggle for disability rights is carried out on the streets and in the courts and has created in the academy the field of disability studies. Activists and scholars have eloquently documented how disabled people are set apart as fundamentally different from everybody else, our incapacities only grudgingly accommodated to enable our participation in public life. The alien is "unnatural, unusual, unconnected […] unfamiliar, strange,

unfriendly, unsympathetic, unfavourable, inappropriate, incompatible, distasteful, repugnant" as the word's etymology in the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes clear (218). These are (often unspoken but strongly felt) epithets that commonsense attaches to disability, and aliens are, of course, to be excluded, or admitted only grudgingly on the rare occasions when the civil rights of disabled people are enforced.

Disability studies has a well-developed critique of social disablement: the multitude of ways in which variously incapacitated people are excluded by the built environment, by expectations of productivity and development, by fear of the strange and unusual and by an unwillingness to adapt in order to accommodate the lame, the halt, the blind, the deaf. The so-called "crazy" and "slow witted" ones among us are rarely welcome actors in public life. Social disablement decisively shifts disability from the individual bodymind and locates it firmly in the social world. I fully understand that I am disabled not by paralysis, but by curbs with no curb cuts; stairs, but no ramps; doors that won't open; hallways that are too narrow; buses with no lifts; subway stops with no elevator. Perhaps even more importantly, I am disabled by all those who pity me and rest untroubled by my exclusion from the public world.[1]

But disability studies has not until recently begun to account for the ways in which injury, illness, and incapacity often entail physical pain and psychic distress. Disability studies has been often unwilling as a field to link disability to catastrophe—quite rightly, I must add—because so doing easily serves to reinforce the public prejudice against disabled people. Catastrophe, however, is how some of us arrive at the social condition of disablement, and we need to be able to account for the aftermath and acknowledge losses *as* losses that must be grieved.

[1] Lennard Davis puts the problem succinctly in his introduction to *The Disability Studies Reader:* "[T]he problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the 'problem' of the disabled person" (1). *Keywords for Disability Studies* is another rich resource that illustrates the explanatory powers of this "social model" of disability and "shows quite vividly how the dialectical concepts of 'normal' and 'abnormal' are responsible for structuring basic aspects of society and culture" (2). Also see www.keywords.nyupress.org/disability-studies/about-this-site/.

Failure to grieve distorts both private and public life, and unacknowledged catastrophe continues to harm.[2]

This is where Maggie comes in, for she understands the importance of the interminable, recursive work of grieving loss. We human animals are in each other's hands, and we need one another when faced with life upended and undone. Maggie's art is finely attuned to relational life. She says in *The Argonauts*, her most recent book, that her "writing […] dramatizes the ways in which we are *for another or by virtue of another*, not in a single instance, but from the start and always" (60, emphasis original).[3] This other-directedness has no built-in ethical vector, as your condition-in-life is by no means directly under your control. In this sense, we are all bodyminds undone. Ethical possibility lies in your response, in concert with others, to this undoing. Judith Butler underlines the gravity of this inextricable engagement with others by writing that "the *body is less an entity than a living set of relations*; the body cannot be fully dissociated from the infrastructural and environmental conditions of living and acting" (Butler 65, emphasis added).

There's no getting around it, but most of us try, nonetheless, to protect ourselves from vulnerability when our own dependent condition is revealed after catastrophe strikes someone else. Clichéd narratives about 'overcoming' are part of this protection, and most accounts about disability in the popular press take this narrative form. In the aftermath of catastrophic injury, it is easy to go about busily projecting possible fixes—maybe this, maybe that. Maybe robotics. Maybe a service dog. Maybe a hand cycle. Maybe stem cells. Maybe someday, maybe sometime. But to conjure this or that is easy, and sometime is not right now.

For the five months I was in the hospital, Maggie drove up from New York City every Saturday to give my lover, Janet, a break from

[2] Alison Kafer, a widely respected scholar of disability studies, has recently asked, "[H]ow has my theorizing […] been informed by the things I am not supposed to talk about, by the feelings and reactions—by the mental and emotional distress—that do not yet fit within disability studies?" (2). She is writing specifically about flashbacks to the arson fire that badly burned her and killed her lover. In his most recent book, Eli Clare also 'grapples' with the fact that some disabled people believe in the importance of articulating their felt losses, even as they are part of the struggle for disability justice.

[3] In the margin of her book, Maggie attributes the italicized words to Judith Butler, but offers no further citation. The formatting is hers.

visiting me in the rehab hospital. "Morning En Route to the Hospital" is a poem about a revelation she had on the road:

> Snow wafts off the little lake
> along Route 66, momentarily encasing the car
>
> in a trance of glitter
>
> Live with your puny, vulnerable self
> Live with her (*Something Bright*, 42)

In the instant of "a trance of glitter," anything can happen, for good or ill. Each of the two lines in the last stanza is a syntactical whole, driven forward by the imperative "Live with," and neither has a period at the end. Knowing she is as weak, little, and unprotected as the unnamed other, the speaker must nonetheless live on without the closure of a full stop. In this poem, we see "the body [as] less an entity than a living set of relations." I find this attention to bodies-in-relation to be one of the striking features of Maggie's writing, from first to last.

That time in the hospital extended and deepened our friendship. Then she got a job teaching at Wesleyan for a year, as I continued very slowly to recover my health. Our many conversations both took me out of myself as I concentrated on the subject at hand rather than on pain and paralysis, and returned me to myself, no longer alienated and elsewhere, but right there with my friend. During that time, she was finishing *Jane: A Murder*, and in the early summer of 2005, left Middletown on a book tour she had arranged to promote the book.

I am grateful that Maggie spent years accounting for Jane's life and death, years of doing research and working to find a form for the book. Jane was Maggie's aunt and was murdered in the spring of 1969, four years before Maggie's birth. From childhood to young adulthood, Maggie knew very little about her, since Jane's name was largely unspoken by the adults around her, and her death was not discussed. Maggie shows that it is possible to say what has not been spoken, and to feel deeply painful affect without retreating into silence. Since *Jane:*

A Murder, Maggie has published three more books, each one extending her readership and winning her more recognition. Yet it is to her 2005 book that I return, thankful to have as a resource her representation of vulnerability, violence, loss and grief. I am not claiming some sort of parallel in my life to the losses that Maggie has felt so keenly and figures so vividly in *Jane*— that would be absurd. But I am interested in how she represents the energetic liveliness of life, the ways loss and grief perturbate relational networks, and the fact that some losses open gaps that cannot be closed and baffle the need to know.

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At a glance, *Jane: A Murder* looks much like the four books of lyric poetry Maggie had already published, with lines organized into stanzas, surrounded by lots of white space on the page. But in *Jane: A Murder*, Maggie takes words from two journals that Jane kept, one when she was thirteen years old and in junior high, and another when she was nineteen and in college. We hear Jane's voice, even as Maggie transforms her sentences into lyric poetry by selection and lineation.[4] You will also find short paragraphs of prose in the book—quotations from letters, quotations from newspapers, and brief excerpts from a terrible book called *The Michigan Murders* (Keyes) that sensationalizes the sexual violence of a serial killer of women who was active when Jane was murdered. After an extensive investigation, no one was charged with Jane's murder, though many thought the serial killer likely responsible. So the crime lingered as a cold case, inviting interminable grief, and *Jane: A Murder* is *sui generis* a demonstration "that pain has, or can at least sometimes find, form" (*Jane* 223).[5]

[4] In a teaching resource on the web page of the Poetry Foundation, the poet Rebecca Hazelton observes that the poetic line "is a modifier or an amplifier of sense, syntax, sound, and rhythm—which is precisely why an exploration of line can so illuminate poetry as a whole."

[5] I mean "interminable grief" quite literally. Detectives in a cold case unit did finally track down Jane's murderer, a man named Gary Leiterman, who was tried, convicted, and sentenced to life in prison in 2005—thirty-six years after her death. He died there of natural causes a week before I sent Maggie a draft of this essay. She told me that his death had renewed her mother's grief, not only for the loss of her sister, but also at realizing she would now truly *never know what had happened*—Leiterman continued to profess his innocence to the end. Maggie wrote a book, *The Red Parts*, about the detectives' discovery of a DNA match, which led to a reopening of the case. The detectives' work paralleled, in a most uncanny way, her own research and writing. She returned from the book tour for *Jane: A Murder* only to leave immediately to attend the trial.

Jane's life and death had been absorbed into nearly impenetrable family silences, but her presence could make itself felt, nonetheless—Maggie's deeply reticent, Protestant grandfather often slipped up and called her Jane, rarely noticing to correct himself. When she turned twenty-three, the age Jane was when she was murdered, Maggie began having nightmares about being shot in the head. Jane was an unquiet ghost.

Avery Gordon understands that ghosts haunt because they demand to be heard and require a response. They demand a "reckoning"—Gordon's word as well as Maggie's—with the forgotten past and the "whole complicated sociality" that Gordon declares a ghost must represent. It is the ghost's business to make sure that we *remember* what the powers that be dictate must be *forgotten*. This contest is a political, ideological struggle:

> [T]he force of the ghost's desire is not just negative, not just the haunting and staged words, marks, or gestures of domination and injury. The ghost is not other or alterity as such, ever. It is […] pregnant with unfulfilled possibility, with the something to be done that the wavering present is demanding. This something to be done is not a return to the past but a reckoning with its repression in the present, a reckoning with that which we have lost, but never had. (Gordon 183)

The "sociality" in which Jane came of age was the 1960s in Michigan, both the progressive world of the state University and the conservative one of her parents' home. When she graduated from high school, she gave a blistering commencement address about the Civil Rights movement, and her analysis of white supremacy continued to develop. In her undergraduate years at the University of Michigan, she became increasingly convinced that the world in which she lived was fundamentally unjust. Maggie's mother called her sister a "spitfire." Jane campaigned against the war in Vietnam, and in a fury, called her conservative parents "racist pigs." By the end of her second year in college, she was no longer welcome at home. When she graduated, she applied to law school, won a fellowship, and was one of a handful of women admitted.

She and her lover (a man older by a few years, left-wing and Jewish) decided to marry and move to New York City. In other words, she wanted to live her own life, and she wanted to remake the world.[6] She was on her way home near the end of her second year of law school to talk with her parents about her plans when she was murdered.

Maggie uses as her epigraph the closing lines from Sylvia Plath's poem "The Detective":

> We walk on air, Watson.
> There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
> There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes. (*Jane* 11)

When we read Plath's poem, we learn the detective is investigating "a case of vaporization." A woman has disappeared, and all that remains is a domestic interior.

> These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
> And this is a man, look at his smile,
> The death weapon? No one is dead.
>
> There is no body in the house at all.
> There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
> There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
> Bored hoodlum in a red room
> Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.
> (*Ariel* 209)

At the time of her death, Jane wasn't interested in polish or plush carpets. From an entry in the journal Jane kept when she was nineteen years old, Maggie made a poem titled only with the date "(1966)":

> I went for walk this morning …

[6] Maggie says in an interview that "Jane is like a hungry ghost" (Carr 5), and she told me on the phone that she was frustrated by not knowing the true scope of Jane's radical politics, or how she would have lived her commitments over time.

My head cleared and rejoiced.
I thought of neither past or future,
but only of the cold air

the fast walk, the next curb,
the top of the hill,
the rain on my face …

My destination: anywhere in god's name
but out – away –
and make it exciting (63)

The short, propulsive lines, and the line-breaks emphasizing *future, air, curb, hill, face, away, exciting* all show the speaker of the poem boldly walking into the world, away from whatever confinement led to the longing, intensified by an oath and the enjambed line of the last stanza, for "anywhere in god's name / but out – away –." This is the woman who came to haunt Maggie, when Maggie was making her own independent life in New York City in the 1990s, risking nighttime walks home from work in the small hours of the morning just to feel alive.

Maggie's poem "Demographics" makes clear the threat that such "independent women" pose to the settled order, then and now, as the first two-line stanza makes clear:

"All the victims have been independent and politically liberal,"
the paper said, i.e. girls who would be God. (*Jane* 134)

The hyperbole of the second line is a silent quotation of Sylvia Plath, who in her diary called herself "the girl who would be God" when she was seventeen years old.[7] This trope is insisted on by the poem's

[7] The title of Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel, *The Bell Jar*, which is contemporaneous with the diary, is a satiric metaphor: bell jars are often used in laboratories to contain a vacuum, and are used as dust covers in a display. Plath's metaphor emphasizes that the protagonist of her novel finds the proprieties of mid-century white, middle-class femininity both suffocating and depressing. In an interview, Maggie says, "I love Plath, I really do […] There was a kind of ferocity Plath had that was very impeded by her times, and her psychology, class, and herself. […] I think her position was analogous in the 60s to some of the situations in [*Jane: A Murder*]" (Carr 7).

lineation to suggest the world's resentment, even hatred, of women who wish to affect that world, who are ambitious to make their mark and who believe, at least some of the time, in their own powers. Yet, the exaggeration of claiming divinity for women who simply want to go their own ways and follow their own ambitions subtly undercuts the pronouncement, as Jane herself sometimes questions her own abilities.

The 1960s in America, now so long ago, was a time when radical politics flourished in response to the US war machine and Jim Crow racism, sometimes inspired by liberation struggles against colonial powers. In Students for a Democratic Society and other groups developing a radical critique of power, white women began to advance a strong political account of white patriarchy, as Black feminists developed their politics through the Black arts movement and struggles for Black power. Sometimes these movements intertwined, reinforcing a feeling of revolutionary possibility, and sometimes they were in conflict. This is the "whole complicated sociality" that the ghost requires us to engage, and that provoked a profound right-wing backlash as the neoliberal world order began to take shape in the 1970s. Jane Mixer and Sylvia Plath record their self-doubt as well as their ambitions, and are clearly vexed by a femininity that required women to efface themselves.

Murder is an immediate, dramatic, and irreversible interruption of intimacy. Jane's parents were never given the chance to reconcile with their daughter, or come to terms with her commitment to a radical politics at odds with their conservatism. The damage done to the relational network of Maggie's family reverberated well beyond 20 March 1969, the date of Jane's death. Maggie Nelson never met Jane Mixer, yet years after Jane was killed, Maggie began to have nightmares in which she and Jane became one. We see this dream-logic at work in the opening poem in the first chapter of the book, which is titled "THE LIGHT OF THE MIND (Four Dreams)":

> She had been shot once in the front and once in the back of the head. […] The holes in her head were perfectly round and bloodless, with burnt-flared edges, two eclipses. […]

> […] a long shaft of pale light cast out from the center of her forehead, and another streamed behind her.
>
> *Is this the light of the mind? Is this the light of my mind?*
>
> […] *Why had the light always been invisible?* […] *I must have been squandering it, I must have felt only its vaguest rotations.* […] *I might illuminate entire rooms, entire dungeons, I shine so bright* […]
>
> But in fact she was losing the light; it leaked everywhere, unstoppable. (17, emphasis original)

Reflecting on her condition, the unnamed speaker decides to go to a café to write a letter illuminated by the light of her mind, thereby beginning the book.

Jane's ghost demands that Maggie not accept the "case of vaporization" that simply removes the body of the woman. That body must be returned to bleed all over the quiet interior where the sunlight plays its blades as the indifferent world natters on. Her life and death alike must be accounted for.

Yet it is an awful thing to be interpellated by a ghost, as Maggie makes clear in the poem "Hideous":

> Unable to sleep, surrounded by
> her words. Afraid, truly afraid
>
> to tell you about my brain
> chattering with cruelties –
>
> when did she know
> she was in danger;
>
> the terrible little gun's
> flat against her head;
> […]

> The fear,
> her fear
> […] (191)

"The fear" is quite specific. Maggie is here imagining herself as Jane, who must have realized that she was in grave danger in the eight or nine hours before the murderer pulled the trigger. Maggie declares that while she was writing *Jane*, she was afflicted for months at a time with what she calls "murder mind," when thoughts of murderous violence looped endlessly, gathering in intensity at nighttime and making rest impossible (*The Red Parts* 9).

Maggie is torn. In renewing Jane's life, she immediately confronts her death. You can see her set the contrast in these lines from the poem "First Photos." Maggie is doing research, looking at microfilm of the *Detroit News*:

> On March 22, 1969, Jane's face
> suddenly fills the screen.
>
> Her youth an aura like a
> new haircut – just blatant,
> raw, crushing. […]
> How she wants. How she
> penetrates, her eyes
> […] dark,
> obedient, devouring.
>
> My face stares into hers,
> our thoughts frozen together
> on the cusp of a wave
> just starting to go white-cold, curl
> and fall back into the spitting green. (34)

Twenty-three-year-old Maggie's "thoughts [are] frozen together" with twenty-three-year-old Jane's. Passionate life and the "white-cold" chill of death are suspended together in language.

Maggie's poems and her lineation of entries from the journals represent Jane's vitality and her lively mind, and make us intimate with her, so that we keenly feel her death. *The Michigan Murders*, by contrast, sensationalizes the sexual violence of the serial killer. Newspapers styled him the "Ypsilanti Ripper" or "Coed Killer," both titillating names emphasizing that the dead women were nothing more than his victims, with no significant lives worth mentioning beyond their deaths. When the police were unable to close Jane's case, many assumed that she was just such a victim. All of these elements invest *Jane* with Maggie's own passionate desire to live a full life in a world in which women's lives are too often stunted by fears excitedly promulgated by the press and prescribed by worried authorities, who tell women to never walk alone.

The "Epilogue" brings the opening dream to its terrible conclusion and sets the narrative frame:

> […] the world in which she moves can threaten blindness.
>
> Indeed, she no longer sees it, but the last of the light is dribbling out in thick, sticky drops of phosphorus.
>
> *I go on and I don't know whether I'm going into darkness or into light and joy*, she thinks as she walks further down the road.
>
> Above her, the sun is still trying to burn through the mist. *Strange*, she thinks, *how the sun so often appears as a pale circle, and not the orgy of unthinkable fire that it is.* (221)

Phosphorus reappears from the Plath poem, again in the register of death, for the detective must work the crime scene lit by "only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus." From the untitled poem that begins the book, we know that "the light of the mind" is leaking away even as the speaker says "*I shine so bright*," and here at the last, "thick, sticky

drops of phosphorus" fall to the ground, offering but fitful illumination. Jane is dying. The speaker, however, that compound of Jane and Maggie, continues to observe the scene. She acutely observes that the sun is not as it appears in this misty scene of Jane's imminent death, "a pale circle," but rather burns with a tremendous incandescence as "the orgy of / unthinkable fire that it is."

That final statement is lit by the scorching light of the largest star in our sky. It reminds us of the dangers of daring to gaze directly at the violence that extinguished Jane's life. It is dangerous to look at the sun directly with no protection – you will damage your corneas, even if you look only when the sun is fully eclipsed. No wonder Maggie is unable to sleep when thinking about Jane's terror after she had been picked up by the killer, before he shot her point-blank in the head. Maggie's willingness to go where language takes her gives Jane: A Murder its distinctive form. Henceforth, in the books that follow, Maggie creates the form her content demands, as in the "autobiography of a trial" that is The Red Parts, the lyrical Wittgensteinian proposition-essays of Bluets, and the "auto-theory" of The Argonauts.

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Does *Jane: A Murder* repeat the violence that it represents? Inevitably. But the repetition is with a difference. As Maggie writes in *The Argonauts*, "Words change depending on who speaks them; there is no cure" (8). She repeats passages from *The Michigan Murders*, a loathsome book that lasciviously lingers over the violence it represents, but those words change in the different context that *Jane* creates, and become repulsive, not exciting. The same can be said of her quotations from the newspaper. The book as a whole is suspended "on the cusp of a wave / just starting to go white-cold," where the life-force of Jane Mixer meets the poetic intelligence of Maggie Nelson.

That moment of suspension creates an interval wherein the violence of Jane's death signifies differently. There is no resolution, as though the loss of a loved one to premeditated, gender-specific, sexualized murder can ever be resolved. Maggie presents Jane in language that is vivid and

alive, and refuses to give lethal, misogynist violence the last word. Jane herself is dead long ago and buried. Maggie makes her live again to love her and to mourn her loss, while mounting a furious protest against a social world that ratifies masculine power and sensationalizes violence against women.

Thankfully, language is an inexhaustible resource, and is especially rich when compressed into lyric poetry. Phosphorus is a word demanding our attention, as it is significant in both epigraph and the "Epilogue." Phosphorus is, as we see in Plath's poem, a source of light, but its chemiluminescence is fitful and has a limited burn-time. This is the "light of the mind" that goes dark at the end of Jane: A Murder. In this sense, the reappearance of phosphorus at the conclusion of the book confirms the bleakness of "The Detective."

That is not, however, the last word to be said about the "Epilogue." The OED shows that the etymology of "phosphorus" extends back to the Greek word compounded of "light" and "form." To the ancient Greeks, φῶςφόρος signified "the morning star," the "light-bringer" visible in the night sky just before dawn. This celestial body is now known to be the planet Venus, which is the "third-brightest object in the sky, after the sun and moon" (EarthSky.org). The phosphorescent "morning star" supports the possibility that Jane is indeed "going […] into light and joy," even as the light of Jane's mind is fatally dimming, and phosphorus remains indelibly associated with darkness and death. The matter is undecidable. The "light-bringer" heralds the dawn, but without a shred of the easy assurance associated with the hopelessly clichéd phrase, "dawn of a new day." After all, the sun will soon outshine all else in the sky, its incandescence all-consuming.

I have had to do my own reckoning with the fact that all embodied life resists representation. It is a cliché to say that to understand someone, you need to "climb into his skin and walk around in it."[8] The metaphor of climbing into someone's skin avoids the painful recognition of impenetrable otherness, and evades confronting the ways in which no one, no matter how well they know you, no matter how well they

[8] One of the oft-quoted "morals" of Harper Lee's 1960 novel, *To Kill the Mockingbird* (36).

love you, actually experiences the world as you do. Nor can they fully understand, no matter how well they listen to you.

I am alone in my pain and a grief that I can never communicate fully. Sometimes this reality makes for excruciating loneliness that words cannot assuage because I can't find the words, either write them myself or find them written. What literary language offers is a way to address the other, as we can witness in Maggie addressing Jane. Rereading her words, my deep affection for their author is renewed. Jane: A Murder will speak to you differently, of course, and you will make of it what you will. For myself, I remain, quite simply, grateful—for the book and for the friendship. Both help me to sustain a life of grave difficulty that is eased by reading, writing and what literature has to offer.

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Biography

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