The Word "Genius"

a story by C. P. Boyko

Mr. Malcolm Gawfler could not sit still. He was alarmed, though he did not know why. Something terrible was about to happen, but he did not know what. War? Famine? An earthquake? Yes, that would be just his luck: an earthquake the same day his new book was launched! A gaping chasm would swallow up all fifteen hundred copies, he supposed. In any case, survivors of earthquakes did not run out the next morning to buy new novels, but instead useful trash like bandages, food, and rope. Yet he was expected to perform tonight, to read aloud passages of this scandalously irrelevant work, as if an apocalypse were not hanging over his head! He had another cup of coffee, to steady his nerves, then another; but for some reason, this did not help.

Mrs. Deirdre Gawfler watched him sadly as he lunged about the room, muttering and making gestures of hypothesis, decision, and renunciation. She intervened long enough to straighten his cuffs and wipe the ever-present smut from his fingers. His large, knobby hands were trembling and his eyes were wide open, as if to Injustice.

"You'll do fine," she said, though she knew better, and patted his lapels.

"Who cares?" he cried, tearing his arms free and throwing the cuffs again out of alignment. He felt like a man going over a waterfall being reassured that his hair was well parted. "Who the deuce *cares*?" He clutched his chest and resumed pacing.

Sometimes Mrs. Gawfler wished (for his sake) that her husband were not a novelist, but something less taxing, like a priest, or a sol-

dier, or a prison warden.

But she needn't have worried about that evening. The reading was a success, at least compared with previous occasions. In the past, Malcolm's nervousness had filled his speech with long, bewildered pauses; it was as if he had never seen his text before, did not recognize the language it was written in, or indeed the alphabet. That night, however, he read derisively and incredulously, like an angry atheist mocking the Bible in church. This new style was deemed by the audience an improvement. It was certainly quicker, and got the drinks served sooner. Mrs. Gawfler noted with relief that Lady Astmore had complied with her private suggestion and withheld coffee.

An hour later, when Mr. Gawfler had more or less subsided to his normal level of excitability, Mrs. Gawfler made her excuses ("The children ...") and took her leave. On the way out she touched the arm of Mullens, the publisher, to remind him of the little matter of the book reviews.

Mr. Gawfler, meanwhile, was feeling more optimistic. He no longer felt that an earthquake was imminent, or even inevitable. Probably the people in this room would live to ripe old ages. They certainly deserved to. They were good people, intelligent people, with obviously refined tastes. They deserved to be happy. He toasted them, individually and collectively, with the latest in a series of whiskies that had begun mysteriously to appear in his hand. He did not normally like whisky—he did not normally drink—but this stuff, really, was not half bad. He could give credit where credit was due. Tears came to his eyes at this realization of his own generosity. His epitaph, he thought, might someday say, "Kind Even To Whisky." Cigarettes too. He did not normally smoke, but at one point in the evening someone offered him a cigarette—or anyway allowed the hand holding it to drift too near his gaze—and Mr. Gawfler plucked it from their fingers as though it were Life. He sucked on the thing

as if trying to draw a pebble through it; when his lungs and cheeks were full, he threw back his head, puckered his lips, and exhaled a magisterial cloud of dense white smoke. A moment later he was seized by a fit of hacking, shuddering coughs. When the worst of these had passed, he looked around him, dazed. "Where did *that* come from?" he wondered.

All but two of the people in attendance were known to him personally, and these two were promptly recommended to him as the rarities they were. The first was a man who claimed to have read all his books and, in proof, quoted a few lines that he had particularly admired—and which Mr. Gawfler did not recognize at all. The feeling that came over him whenever one of his friends strayed from generic into specific praise came over him now. He felt stiff and uncomfortable and fraudulent. All that old stuff seemed so far behind him! Why did no one ever praise the paragraphs he'd written that morning, for instance, or the ones he was going to write tomorrow? The little man before him had a receding upper lip, caterpillar eyebrows, and squirrel-tail side whiskers. Mr. Gawfler thanked him, delivered some thoughts on the indispensability of the reader in the creative act, and autographed for him a fresh copy of the new novel (thus obligating the poor man to purchase a second one). Then he turned his attention, by turning his body, aside.

The second stranger was a woman who also claimed to have read all his books. She made other claims, too, some of which were not comprehensible to Mr. Gawfler in his exalted state, and many of which were interrupted by Mr. Gawfler's own enthusiastic agreement. She claimed that his characters really lived; that he had a remarkable understanding of women; that she would rank him among the preeminent novelists of the day, alongside Mrs. Humphry Ward and Mr. Jerome K. Jerome; that she had read *The Layman and Lord Newbotham* three times, and that "that Newbotham" was a "real subtle character"; that his use of punctuation in the Laura chapter of

Mrs. Dreazle was simply extraordinary; that one sensed such sadness beneath the bright pageantry of his plots; that that bit about birds and trees at the end of *Jebediah Stokes* was perhaps the finest piece of really lyrical prose since she didn't know when; that she loved his inventiveness, his compassion, his sense of humor; that she loved his mind. She had a protruding lower lip, a drooping eyelid, and a chin like a spade. She spoke with an ever-modulating inflection, as if her voice were an instrument she was trying to tune. She sounded always on the verge of breaking into embarrassed laughter. Mr. Gawfler was charmed. He spoke with her, to the exclusion of everyone else, for the rest of the evening. He did not even think to sign for her a copy of the new novel—an oversight which would have significant consequences, as the reader shall presently see.

Mr. Gawfler was not what one might call a good sleeper. He did not sleep easily, and especially did not fall asleep easily. He seemed never able to get all his many long limbs inside the bed at once, but had to fold and refold himself this way and that, tucking parts of himself away wherever they would fit, as if his body were one too many towels to be stuffed into a drawer. He was always too cold or too hot, a difficulty which was rendered quite unresolvable by the possible combinations of seven blankets and the window's several hundred possible degrees of openness. And in addition to these physical discomforts, he had to contend with a restless mind.... Consequently, he often leapt into bed at the first yawn or telltale sign of mental fogginess, hoping to smuggle himself across the border into the Land of Nod while his mind was off its guard, as it were. But inevitably, as soon as his head hit the pillow, acute mental clarity and crackling wakefulness lit the inside of his brain like a searchlight and he found himself, quite against his will, pondering such questions as how many bees it took to make a teaspoonful of honey, whether or not Reverend McAdams would like the books he had lent him, what funny things the children had said at supper time, whether or not he

had brushed his teeth, whether or not he had that morning used a semicolon incorrectly, and *how long* it would take so many bees to make so much honey. When he realized that his mind had tricked him and that it had no intention of turning off, he got angry—which of course only woke him more fully. But his anger also made him more determined, so that he would often lie there for hours, his eyes clamped defiantly shut, his every muscle straining with the effort to sleep.

That night, however, he sank into his vast mattress as if it were sun-warmed moss; his limbs unfolded effortlessly and imperceptibly, like petals unfurling in springtime; his joints exuded a pleasant healing fatigue, like cut branches exuding sap; his eyelids were warm stones; waves of happy accomplishment flowed down his spine; and his mind hummed in wordless contentment, like the final dying notes of a symphony. His last thoughts were: "Mrs. Brewler; her name is Mrs. Brewler," and, "She loves my mind!" Then the lukewarm tide of slumber came in and gently extinguished these last glowing embers of consciousness.

But when the morning came, something was wrong. He awoke convinced that all his anxiety of the previous afternoon had been justified—that something terrible had happened after all. He lifted his head from the pillow (it was like shifting a sack of meal) and looked hard at the world. He found signs of the catastrophe everywhere, in every thing: the way his shoes lay empty and abandoned on the floor; the way all that remained of yesterday's coffee were cold dregs; the way the very walls were blistered and peeling, as though bursting with rot. He sloshed himself queasily upright and stared out the window. The sun glazed the hills of mud with a harsh, tacky, amber light, like syrup that had congealed overnight. There had been no earthquake, perhaps, but it would have been better if there had. He staggered out of bed and, armed with nothing but a terrific headache and a tongue like a slab of cold turkey wrapped in a handkerchief,

launched himself out into the world to find the cause of this apocalypse.

Mr. Gawfler, you see, was an intellectual, and had, as I have endeavored to show, the intellectual's tendency to become bewildered by his internal, emotional states, and the intellectual's need to find rational, external explanations for them. In short: He felt bad, and he wanted to know why.

He had not far to seek. The smell of frying rashers reached him on the stairs, and he realized that their cook was a sadist. The page boy passed him in the hall and tipped his hat, and Mr. Gawfler realized that they employed the most lazy, incompetent, and insolent help in the world. In the dining room his children lunged at him like feral dogs and wiped their sticky paws and muzzles on his pyjamas, and he realized that parenthood is a prison sentence. His wife said "Good morning," and he realized that he hated her.

Ah, God! It hadn't always been thus. He'd loved her once. He'd even *been in love with* her once! An image opened in his mind like an old wound, a vision of the fields outside Hawksmoor where they had rambled that summer, so many years ago. Ah, God, the cruel ravages of time! thought Mr. Gawfler poignantly. He'd been in love then, certainly—though he may not have realized it at first. He thought he was just being gentlemanly, keeping the poor girl company. He explained his happiness, when he recognized it for what it was, as the logical result of so much exercise, sunshine, good conversation, and, yes, feminine beauty. For he had to admit that her hair in the sunlight looked as soft and thick as a muskrat's pelt, and he did rather like the way her little pouchy cheeks framed her mouth like parentheses when she smiled, and he supposed he admired the way she moved so easily, like a single swath of fabric wafted by a breeze. But he also found that his nerves jangled, his extremities tingled, and his insides became muck in her presence. He concluded that she had an abrasive personality.

He required nearly two weeks to achieve insight. The day before he was due to return to Fulfordton, he called at his aunt's a few minutes early—and discovered that Deirdre sat on the floor like a child to tie her shoelaces. Then, while they were walking, she mispronounced a word: She said that Blake was too "eth-real" for her. These idiosyncrasies warmed his heart almost painfully; he did not know why. He believed he was embarrassed for her. In fact, she was endearing herself to him.

An hour later, he finally understood. They had found and venturesomely reclaimed an overgrown trail through a hedge of blackthorn that led down to a secluded bower where a stream gurgled complacently, like bathwater draining from a tub. The natural sanctity of the setting, or perhaps the thought of his imminent departure, rendered the two of them mute. Eventually he noticed that, every minute or so, and quite unnecessarily, she smoothed back the hair from her cheek with the last two fingers of her hand. Fear coursed through him; his blood tolled like a bell with the realization that she was nervous in his company—that she loved him.

And so, at last, he was able to see, in the mirror of her feelings, his own.

"Would you," he said, "will you," he said, "would you by any chance like for me to—permit me to—read you a chapter or two of my novel?"

He remembered how her eyes had shone with emotion.

Yet it was all doomed to end here, at this awful table, with these horrible, still-quivering strips of fried pigflesh on the plate before him!

Still, there was no use denying it: He had been happy once—ah, God!—happier than he had been at any time since.

Until, that was, last night.

He brooded over his breakfast, clutching his fork and knife like bludgeons, and occasionally making strictly defensive attacks on his

rashers. He managed to keep them at bay; but his thoughts were another matter.

Why should he have been happy last night? What about last night could have made him feel so good, so much better than he had felt since he was in love?

His rashers enjoyed a momentary respite as his utensils fell still. It all became clear.

Mrs. Brewler's face, certain characteristics of her voice, and even a few of her words came back to him. He realized ... that he was in love.

Mrs. Gawfler watched her husband throw down his utensils, stagger back from the table as if warding off a blow, and galumph out of the dining room without a word. She listened to him trudge upstairs to the attic, grapple with the door for a moment before slamming it vindictively shut, and begin resolutely to pace—setting out each time, from alternate corners, with renewed purpose, as if determined *this* time not to be checked. She smiled, sighed, and raised her eyebrows all at once. It was always something of a relief when Malcolm returned to work after a long hiatus—even though in many ways he was more difficult to live with when he was writing. He began to sleep at odd hours or not at all; he forgot to eat and to shave and to wash; he became irritable and preternaturally sensitive to all "noise" and "clutter"—two rather fluid categories which seemed to encompass, at one time or another, the set of all things audible and visible. Thus it became necessary for the cook to prepare only "quiet" meals, bland foods which could be ingested with minimal distraction to the eye, ear, nose, or tongue; for the children to eat at other times or in other rooms; for the gardener to do all his work on the south side of the house either before dawn or after dusk; and for Mrs. Gawfler to do without house guests or callers for the four or five months Malcolm typically required to complete a book.

On the other hand, the hours when he locked himself in The

Brown Study were always her most productive. It was considerably easier to answer his correspondence, pay his bills, organize his library, and make a clean copy of the latest pages of his manuscript when he was not constantly buzzing around. Nevertheless, she knew that, relieved as she now was, in a month or two she would begin to miss him, begin almost to long for the day he would be finished—that first jubilant, attentive, loving day of idleness, when he would bundle her and the children outside for a romp in the fields or a long botanical walk through the woods. By all appearances he seemed to hate the writing life; but he needed to write, she supposed, so that he could occasionally feel by contrast the joys of not writing, of not having to write. Still, sometimes she wished he wrote short stories.

She sent the children outside with the nurse and both maids and luxuriated, for nearly five minutes, in the silence and freedom of solitude. Then she returned to the library and resumed her hunt through that morning's newspapers for any mention of her husband's new novel. Distantly and soothingly, like the ticking of an old grandfather clock or the dripping of a faucet, came the sound of the novelist's regular, agitated pacing.

But Mr. Gawfler, as the reader knows, was not hatching a new novel; he was reluctantly but with rigorous honesty convincing himself that his deduction was correct—that he was indeed in love with Mrs. Brewler. Whenever his arguments lost coherence, flying apart into so many fragments of excitement and dismay, he dragged himself back to facts. It was true, at least, that she was in love with him. She had said as much—had she not? "I love your mind," she had said. But what was he if not his mind? To say "I love your mind" was to say "I love your soul," or "I love your *you*." So she loved him. She loved him! Panic swept through his body—and he assumed that this was reciprocation. He felt ill, and supposed that this was love.

He did not *want* to be in love—and with a married woman! He had not planned this; he had not asked for this. —Or had he? Mrs.

Brewler had sensed a "sadness" behind his words; what could she have meant by that, if not a secret dissatisfaction, a hidden longing? She knew him better than he knew himself! He had never imagined that his books were autobiographical in any but the most superficial sense; but here was the counterproof. He went to his bookshelf and looked at the volumes he had so naively produced over the years. It was all there, unconsciously encoded in his books. He flung open *Mrs. Dreazle* to the celebrated Laura chapter and read at random: "For surely, thought Laura, Mr. Edmunds would not—would he—dare to presume ...?" Good God! He snapped the book shut in amazement. He had never once given conscious thought to the expressiveness of punctuation, but that one sentence now struck him like a compact essay on the subject. Those dithering dashes, that pregnant ellipsis, the excruciating uncertainty of that question mark! He pulled down *Jebediah Stokes*, opened to the last chapter and read: "The hawthorns were in full bloom ..."—and could read no more. At one time, he would have been hard-pressed to define "lyrical" prose, but now he could do better: He could point to a quintessential example of the stuff! Finally he tore into *The Layman and Lord Newbotham*, where he found this: "Mr. Clarence, laboring under the misapprehension that his presence was still desired, crossed the room to the picture window." Mr. Gawfler, unable at first to grasp the Brewlerian significance of this passage, caught himself *reading it three times*. Then he riffled back and forth till the eponymous hero appeared, and he stood flabbergasted by the portrait of this monster of subtlety: "Lord Newbotham thought it better, for the moment, to say nothing."

Mr. Gawfler, for a moment, felt naked before Mrs. Brewler's clear and all-seeing gaze. She knew him inside and out; she knew every nook and cranny of his mind—and she loved it!

Did Deirdre love his mind? He supposed that she supposed she did. But his mind, he now realized, was in his books. Did she love

his books? It had been years, surely, since she had given him any definite indication that she admired his work. Good God! Perhaps she *hated* his mind! Perhaps their entire marriage was, intellectually, a sham!

After five or six hours of further deliberation and five or six thousand false starts, Mr. Gawfler at last successfully hurled himself out the attic door and down the stairs, determined once and for all to wrench this matter into the open.

At the sound of his portentous tread on the stairs, Mrs. Gawfler signaled as prearranged to the nurse, who was to find the maid, who was to tell the cook to warm up Mr. Gawfler's supper. Mr. Gawfler, however, did not go to the dining room, but joined his wife in the library. He snapped his mouth open and shut a few times, then fell into a chair and began methodically rubbing his face and head, as if searching for something he had glued there for safekeeping. Mrs. Gawfler put away her writing things and gave him her attention; she sensed that he wanted to talk.

"Confound it," cried Mr. Gawfler at last. "What did you think of —" But at the last moment he balked, and named instead a colleague (or adversary) whose recent three-volume novel they had both read and which he had grudgingly enjoyed. Mrs. Gawfler replied vaguely and promptingly; but to her surprise, Mr. Gawfler did not take the bait. He wanted to know what *she* thought.

Mrs. Gawfler sat fully upright. It had been several years since her husband had read his day's work to her, but she remembered how trying it had been for them both. She genuinely liked his prose, but when she praised it he suspected her of humoring him. When she denied this, he questioned her objectivity. When she tried to oblige him by scraping up some helpful criticism, he accused her of caviling, and losing the forest in the trees. Unable to say the right thing, Mrs. Gawfler had resolved to say nothing; and soon Mr. Gawfler stopped soliciting her opinion.

Now she sensed a trap. She had in fact liked Mr. Paulsen's novel, had been entertained and moved by it, but she was afraid that praise of another man's work might be construed by her husband in his present state (she was acutely aware that he had eaten nothing all day) as condemnation of his own. Pressed for comment, she said that she felt on the whole that it was rather unfortunate that the heroine had had to drown her baby at the end. By this she meant nothing more, really, than that drowning one's baby was a Sad Event, something to be avoided whenever possible. She was even congratulating herself for hitting upon so unobjectionable a view, when Mr. Gawfler objected, and objected vociferously.

Mr. Gawfler, it must be remembered, was a novelist, and his approach to novels was that of a novelist. On the page, instead of people, some more, some less likeable, he saw characters, more or less believable; instead of stories, some more, some less engaging, he saw plots, more or less skillfully constructed. For him, all criticism and commentary referred to craftsmanship; he could understand no other possible attitude. But Mrs. Gawfler was essentially a reader; and while she was certainly capable of evaluating the artistry employed in the making of a fiction, this was not her usual method. Especially when a novel was good, she was content to take the people as people and the stories as a record of their lives.

So, this is what happened: Mrs. Gawfler said that it was unfortunate that the heroine had drowned her baby. Mr. Gawfler took this to mean that it was unfortunate that the *novelist* had seen fit to make the heroine drown her baby; that, in other words, this act was not credible, or was in some way not artistically proper. He argued that the heroine *could have done nothing else*—by which he meant, of course, that the novelist would have been wrong to make her do anything else; he thought the finale was fitting, and indeed beautifully tragic. Mrs. Gawfler, however, interpreted these statements not in the aesthetic sense in which they were intended, but in the moral

sense with which she had opened the discussion; so it seemed to her that her husband was not far from saying that drowning babies was in and of itself a beautiful and fitting thing to do. She begged to disagree. And so the argument waxed heated, neither of its participants guessing that they were speaking at cross purposes, and both of them becoming more dogmatic as their antagonist became more outrageous—till Mrs. Gawfler seemed to Mr. Gawfler to be saying that one must never so much as introduce a baby or even a lake into a work of fiction, and Mr. Gawfler seemed to Mrs. Gawfler to be saying that all babies everywhere must be drowned always.

The contest was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Gawfler's meal, which Mrs. Gawfler begged him to eat. Unfortunately, Mr. Gawfler did not know his own body as well as his wife did. (He had once consulted the local physician about what he feared were ulcer pains, but were in fact tactfully diagnosed as hunger pangs.) Taking his wife's appeal as a cowardly diversion or bribe, he swept the tray grandly to the floor and strode out of the room, the very picture of dignified indignation. Back in the study, he nursed his newly shattered illusions till they grew into the conviction that his wife was a moron who hated his mind. This terrible truth gradually lodged itself physically in his abdomen, where a strange new feeling of aching emptiness began to consume him.

It was several days before Mr. Gawfler acted on this revelation. In the meantime, he became kindly, patient, and valedictory towards his family. At times he quailed at the drastic step he was about to take, and could almost believe that it would be better to let life continue in its old dreary course. But then the image of Mrs. Brewler—or rather, the image of himself that she had evoked that night—strengthened his resolve. He weighed the facts gravely and objectively, denying himself the sentimental luxury of modesty. If he had responsibilities to his family, he had even greater responsibilities to his Genius. (Mrs. Brewler had spoken much of Genius, and much of

him; the implication was clear.) A man was put on this earth for some purpose; *his* was to write great novels. But could one write great novels, or any novels at all, in such a stifling, loveless, poisonous atmosphere as this? One could not. He owed it to his work, and to his readers of tomorrow, to escape before his afflatus was snuffed out entirely. Besides, an artist had an obligation to *live*, confound it!—to taste all that life had to offer! His *art* demanded that he love and be loved by Mrs. Brewler; let the consequences be hanged!

He worked some of these thoughts, discreetly and poetically condensed, into the telegram that he finally sent Mrs. Brewler later that week.

Thinking	much	our	conversation
forgot	sign	book	deepest
regrets	hope	sincerely	rectify
oversight	may	call	Gawfler

The response came in the form of a letter, effusive but brief, inviting him to call for lunch next Thursday. As per custom, this letter was opened, read, and replied to by Mrs. Gawfler, before being slid under her husband's door with the rest of the mail; so that Mrs. Brewler was rather bemused to receive two very different responses from the novelist. One regretted that a visit would not be possible as he was deeply immersed in a new novel; the other declared that he would be delighted to come. Since neither letter claimed to be a correction to the other, and since both arrived by the same post, Mrs. Brewler deliberated anxiously for some time over the guest list—ultimately striking an elegant balance between those people most likely to be impressed by an unexpected literary guest and those least likely to be disappointed by the appearance of no unexpected guest whatsoever.

The lunch, in any case, proved to be not quite what the literary guest had expected. To begin with, he was greeted at the door and divested of his inscribed novel by a short man with a driving manner

and a head always cocked to one side, as if he alone would succeed diagonally where all the timid, conventional world had failed vertically—and who turned out, in fact, to be Mr. Brewler. Something about the pointed brevity of Mrs. Brewler's letter had rather led Mr. Gawfler to believe that his was to have been a private interview.

Having ascertained who, or anyway what, Mr. Gawfler was, Mr. Brewler took him around and thrust him upon the attention of assorted groups of his wife's guests. "A novelist," he said; then explained, "He writes novels." This fact never failed to meet with respectful astonishment, rather as if Mr. Gawfler had been introduced as an armless philanthropist who volunteered Sundays at the parish soup kitchen. Mr. Gawfler looked anxiously around for Mrs. Brewler as his new admirers asked him sensitive, probing questions about his work. Was it very wonderful being a novelist? Did he write in the morning, afternoon, or evening? How many pages did a novel have to be? So very many as that? Was it very difficult to come up with new stories and characters all the time? Would he put *them*—this lunch—into one of his novels? Was it very painful for him to kill one of his characters? Did he know Mrs. Humphry Ward very well? Mr. Gawfler was just beginning to resent the impersonal tone of these questions when someone asked him if he had been very devastated by the notice his book had received in last Saturday's *Review*.

Now, Mr. Gawfler, having published fifteen novels, had long ago cultivated a simple yet robust defense against book critics. He dismissed them all as fools. I would like to be able to say that this policy was not so self-serving as it may seem, for indeed Mr. Gawfler also applied it to favorable reviews; but the fact is that he did not receive many favorable reviews, and such as he did receive always seemed to him thin, vague, and poorly written (though no more thin, vague, and poorly written than the bad reviews, let it be said). If he was hard on his detractors he was also hard on his supporters—because, in both cases, he secretly felt that he deserved better.

Mr. Gawfler implied something of this attitude in the frosty, dignified manner in which he confessed that he had not "bumped into" that particular review. Mr. Brewler (who owned part of a newspaper) was scandalized by this failure, as he saw it, of the national press to reach its intended audience; his head even shot upright for a moment. He resolved to rectify this minor collapse of civilization, and, tilting sideways with an intent air of peering right around to the dark backs of things, set out to find the elusive article. His determination was so manifest that conversation died and everyone stopped to watch, as they would have been compelled to stop and watch a man lift a house or wrestle a crocodile. He found his quarry—as no one had doubted he would—on the sideboard; he ripped it from its hiding place, lifted it triumphantly over his head and shook it, as if to break its neck, and presented it to Mr. Gawfler.

Mr. Gawfler read the review. When he had done, he laughed, once, as a fencing instructor in full armor might say to his student, "touché." But the fastidiousness with which he refolded the newspaper, making creases where none had existed, the new blankness that now entered his gaze, and the hollow joviality that entered his speech, betrayed something of his hurt—or would have, if Mrs. Brewler's guests had not found in these symptoms confirmation of their conception of The Novelist as a sort of benign lunatic, an absent-minded mystic with little interest in the mundane world of phenomena, little social skill, and even less sense of proper attire. The only thing missing was a filthy beard. They found him quite charming. The lunch was a great success.

Two hours later, Mr. Gawfler staggered out into the sunshine with a sick and heavy heart. "Those people!" he muttered. It was all he could muster for a time, so he repeated it. "Those ... *people*!" He decided he did not like those people. They were not his kind of people at all. They were—oh, dash it!—they were fools!

It had been a particularly bad review.

He walked to the train station with the slovenly gait of a child reporting for punishment. A carful of goggled motorists passed him in the road, sending a single small cloud of dust directly into his face. He stood there, sneezing and shaking both his fists, for more time than it would be seemly for us to observe him ... Eventually his rage was distilled into thought: So that was what the world was coming to! A nightmare vision of the future came to him, of the earth weltering in a fog of dust and exhaust through which half-human holiday-makers, crazed with pleasure, blindly piloted expensive missiles ...

And the whole time, Mrs. Brewler had avoided him, maneuvering always to keep one of her guests between them, like a squirrel on the far side of a tree. He did not believe they had exchanged one word. And he had practically chucked his family over for her!

Ah, God, he was a fool. He did not deserve love, to love or to be loved. He did not deserve to experience things, did not deserve to taste even the most blighted of fruits from the Tree of Life. He was a blackguard, a scoundrel, a wastrel. He did not deserve to return home to his too-loving wife, his too-sweet children, his too-comfortable chair, his too-able cook, his too-deferential page boy, his too-industrious gardener ... His mind rambled through his house and grounds with a heavy, sensuous self-pity, as if he were already a ghost there, who could look but never again touch.

That night Mr. Gawfler joined his family at the supper table. He sighed a great deal and ate whatever was put near him, but with an air of ponderous obedience, chewing long and swallowing each time with a shudder of revulsion. At one point David spilled a glass of milk on his father's sleeve, and there was a moment of exquisite tension; but Mr. Gawfler did not even look up, and merely muttered that it was no worse than he deserved.

Mrs. Gawfler was concerned. She had witnessed her husband's hopeful (if oddly clandestine) departure that morning and his lugubrious return that afternoon, and had concluded that the day's

walk in the woods, where he sometimes did his thinking, had resulted in a setback. In the past, when he had decided that an idea for a novel had to be abandoned or radically reworked, there had always followed a week or two of just this sort of moroseness. She made a decision.

"Wait here," she said unnecessarily. "I've something to show you."

She returned with Sunday's *Spectator*, which she placed on the table beneath his dead gaze. Gradually, by fits and starts, the words on the page began to prick his awareness like so many pins and needles in a limb to which the feeling slowly returns.

He read the review. When he had done, he laughed, once, as a bridegroom might say to his best man's toast, "Enough!" The elaborate nonchalance with which he refolded the newspaper, making creases where no newspaper had ever had them, betrayed something of his emotion. Soon he was on his feet and pacing around the table and tousling the hair on his children's heads.

"Dash my buttons!" he said at last. "That fool! That ... *fool*! Where do you suppose he gets off? I mean really! It would make a cat laugh! Comparing me to Turgenev! I ask you!"

After a time his exclamations dissolved into bewildered chuckles. The nurse took the children upstairs for their bath and Mr. and Mrs. Gawfler retired to the library, where the page boy had already built up the fire. Mr. Gawfler placed himself in his chair and stretched himself to the full extent of his considerable length, running his hands over the arm-rests as if searching for imperfections.

"Of course it's all balderdash," he said gleefully. "Most critics after all are only failed novelists themselves, and trash is as often overpraised in its day as great works are derided and misunderstood and neglected in theirs. No, you can't put any stock in the judgement of critics. It's practically your duty to ignore them. After all, you don't want anyone else writing your books for you. Ultimately, you're the

only one who can know if you're any good or not—"

He broke off, and his face crumpled slightly.

Mrs. Gawfler intervened. "Coffee, my dear?"

The doubt, whatever it was, passed. Mr. Gawfler smiled dreamily and nodded. A vision of the future came to him. He would drink much good, hot coffee. He would do much good, hard work. He would hone his mind till it was as sharp and clean as a stainless-steel instrument of dissection, and he would lay open the human heart in all its noble faltering, all its muddled glory. It was not for him to use the word "genius"; but someday he would be good, or even great. He would write a masterpiece yet to justify that poor silly man's praise—and that poor silly woman's. Perhaps someday he would buy a motor-car.