On creative daemons, digital distractions, and reading your life as a work of fiction

Curated readings and reflections.

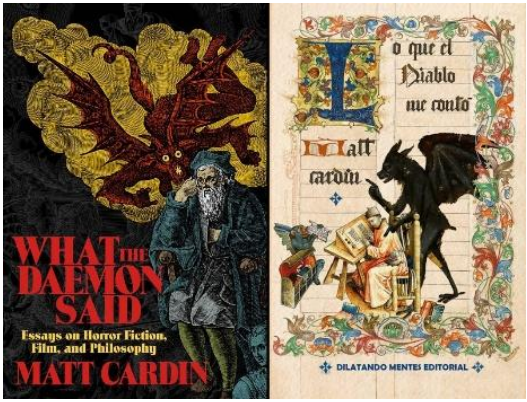
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Dear friends,

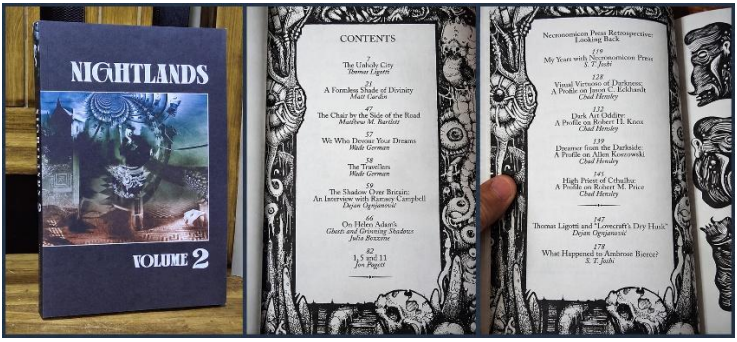
Today, I bring you a gathering of readings and reflections on the daemons of writing, the pleasures and mysteries of books, the importance of loafing, and the strange experience of discovering that your life has taken a turn you never saw coming. Along the way, there are some thoughts about digital distraction and what Ray Bradbury might have made of AI. I've grouped it all into two sections: passages from my recent reading that have stayed with me, and reflections of my own, written as inspiration has struck. Feel free to read straight through or to dip into whatever catches your interest.

But first, a few news items from my writing life.

First, I received a notification last week that *Lo que el diablo me contó*, the Spanish edition of my 2022 essay collection *What the Daemon Said*, has sold out its current print run, so the publisher, Dilatando Mentes Editorial, is doing another. It always feels good when such news comes through. I encourage you to look up the Spanish edition if you're interested. The original English edition is of course still available too, pretty much everywhere.



Second, I also recently received my contributor's copy of the second issue of *Nightlands*, the annual journal of art and weird fiction that Chiroptera Press debuted last year. It's a pleasure and an honor to be included in its stellar lineup, starting with a reprint of Thomas Ligotti's *The Unholy City* and then continuing with writing and artwork from a whole host of talented friends and colleagues, encompassing the likes of S. T. Joshi, Harry O. Morris, Allen Koszowski, Matthew M. Bartlett, and Jon Padgett.



My own contribution, the essay "A Formless Shade of Divinity," is a meditation on Ligotti's "The Red Tower," *I Have a Special Plan for This World* (his poem cycle, not his identically titled short story), and *This Degenerate Little Town*. It was originally published as a booklet accompanying the spoken-word and dark ambient vinyl LP production/performance of "The Red Tower" from Cadabra Records. It's also collected in the opening section of *What the Daemon Said*, where all my major writings on Tom's work are brought together.

And a third item: As I announced in a previous post, my course *Writing at the Wellspring* has reopened at Weirdosphere for a limited period of new enrollment. It explores the relationship between creative inspiration and the deeper unfolding of our lives, asking how we can learn to listen and respond to the source of our writing, and what that relationship may reveal about who we are.

The five modules are now entirely self-paced, with recorded lectures and office hours, notes, suggested readings, discussion prompts, and exercises. I will also host a live Q&A on **Sunday, December 6, at 3 p.m. Eastern**. If you

took the course when I first offered it in 2024, you're warmly invited to revisit the material and join us for that conversation.

Newsletter subscribers can receive **$45 off enrollment**; you'll find the details and discount code in that previous announcement. If you're new here, subscribing is free.

And whether or not the course interests you, the ebook edition of *Writing at the Wellspring* remains on sale for **$2.99 through November 30**. If these questions about creativity and the inner life speak to you, I would be glad to have your company in either form.

On to the readings and reflections. . .

Warm regards,



READINGS

The daemons of writing

It never ceases to amaze and please me that an academic paper that frames writing as a collaboration between the conscious and unconscious minds, and that explicitly invokes the term "daemon" to characterize the latter, has become a minor classic in the field of modern-day writing education. I'm talking about the 1964 paper "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing" by Janet A. Emig, who would go on to spend two decades as an English professor at Rutgers, and who would also eventually lead the National Council of Teachers of English. Here are some key passages from that early paper, laying out principles of writing and creativity that quite effectively call out the deep mystery of the whole thing:

> The rhetoric textbooks and composition guides . . . imply that writing is an act of the conscious self alone....
>
> [But most] writers of whom I know convey implicitly or explicitly not only awareness that there is an unconscious actively performing in all their writings, but a belief—more, awe—in its importance, efficacy, and power. Often, in fact, they persona-fy the unconscious part of the writing self into daemons, to give a swift composite definition from Aristotle down through history, that part of the writing self with which the writer will not tamper, of which he is in profound respect, to which he consequently gives careful autonomy....
>
> A hierarchy of daemons is involved in writing, with careful, formal decisions governing which is called up when, and by what instrument, as when Hemingway switches from pencil to typewriter for the writing of dialogue....
>
> Another way of summoning daemons—especially dozing or quiescent ones—is through music, specifically, the music of language itself. For daemons are creatures of incantations: what stirs them are rhythms, prose or poetic....
>
> The most powerful form of incantation . . . comes from one's own written words—sheer words themselves in clusters, islands, clumps, lists, strings, sentences. The advice here from the writer seems to be, "When mute or in doubt, start generating words on the page; then through examining what you have produced automatically or semi-automatically, you may discern a pattern or theme in the seeming written chaos."

—Janet A. Emig, "The Uses of the Unconscious in Composing," *College Composition and Communication* 15, no. 1 (February 1964)

Inspiration and mediumship

Pair Emig's paper above with the following words from Gustave Geley, the early twentieth-century physician and psychical researcher whose book *From the Unconscious to the Conscious*, from which this passage is quoted, arguably deserves to be characterized as monumental:

> The state of ecstasy, of rapture, of absent-mindedness, in a poet, an artist, or a philosopher composing under the influence of inspiration, is, at bottom, identical with the secondary state of the medium. Let it not be said that the medium speaks, acts, and writes quite automatically, whilst the artist, even when his conscious will does not intervene, nevertheless knows what he is producing. This distinction does not always obtain. Many mediums know quite well what is about to be given through them; just as the artist knows bit by bit what he will produce under an inspiration of which he is neither the master nor the guide.
>
> Rousseau covering pages of writing without reflection or effort, in a state of rapture which drew tears, Musset listening to the mysterious "genius" who dictated his verses, Socrates listening to his daemon, Schopenhauer refusing to believe that his unexpected and unsought postulates were his own work, all behaved exactly like mediums.
>
> —Gustave Geley, *From the Unconscious to the Conscious*, trans. S. De Brath (Harper and Brothers, 1921), 114–115.

The books we need

Speaking of books, here is Franz Kafka in 1904, at age 20, in a letter written to his childhood friend, Oskar Pollak, asserting a deep and almost dreadful purpose for them:

> The books we need are the kind that act upon us like a misfortune, that make us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that make us feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation—a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.

That passage has been widely quoted for decades. And indeed, it's a ringer. More recently, here is Michael Dirda in 2013, in the final entry for his column on books in *The American Scholar*, simultaneously agreeing with, qualifying, and reshaping Kafka's point:

Once, this seemed to me to describe the sort of soul-shattering literary experiences we should always be seeking. Not so much now. For Kafka, reading, like criticism of the Irving Howe school, was something you didn't just do for fun. It was hard work and you needed to use an ax and you probably felt exhausted afterwards and ready for some hot compresses.

There are, of course, books—great, good, and bad—that do require the last full measure of devotion. A reviewer's lot is not always an easy one. I can remember flogging myself to finish Harold Brodkey's *The Runaway Soul,* despite the novel's consummate, unmitigated tedium. Some people—not I—have complained about Proust's meandering sentences, Henry James's fine distinctions, or Thomas Aquinas's logic-chopping. Well, I say if you don't like them, don't read them. You're not in school any more. Even the best mountaineers aren't always up for an ascent of Mount Everest. Sometimes a reader just wants to spend some idle days on the Yann, or drift slowly along with Hercule Poirot as he solves some hideously complicated murder, or quietly revel in the mishaps of Bertie Wooster and Gussie Fink-Nottle.

Just remember, though: keep trying books outside your comfort zone. At least from time to time. True readers ought to be explorers.

—Michael Dirda, "A Positively, Final Appearance," Browsings, *The American Scholar*, February 1, 2013.

Something besides cognition

Still staying with the theme of books, I assume we're aware of the widespread concerns about a crisis in reading, manifesting as a supposed society-wide decline in both the ability and the motivation to read books. It's not so much a matter of declining functional literacy, though that, too, is sometimes called into question. Rather, it's a matter of sheer alienation, a combined inability and disinclination to enter into mental and spiritual communion with written texts that display some minimally significant level of complexity, subtlety, or sophistication. Alarm over this trend has been around for years, and has now been accelerated once more by the advent of artificial intelligence, just as previously happened with the advent of television, the internet, social media, and the smartphone.

An insightful counterpoint to the crisis narrative comes from longtime university English professor Annette Federico in an essay for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. For decades, effective reading inside the college and

university classroom has been framed almost entirely in terms of "comprehension." I am intimately acquainted with this perspective myself, having previously taught college English for a decade. Perhaps this is why Dr. Federico, who has worked with students and books for decades, thoroughly charms me with her lucid and sensitive laying-out of an alternative view:

> [W]e are engaging with works of the human imagination, not with bureaucratic documents or chunks of data. Art makes its way to meaning through suggestion, resonance, just-out-of-reachness, strangeness.
>
> Maybe we're hesitant to admit that there are many things about literature that are too weird to be reasoned with and that escape the critical eye. . . . Can we teach students — and model for them — the essential uncanniness and inscrutability of great literature? Can we admit to ourselves that half the time maybe we aren't getting it either? It's good to be reminded now and then of the peculiarity of our undertaking as teachers of literature — and to celebrate the ways literary language keeps us off balance, awakens and surprises us into attention. An English class should remind us that, when we read literature, something besides cognition may be steering the ship.
>
> —Annette Federico, "What Does It Mean to Understand What You Read?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 22, 2026

She complements these astute observations and reflections with a lovely personal illustration of the point:

> One summer when I was about 16, I picked up Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. The book belonged to my much older brother who was studying for a doctorate in German literature. When he walked into the room and saw what I was reading, he laughed. "You won't understand that," he snorted. I was indignant. But of course, he was right. I didn't understand *Mrs. Dalloway*. How could I? I knew nothing about modernism and British literary history. All I knew was that Virginia Woolf was an important writer, and so I wanted to experience that book. And who knows? Maybe something seeped in, even if it was only a sentence that washed over me and left a tiny imprint. I didn't know anything at that age (as my brother often reminded me) except that there was a whole world of books out there that I longed to read. Wasn't that desire, too, a kind of knowing?

Bradbury on Maugham on how to live your life

Here's Ray Bradbury on Somerset Maugham on how to live:

> The best advice I ever got was from Somerset Maugham's book "Summing Up," which I read in high school. His advice was: Don't look left or right, look straight ahead, get your work done, enjoy your work, do what you want to do, not what someone else wants you to do. And that's been the story of my life. Not pleasing my friends, not pleasing any editor, just myself.
>
> —James Hibberd, "Ray Bradbury Is on Fire!" *Salon*, August 29, 2001

The importance of loafing

And speaking of living:

> On the whole, the enjoyment of leisure is something which decidedly costs less than the enjoyment of luxury. All it requires is an artistic temperament which is bent on seeking a perfectly useless afternoon spent in a perfectly useless manner. The idle life really costs so very little, as Thoreau took the trouble to point out in *Walden*.
>
> —Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (John Day, 1937), 153.

This passage appears in a section titled "The Cult of the Idle Life" in Chapter 7 of Lin Yutang's book, charmingly titled "The Importance of Loafing."

Following the daimon and remembering Dave Collins

There's a nice resonance between the Bradbury/Maugham snippet above and the life—and death—of Socrates, as explored by David L. Collins in "The Contemplative's Socrates." Although the connection I'm drawing wasn't his specific point, Collins's helpful framing places Socrates within a broad tradition of contemplative wisdom. His account offers a profound object lesson,

along with an embedded warning, for those of us who dare to follow the inner beat of our own daimonic drum:

> The other thing that got Socrates condemned was the fact he had a daimonion. A daimonion is a kind of "spirit signal." Socrates, in other words, had something like a guardian angel. He possessed a "divine thing" which gave him guidance. And, in the view of a majority of his fellow Athenians, his daimonion constituted an unapproved god. . . .
>
> The city's ceremonial traditions were understood to be meaningful transactions in an on-going relationship between human lives and divine forces. . . . Spiritual duties, furthermore, were a communal, democratic responsibility. . . . New deities could be brought into a city's practice if—and this was a crucial if—the community approved of them.
>
> And that's where Socrates was a problem. Socrates had his own, personal "divine thing." His daimonion was apparently rather unique—people in his time and ever since have had different ideas about what exactly it was. . . .
>
> Socrates' daimonion was a problem because it wasn't sanctioned by his community. . . . [He] did not traffic in the "customary currency" of his fellow Athenians' values and interests. And, of course, when someone doesn't employ the same currency of customs and norms as does the rest of the community, she or he can end up representing a threat to the entire "economy of values."
>
> —David L. Collins, "The Contemplative's Socrates," *The Side View*, August 4, 2020.

On a personal note, I briefly knew Dave Collins through Twitter, where he shared an ongoing flow of fascinating thoughts, reflections, and links to stimulating reading, including his own writings on religion, spirituality, and psychology. He was unusually qualified to speak about the intersections of those subjects, with a master's degree in Buddhist studies from Harvard and a doctorate in clinical psychology from the California School of Professional Psychology. He also worked in the Department of Psychology at UT Austin. In his doctoral dissertation, he undertook a comparison of contemplative deconstruction in the Christian mystical classic The Cloud of Unknowing and the teachings of Zen master Dōgen.

He and I interacted on Twitter frequently for a year or two, until Elon Musk's acquisition of the platform led Dave, like so many others, to leave it behind. I believe he ended up maintaining his main social media presence on Mastodon. In any event, I found him friendly, fascinating, and generous. On

that last count, he once shared with me a PDF, many thousands of words long, consisting of excerpts he had compiled over the years from books on the historical Jesus. I very much appreciated knowing him, though we lost touch after he left Twitter.

As I was putting this post together, I looked him up to see if I could learn anything about his current circumstances. I was shocked to discover that he had died in August.

Moments like this, when I'm confronted with unexpected news of the passing of someone I knew, always feel like a bracing confrontation with the meaning of life. They also reaffirm my sense that this meaning is found, for each of us, in the mysterious interplay of the event we call our birth with the event we call our death—and most especially in the witnessing position we experientially inhabit. From that vantage point, birth, death, and everything "between" them are enfolded into a single seeming.

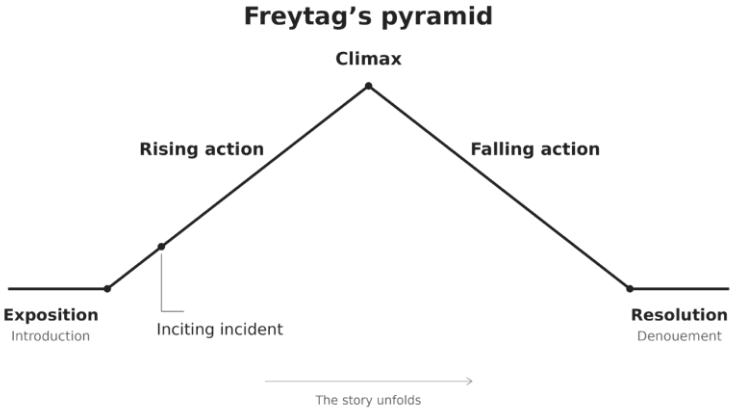
Here's a passage from Dave's obituary that conveys much about who he was, including far more than I was ever able to know through our exchanges of tweets, DMs, and emails:

> After completing his doctorate, Dave moved to Austin, Texas, where he helped raise his daughter, Audrey Forrest, and founded the community for Contemplative Practice, a Zen-oriented meditation community he led for many years. He went on to close out his professional life on the staff of the University of Texas at Austin's Department of Psychology, where he helped connect patients with the clinicians and programs that could serve them. He often said his real calling was elsewhere—in the study and teaching of meditation, and in a body of research and writing on the psychological dimensions of Buddhist contemplative practice that reached far beyond his official role. He also served as a Buddhist minister and "meditation therapist," offering guidance rooted in Theravada and Soto Zen practice to those who sought him out.
>
> Those who knew Dave personally knew a man who was not only a walking encyclopedia but who was also sincerely funny and sardonic, with a gift for finding some thread of connection—an obscure bit of etymology, a historical footnote, an offbeat factoid—in whatever you happened to tell him.
>
> Dave often said, "There's a miracle going on. There really, really is. And it's everything."

REFLECTIONS

Your life's inciting incident

If you were to read your life in terms of the classic plot structure that you were probably taught in high school or middle school English class, what would the inciting incident be? I'm talking about the famous Freytag pyramid, sometimes called a plot diagram, consisting of exposition/introduction, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement/resolution.



In other words, if you were to read your life like a fictional story, like a book or movie, what would be the experience or life event that disrupted the "normal" story your life seemed to be telling up to that point, thus setting you off on a journey, whether figurative or literal, to come to terms with it and find a new equilibrium? I want to dare to say that we all have some such event in our life stories—or, if we don't, then at some point we will. I also want to say that, just as it is in fictional stories, these inciting incidents are invariably destabilizing. They unsettle the existing order of things. In fact, that is the very thing that makes them inciting events. They frequently arrive as some kind of shock, loss, challenge, trauma, tragedy, or surprise—maybe even the surprise

of uncovering something that was already nominally "there" in your life—that punctures your existing world and worldview.

And actually, this experience can and does happen multiple times in one's life, adding up to different chapters in a total life story, mini-cycles of the monomythic hero's journey.

And the whole chain or series is linked by a common, threaded theme of calling into question the world you thought you were living in and the person you thought you were. Maybe this meta-theme grows more prominent, more overt across time, until it becomes dominant.

That's my own story, anyway.

We shall not cease from scrolling

We shall not cease from scrolling
And the end of all our scrolling
Will be to arrive where we started
And know that the internet never really had the self-knowledge we were craving when we wasted our lives on Substack, Netflix, Spotify, and Instagram.

(The above lines of doggerel, transformed by me from an instance of genuine poetry, represent my defective attempt to update a classic bit from T. S. Eliot for the modern age.)

Online scrolling and B. F. Skinner's rats

Did you ever notice how the physical act of scrolling on a digital device is similar to the act of pulling or pressing a lever? Rather like the lever those rats pressed in B. F. Skinner's famous experiment with the food pellets. They quickly learned to press it when they found that it delivered food. This is a classic demonstration of operant conditioning.

Perhaps most notably, Skinner discovered that the most influential reinforcement schedule for conditioning the rats' behavior wasn't a continuous one, with food delivered every time, but rather an intermittent one, with the lever delivering food only sometimes. It turned out that when the reward

came unpredictably, the rats became, in effect, obsessed with pressing the lever.

Kind of like—as I can't help observing—the slot machine of a social media screen, where the algorithm only sometimes delivers up an item that feeds you with a feeling of engagement (interest, agreement, disagreement, approval, anger, lust, whatever) as you sit there scrolling listlessly. This may not be an original observation, of course. But it's one that bears repeating.

To quote Jello Biafra from a song and an album that I loved in college: "'Poor rats,' we human rodents chuckle."

Ray Bradbury on AI

It's interesting to consider the combination of creative energy and inspiration with social or political motivation that drives the writer of dystopian fiction who produces a prophetic warning in an attempt to change that possible outcome. As in the case of—to name an example that I have long cherished—Ray Bradbury, who forthrightly said he wrote *Fahrenheit 451* not to predict the future, but to prevent it. Of course, in Bradbury's case it's also interesting to note the many ways in which, as he himself later observed, the attempt failed, with major elements of his novel appearing several decades down the road to serve more as accurate prediction than successful prevention.

We might also wonder what Bradbury would make of conditions at this moment, fourteen years after his death in 2012. To take a prominent current example of what would surely have drawn his attention, what might he have thought and said about generative artificial intelligence, and especially about the relationship of large language models to writing and creativity?

I think we have more to go on than mere speculation. It's easy to look at what he said about digital technology and the internet during his final years, and from this to gain a sense of what he would have said about conditions today.

A notable example appears in a *New York Times* article from 2009 about his prominent defense of the Ventura County Library when it was threatened with closing. Along with quoting his words on the value of libraries and books, the article contained this:

> The Internet? Don't get him started. "The Internet is a big distraction," Mr. Bradbury barked from his perch in his house in Los Angeles, which is jammed with enormous stuffed animals, videos, DVDs, wooden toys, photographs and books, with things like the National Medal of Arts sort of tossed on a table.
>
> "Yahoo called me eight weeks ago," he said, voice rising. "They wanted to put a book of mine on Yahoo! You know what I told them? 'To hell with you. To hell with you and to hell with the Internet.'
>
> "It's distracting," he continued. "It's meaningless; it's not real. It's in the air somewhere."
>
> —Jennifer Steinhauer, "A Literary Legend Fights for a Local Library," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2009.

There are many additional examples of such effusive diatribes. Like this one in his 2001 interview for *Salon*:

> Today Bradbury continues to criticize modern innovations, putting him in the seemingly contradictory position of being a sci-fi writer who's also a technophobe. He famously claims to have never driven a car (Bradbury finds accident statistics appallingly unacceptable; he witnessed a deadly car accident as a teen). He is scornful of the Internet (telling one reporter it's "a big scam" by computer companies) and ATMs (asking, "Why go to a machine when you can go to a human being?") and computers ("A computer is a typewriter," he says, "I have two typewriters, I don't need another one").
>
> —James Hibberd, "Ray Bradbury Is on Fire!" *Salon*, August 29, 2001.

And this from a 2001 interview, reprinted in 2012 by the interviewer upon the occasion of Bradbury's death, showing Bradbury lambasting computers in general:

> "I don't own a computer," he said. "I don't believe in those things. Why should I have a computer? Just because someone tells me I should have one? I have a pad of paper and a pencil and a typewriter." What kind? "IBM Selectric. Correctable." What about using the Internet for research? "I don't do research. I never have."
>
> —Richard Louv, "Advice from the Late Great Ray Bradbury: 'Be an Optimalist,'" *Richard Louv*, June 6, 2012.

And perhaps bluntest of all, from *Strand Magazine* in 2009, here is Bradbury expressing not just a loathing for the internet and computers but a wish for their wholesale destruction:

> **AFG**: I wanted to ask you about one of my favorite books, *Fahrenheit 451*. Would you say it's even more prophetic today, in terms of people not reading as much as they used to, than it was 50 years ago?
>
> **RB**: The Internet should be destroyed! I hate the Internet! I hate computers!
>
> —Andrew F. Gulli, "Interview with Ray Bradbury," *Strand Magazine* 11 (July/September 2009).

So . . . Bradbury on AI? While we'll never know for sure, I find it hard to imagine that he would have done anything but attack the technology with gusto, and maybe even more passionately than with his criticism of computers and the internet, given AI's ability to actively mimic human writing.

Reading as escape or engagement

For much of my life, I was drawn to seek out books that would take me away somewhere. I wanted books, whether fiction or nonfiction, that would transport me with a vision of a marvelous elsewhere and a sense of having gone there.

But at some point that changed. Now I'm drawn to books that intensify my awareness and attention to the present moment and the marvelous details of the world that presents itself.

The reluctant authorpreneur

Even though I have been giving interviews to podcasts and sometimes radio shows for years, my introvert self distinctly regrets it every time I have one scheduled. Ironically, while I do enjoy talking about the subjects that interest me and the things I'm drawn to write about, in general I would prefer just to write, to stay in my monkish authorial solitude behind the screen or page, and to avoid the pressure of live public dialogue.

Needless to say, this makes today's dominant model of the "authorpreneur" less than attractive.

On not writing as the key to saying everything

If you're a writer, maybe you, like me, have encountered the complication that Cioran famously described (in *The Trouble with Being Born*) as he grew older: "Once we reject lyricism, to blacken a page becomes an ordeal: what's the use of writing in order to say exactly what we had to say?"

Writing seems like its own justification in youth, when our inner fire burns hottest. But later, the question of *why*, which never even came up before, begins to assert itself.

Especially when we can *not write* and just watch universal creativity spontaneously morph and shift as the ceaseless activity of this moment. Maybe that says everything that needs saying.

And yes, sometimes this spontaneous unfolding may take on the appearance of writing.