I have been reading Jonathan Rose's *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* which tells the story of what, for people who could not take reading for granted, it was like to discover the world of books. Suddenly, says one self-educated potter, in a luminous phrase, 'We had the freedom of the universe.'

These were men and women who were short of books and of teachers, and almost literally hungry for education. For them, it seems, culture was not indoctrination in bourgeois values but a form of individual discovery. Here is the daughter of an impoverished Dundee book-keeper, born in 1880, remembering the moment when she first came across Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, at the age of 14:

> It seems that from our earliest years we are striving to become articulate, struggling to clothe in words our vague perceptions and questionings. Suddenly, blazing from the printed page, there are the words, the true resounding words that we couldn't find. It is an exciting moment... 'Who am I? The thing that can say I. Who am I, what is this ME?' I had been groping to know that since I was three. (Rose, 46)

Of course, we cannot expect the relatively privileged, cool young people in the universities of the West to be so obviously needy these days: it is a sign of a welcome social and material progress that they are not. You will be quick to tell me, surely, that there is no point in being nostalgic.

Indeed, Rose's self-educated working people, who discovered the power of literature as if for the first time, were naïve – even to the point of hardly being able to tell, in the midst of the experience, the difference between fact and fiction. In 1815 a young artisan, Christopher Thomson, persuaded his anxious puritanical mother to let him see Shakespeare's *King John* in Hull’s Theatre Royal – and found himself utterly unfamiliar with the conventions and illusions...
of theatre. To the ignorant spectator, between the rise and fall of the curtain, it was no cliché to think of theatre as a sort of magic:

It might be a dream, but what if it was? It was a waking one! The only fear was, would it be as 'Baseless, as the fabric of a vision', and so throw me back again upon the every-day world? ... I was every thing by turns; now ready to 'hang a calf-skin' over the recreant Austria, or rave with Constance for her 'absent child'. By the time the fourth act came on, all my fear of the play ending was gone. I thought of nothing but the story ... I sat absorbed in that new mode of visiting the inner-soul by such strange realities. (Rose, 100)

Waking dreams, visitings into inner realms of reality via external shows: what was going on? Notoriously, even more unsophisticated members of the audience might shout out in the midst of performances. To take it so literally, as though it were real, was what philosophers now call a category-mistake.

I believe in all sorts of category-mistakes – confusing books with realities, thinking there is something behind the words, identifying inside with fictional characters. Category-mistakes are the places where the real power of metaphor and imagination begins, before you ever realize that this is metaphor, this is imagination. When the ignorant audience member stands up and shouts at Othello, in protest at the imminent murder of Desdemona, it may be, to put it mildly, a misplaced instinct – a misunderstanding of the nature of art and a failure of correct psychic distance. But it is the right thing, albeit in the wrong place. The story of evolution is that what at first was an outright physical impulse becomes a silent mental one, and individually we repeat that biological story not once but throughout our lives.2

Thus, when, in Grace Abounding, John Bunyan thought that, in reading the Bible, it was speaking to him personally, I don’t think that this was schizophrenia. I think that what some may call schizophrenic in Bunyan is no more than a heightened example of what is normal in the most serious reading – the persistent sense of being on the verge of a secret personal message, some minor inner revelation. The great thing about the reading of literature is that it simply isn’t like a science – incrementally progressive in its discoveries – but has to keep going back to its sources, recovering the first feelings. Each time someone genuinely re-discovers a book, it is as if that book is alive for the first time again. That is why it is good to teach first-year students – if you are lucky enough for them to be rather naïve and lacking in confidence, somewhat ignorant and inarticulate, and yet enthusiastic and (in their own ways, often secretly) in need.

Creative originality in students is not so much to do with thinking something new, but thinking something which is new to them, as individuals, and, moreover, close to the very origins of the work, of the thought, in question. No