

THE NOVEL

Mary Ruefle

I was reading in front of the fire, it was a luxury, it was snowing outside, bitterly cold, but there in my snuggerly I was on fire with my book, a recently published novel that had been translated into over twenty languages, I was in the middle of a sentence when a thought of my own intruded — somewhere in the world someone else was reading the same novel and was in sync with my own reading, reading the same sentence I was, and I was gripped with this knowledge and with fear and terror — I had thought I was alone but someone else was reading with me, the same sentence, apace with me, word by word my terror spread, I wanted to be the only one reading, to be in the middle of *a solitary act*, this is why I built the fire in the first place, why I had laid down on the couch in front of the fire, but I was not, unquestionably I was not the only one reading the book at this moment, and I was utterly de-served, so turned around and so tortured I stopped reading, I stood up and commanded myself to walk, I told myself that the other reader would be going on ahead, ahead and alone, we would no longer be synchronized and I could again be an individual with individual pursuits, I walked around the room with my pulse beating, my heart racing, I tried to calm myself, I said to myself, This is ridiculous, and then I lay down again and began to read, safe in the knowledge that the other reader was at least a page ahead of me, what a relief, I did not have to share my moment-to-moment experience with him — or her — or they — in Tashkent or Paris, Granada or Stuttgart — and I kept reading, I was calm, I forgot about my irrational fears of a moment ago, and some hundred pages on, when they were entirely forgotten, the author began writing about the fear of the doppelgänger, the twin, the mirror, the echo, the identical other, and I was paralyzed again, not with fear of the other reader, who was by now pages and pages ahead of me, but with the new fear that the author inhabited me, and had my thoughts, and that my experience was no longer my own, and never had been.