

RISK EVERYTHING

Making Literature Matter in the 21st Century

1.

Let's start here: we're all cowards, on some level.

If we can agree to that, we can talk meaningfully about risk. Because risk is the flash point of desire and fear. Risk is where those two come together and drive apart. It is the locus of the explosion. The tearing of flesh, bone, and spirit. It is, in a word, dangerous.

Which is what our literature right now is not.

And I have a problem with that.

A little context: in an essay titled "With Pens Drawn: Literature Should Get Dangerous Again," Mario Vargas Llosa writes that "hardly anybody I come across believes any longer that literature serves any great purpose beyond alleviating boredom on the bus or the underground, or has any higher ambition beyond being transformed into television or movie scripts." At the same time, he points out, many people still fear the writer. Citing recent events in Nigeria, Algeria, North Korea, China and a host of other locations where prisons are full of writers who've done no more – and no less – than write, Vargas Llosa describes a conundrum: "in countries that... are the most free and democratic, literature is becoming a hobby without real value, while in countries where freedom is restricted, literature is considered dangerous, the vehicle of subversive ideas."

Time out. While I wholeheartedly agree with him, this isn't a talk about activist art. Or subversiveness in the molotov-cocktail, anarchist, stick-it-to-the-man sense. It's about a different, related topic: making literature matter.

A little more context: Patricia Hampl, in her book *A Romantic Education*, addresses the same conundrum from a different angle: "A repressive society," she writes, "one that takes the voice seriously enough to silence it, may obscure and deny many... stories of its national life, but as it does so, it automatically clarifies and intensifies the significance of utterance. On the other hand," Hampl writes, "it is now impossible to get into serious trouble in the United States by making art. The worst you can do is be scolded as a petulant child."

As if that wasn't pithy enough, Hampl concludes: "American writers are free to write what we want, but [because?] what we write doesn't matter."

Again, I agree. And I would contend we readers and writers are partly at fault.

2.

Moment of truth.

At this point in writing the talk, I stopped myself.

Whoa, there cowboy, I told myself. You're going to walk into a room full of smart, dedicated, active people and tell them literature no longer matters, and it's their fault? You're going to rant about how literature should be a vehicle for subversive ideas?

Not quite yelling "fire" in a crowded theater, but maybe not that far off. I risk losing you by raising provocative and deeply political issues that aren't - exactly - at the center of what I want to talk about. Those issues could easily become a rabbit hole down which we get lost.

But it's a risk I have to take. Because literature matters to me. And I suspect, by your presence here, it matters to you. And I don't like the way it doesn't matter in our culture. And I think we can change that. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Because first we need to spotlight some of the causes of that erosion.

Let's take the top three.

First, books have long since been supplanted by movies, television, music, even the Internet as our culture's primary storytelling vehicles. As a delivery method for narrative, books are archaic. Ineffective for delivering popular entertainment.

Second, we readers and writers have acquiesced to (or been beaten into submission by) a money culture, in which the goal is to "generate product" which will "sell units." With rare exception, we writers - and readers - have failed to fight for a literature that is more than a branch of the entertainment economy. In a money culture, whatever we don't support shrivels and dies.

Third, as writers and readers we've become fixated on idealized forms from the past. Our idolatry of great writers from the recent or even distant past results not in an ongoing literary renaissance, but a triumph of craft arguably better suited for the museum than for the bedside table. Our literature is too often what British novelist Jeanette Winterson calls "reproduction furniture." Beautiful recreations of past masters, but not relevant.

Literature CAN still be relevant. Vital. It is now, sometimes, and it can be more broadly again in this country if we readers and writers are willing to make it so.

Know what it demands? Risk.

3.

Risk.

Because the vital literature of this new century lies not in (re)creating perfect examples of literature past, but in telling today's stories in today's forms. Reaching beyond what's already known, what's already been done, to represent what's *particular* to existence in this moment, in this place.

Risk.

Because if literature is going to matter, our job as readers and writers is to drag the short story and the novel kicking and screaming into the 21st century. To force their evolution until they address today's – and tomorrow's – realities in words – and shapes – that resonate with an audience beyond classicists.

To speak to my primary form, the job of a serious short story writer is NOT to master the Carver story or the Hemingway story or even the Flannery O'Connor story, but to discover in the work of those greats the techniques, tools and subtleties of craft that made them so. But the learning can't stop there. If it does, we miss their most valuable quality, and consign ourselves to the museum.

To truly learn from those and other past masters, we must recognize them as visionaries. Possessors of a kind of early warning system that enabled them, in Jeanette Winterson's apt words, "to put into words that which is only just bubbling into collective consciousness." To illuminate for us something essential, and until then inexpressible, about what it means to be human in that time and place. This quality, beyond craft, is what made their work resonate so deeply when they wrote it, and what makes it resonate still today.

Excellence and evolution are EQUALLY necessary. Because language and ideas get used up. We reach a point where we don't hear them anymore. Even if it's an essential human truth, we require a fresh expression of it periodically to re-gain the insight.

Art cannot move forward by clinging to past discoveries and previous expressions. The re-discovery and re-invention of form, and the evolution of content, are both essential to generating fresh writing. Writing that matters.

Winterson:

"The calling of the artist, in any medium, is to make it new."

4.

Writers – all artists – are explorers. A culture's advance scouts.

It is, and always has been, the writer's primary task to go into uncharted territory and bring back reports of what he or she finds there. Items for study about who we are, yes, but also who we might be, who we are becoming; experience that contributes to the world's store of knowledge, glimpses of understanding into ourselves as humans.

Put it another way. The writer's job is to venture unguarded into the deep unknown and bring back visions. To deep-map the human heart by giving voice to what we can't yet articulate, but yearn to.

I know. It sounds grandiose. So what. Maybe we need a little grandiosity. As a money culture, we are so bottom-line oriented we've lost the ability to think big picture. To value dreams. To embrace possibility. We tame those forces that don't conform. That aren't easily translated into profit, or at least productivity.

So here's the scary news: ART IS VISIONARY. In its essence and by its nature. For good reasons, it is out of favor to claim visions. To do so is – to put it mildly – to risk credibility. Too bad. It's time for artists – writers – to do it anyway. It's part of the job description. Time for us as readers to admit the hunger, and seek out writing that speaks to it.

What literature can do, in Winterson's words, is “open dimensions of the spirit and the self that normally lie smothered under the weight of living.”

Literature does that, I contend, by exploring, and experimenting. Feeling its way forward toward, in Winterson's words, “new frequencies of language which in turn allow new frequencies of emotion.”

There are reasons those experiments aren't the norm. They come at a cost. For writers AND readers.

Put another way: they demand risk.

The French novelist André Gide described it this way: “One does not discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time.”

5.

Winterson:

“The riskiness of art, the reason why it affects us, is not the riskiness of its subject matter, it is the risk of creating a new way of seeing. A new way of thinking. New work is not just topical, it is modern. That is, it has not been done before.”

Gertrude Stein said the form in which we write, the very syntax we use, determines what stories it is possible to tell. [Of course, she didn't say it that directly.]

In other words, different forms or structures allow different stories to be told. Think, for example, of Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*. Broadly speaking, each the story of a search for self, but representative of different times, different windows and walls to human self-understanding. Each story unimaginable apart from its form. In film, think “It's a Wonderful Life” and “Memento.”

As cultural literacy changes over time, any medium that wishes to succeed as communication – to be relevant - must learn to speak to that literacy. That's not compromise. It's growth. Excellence AND evolution, remember.

In our time, fiction is not needed as merely a way to tell stories.

Winterson:

“If fiction is to have any meaning beyond the museum, it must keep developing. Fiction that is printed television is redundant fiction. Fiction that is a modern copy of a nineteenth-century novel is no better than any other kind of reproduction furniture.”

Fiction has to aspire to its ideal: to be *novel*. To be imaginative. Innovative. Other.

6.

This from novelist Nicole Krauss:

“What is literature, really? Boiled down to a single sentence, I’d say it’s this: an endless conversation about what it means to be human.”

Not just form, but content needs to be made new. Again and again.

Our understanding of what it means to be human changes over time. If literature is, as Krauss suggests, a conversation, that conversation needs always to reflect our current self-understanding – and anticipate our emerging understanding – in order to remain relevant, which means simply to speak in ways we can hear.

But it’s more than that. Fiction is a culturally vital act of nonconformity. It’s a primary way we explore our spiritual restlessness. An escape from existential discontent. An examination of our highest ideals and our deepest fears. Even a cry against injustice or tyranny. Fiction is a uniquely powerful instrument with a demonstrated ability to both move people and to resonate in us over time. Fiction helps show us who we are, and aspire to who we might become.

Listen to Vargas Llosa, about the impact of one iconic work of Spanish literature: “Fiction is, first, an act of rebellion against the limitations of real life. This quixotic enterprise... has produced exceptional individuals whose eccentricities have contributed to the world’s store of knowledge and without which life would be even grayer than it already is. Scientific, social, economic, and cultural progress is due to impulsive visionaries like [Cervantes and his fictional hero]. Without such as them, Europe would not have discovered America, or the printing press, or human rights, and we would continue to dance around in circles to make rain fall on the crops.”

Let’s bring it home. Our culture – our money culture – pushes toward conformity. Efficiency. What’s valued is what’s recognizably productive. As much as we want to prize freedom of choice, streamlined homogeneity is the economic objective. Each of us a cog in an efficient economic engine. I’m not saying we live in a repressive state. I’m saying the tendencies of the larger engine are largely invisible to us, and their momentum is hard to resist.

Winterson:

“I do not think it an exaggeration to say that most of the energy of most of the people is being diverted into a system that destroys them. Money is no antidote. If the imaginative life is to be renewed, it needs its own coin.”

Art – literature – the conversation about what it means to be human – is that coin.

7.

So what can WE do?

The question matters. Because we can. Writers. Readers. Publishers and booksellers. It's within our grasp.

Readers: feed the hunger inside us. Don't apologize for it, and please – PLEASE – don't stop asking books and their authors to speak to it. Find writers who do, and support them. Better still, let them know their work matters.

And yes, support independent bookstores and small presses, because their shelf space isn't for sale, because they can reach beyond the demands of high-volume sales to cultivate writers who take the risks to make it all new.

Publishers: claim your industry as something more than just entertainment, or the relentless repackaging of the familiar as slaves to an imagined "market."

Writers: live into your role as an advance scout. Remake the novel and the story until they speak powerfully and unmistakably to the life we live today, the life we will live tomorrow. Do the work that television and movies can't. Be proud of that, and humble in recognizing the work is more important than you are.

It's about an awakening of vision. A willingness to ask the best of ourselves and our art. To do that, we have to risk being misunderstood. Temporarily losing our bearings in unfamiliar territory. Grappling with uncertainty.

That's always been the lot of serious writers, and serious readers.

In closing, I echo the words of my favorite visionary, Jeanette Winterson. "To those [readers] I ask this: that [our] relationship with writers be a direct one, the agency of the book [our common ground, our front door.] [Let's] open it. Once there, if the arrangement of the rooms is unfamiliar, and the fabric is strange, reflect that at least it is new. It will be, too, a world apart, a place where the normal weights and measures of the day have been subtly altered to give a different emphasis and perhaps, [if we're lucky,] to slide back the secret panel by the heart."

The prize is out there. Let's claim it.