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THE TIME OF THE AUTHOR

## **News and the Writer**

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Among the things which art can do, one constant has been the inversion of hierarchy. In the 17th century, Flemish painters introduced the intimacy of private lives into an art form so far dominated by the official imagery favoured by its ecclesiastical or feudal sponsors. Children at play, domestic utensils and the uneventful repetitiveness of everyday existence now became as worthy a subject matter as *The Judgement of Prince Paris* or the torments of any saint. A peasant would work his field oblivious of the naval battle taking place far away in the background, or Icarus falling from the sky. A young woman would read the letter she had just received, and the silent room around her would become a world of hushed, subdued emotion more tense, more beautiful and fearsome than the glorious, horrific world outside her windows. That world, meaning the power play of politics and social institutions, would from now on be seen in the personal perspective of individuals otherwise marginalised as the anonymous extras in history's

theatre.

In literature, the great novels of the 19th century continued this exchange of perspectives, placing themselves on the threshold between the home and the city, family and society, private and social struggles. Ever so often, a novel would describe how forces of class, culture and economy impinged on a person's life, crushing hopes and aspirations; or it would be about a young person's way up in the world, trying to make it and become the author of his own destiny. More often than not, that young climber would be male, but even so, the novel as a genre became the window through which the women of a patriarchal society could take a critical look at it, be they readers or writers themselves. In doing so, they participated in the development of democracy not only as a political order but as a culture; an open, permissive atmosphere blending values and sensibilities, moral awareness and the transgressions of passion.

The second half of the 20th century saw the human – and humanist – perspective of European art spreading from culture at large into the social realm. With the middle classes of Western welfare societies, mankind saw a degree of personal freedom unheard of until then, and with that freedom, new anxieties succeeded those of raw survival. A protected zone was carved out of history's battlefields and the arena of class struggle, and suburbia became its topographical metaphor, if not the zone itself. The suburbs as opposed to the historical city centres where great, formative events had once taken place and sometimes still erupted. The suburbs where nothing special happened, where you were left alone to pursue a privileged life of relative security, boredom and occasional happiness.

The new thing was that history as such had been reduced to news; flickering images on a screen in the corner. History had become something we could turn off at will. We were no longer the unresisting objects of its insensitive machinery and some of us even began to think that it might have come to an end. News, of course, had not, but in the meantime "news" were becoming a genre of its own in the globalised industry of television entertainment; an increasingly fragmented one-to-one rendering of what is happening elsewhere this very moment. Mostly something horrible, which might be the reason why this subgenre is generally known as "breaking news".

The thing with news, however, is that somehow they compete with and even undermine the carefree suburban lightness of heart, unfettered by the chains of so-called historical necessity. As if it were in the nature of news to reintroduce the hierarchy of meaning and importance which had been turned upside down by Flemish painters, 19th century novelists and anyone of us born on the comfortable, easy-going side of Europe's last great war. Apart from telling us what's going on in other places, news convey the impression that those other places where horrors unfold are the real world – meaning that the place we're in, watching, amounts to something like a suburb to reality itself.

News are hierarchical in an epistemological sense because they re-insert the age-old difference, in our minds, between centre and periphery, importance and triviality. Only, the centre has now become a moveable feast, constantly travelling with its camera crews and correspondents to yet another source of breaking news. Even big cities may feel like some sort of

backwater when its inhabitants follow the news happening in other big cities or in faraway mountains where villagers have equipped themselves with rocket launchers rather than spades. Until, of course, someone hammers an airplane or two into the highrises outside your window and sends thousands of innocent people to their death.

Not until one's TV has been turned off does the thought sometimes occur that in a way, the world does not exist – “the world” as news will have it – any more than “international” refers to any accessible place since all the term designates is the communication between nations; a process rather than an entity. Only airports are truly international and even they have a zip code. Any writer knows this and more often than not we are mischievous of the idea that in our work we should feel obliged to relate more profoundly than others to the news of the world; to history in the making.

First of all there is the problem with time itself. It is a slow occupation, to write, and we would never catch up with current events even if we tried, just as we will never quite grasp the memories which keep eluding us, yet draw us into the gravity of our unspoken reasons to have entered language without a clear message to deliver. Any writer knows that history as such cannot be told in any form that will not belie and betray the kind of individual nuance, emotion, experience and inner truth which were always first to be thrashed by its pitiless wheel. Any writer who ever wrote on behalf of so-called historical necessity was a traitor not only to his fellow citizens but to his art as well. And I am not only referring here to fellow travellers or Stasi stool pigeons. Any request that literature be adult in a responsibly topical way forsakes what it is really about.

This reminds me of an essay I once read by Peter Handke in which, November 1989, friends in Berlin urge him to join them and witness The Wall coming down. History is happening before our very eyes, they tell him, assuming that this must be everything a writer dreams of. After which Handke leaves Berlin and goes travelling the desolate Spanish countryside writing an essay on the jukebox. And he is a Flemish painter, there, going for meaning and depth where they are seemingly absent. Just like the Polish film director Krzysztof Kieslowski who, asked what he made of the fall of the Iron Curtain, said that people would still be waiting for the bus and would still die of cancer. He, too, was a Flemish painter as is any of us who prefers the undiscovered periphery to the obvious importance of the centre; the unassuming pathos of people's inner lives rather than the intimidating heroism of great themes and all-embracing drama.

And yet – so the self-perception of many a writer – even an essay on the jukebox may have more to say about its time and how it felt to be alive just then, than so many newspaper articles or so much footage from the hot spots of BBC World. Furthermore, when literary language finally catches up with the ever-elusive present it will illuminate it in ways that turn “breaking news” into a somewhat somnambulist affair. As Kierkegaard would have it, we are destined to understand our lives with our backs to the future and the irony of this is entangled with the beauty and dignity of remembering the dead as well as one's own lost summers.

Literature is never a pastime *hors du temps*. On the contrary, any literary work has the date stamped on it, even the classics; especially the classics. Only the makers of kitsch opt for eternity. You may hope to have

readers after you've gone but you will only have left something behind you for others to read if you were driven by an urge, as an artist, to grasp and capture, to feel and find the adequate means to express what it was like to be present right there, right then. Not how authors before you would have said it but how it sounds today; not in order to make literature the way it was made before you were born but in order to re-ignite a spontaneous relationship between language and the world. In the words of the critic and essayist Logan Pearsall Smith: "The great art of writing is the art of making people real to themselves with words." That you cannot do once and for all; it must be done time and again, each generation awakening to the fact of their specific, shared experiences.

Baudelaire, for one, would insist on the importance of being contemporary, and in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life" he celebrates the artist roaming the streets with a sensitive awareness of the slightest changes in fashion. To embrace transience and translate one's historical moment, what you have actually known and seen, into something slightly more durable, a string of sentences, a narrative, a book – that is what a writer does and he or she can only do it, can only resist impermanence, by plunging into it. As for novels, they suffocate without detail; the hues and scents, the manners and inflections of real places and people at a specific junction of historical time and space. Details remain a vital part of their fascination, regardless of all literary measures. The traces left of what once was. So the question, for a writer, is not whether he or she is a product of history but whether that notion, apart from being our fate, should also be a vocation.

Making people real to themselves with words ... The phrase presupposes that without them we are somehow unreal as if we had not arrived yet to the reality of the moment we are living through. In itself it is indeed a historical notion, the belief that there is such a thing as a shared present tense in which we recognize our fellow humans as our contemporaries in more than a physical sense. One might certainly argue that people have always lived in separate time bubbles, frames of mind set apart from one another, and widely so, in terms of knowledge, culture and values. It is nevertheless a recurrent thought that one should be awake and attentive to a shared perception of where we are in time, if not where we are going. It seems inherent to the mentality of democratic culture to think so and I don't care if it's just a product of historical contingency. I feel the impulse myself and at least the feeling is real.

But how to do it? How do you find the words that will make people feel real to themselves – perhaps even to one another? In the 19th century, you would subscribe to the idea that art and literature were universal. The approach of humanism was to see both as spiritual forces which might release us from our cultural contingencies, the specifics of class, ethnicity, religion and so forth, in order to recognize what we have in common in spite of all differences. A deeply Christian thought, transformed into the secularized Romantic vision of the artist as Redeemer.

In the 20th century, you would probably sign up for the creed that art and literature can be new in a radical sense. The unheard of; that which breaks the patterns of tradition, disappointing our expectations in order to replace them with what we didn't know that we were craving for;

provocation as an eye-opener, scandal as purgatory on our way to enlightenment; the artist as herald of things to come – all of these are relics of an avant-gardism which is now, ironically, behind us. But there was a time, a hundred years ago, when art was new and when its newness had become the last remaining criterion of its cultural relevance. To be contemporary was only a beginning; the artist had seen the future and didn't know yet that it was murder. For a few years, Russian avant-garde painters and poets would believe that they were teachers, not victims to be, of the Revolution.

So where do we go, as writers, after humanism and after the cult of the new? We no longer believe in the universalism of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, and what is more, no one knows about any of that any longer, education having lost its ideal purpose, eager now to accommodate the shifting needs of the globalised market. But we also seem out of touch with the cheeky faith in themselves so characteristic of the writers of Modernism, relying not only on the tradition which they were questioning – much the way rebellious children rely on the vitality of their fathers – but also buttressing themselves with the authority of the new.

My own life, as a person and a writer, was shaped and marked by two events, both of which I have mentioned already. I was thirty years to the day when the Berlin Wall came down, and as I woke up to adulthood from a youth spent under the spell of Cold War antagonisms it seemed as if European culture were celebrating the reunion of East and West with the return of humanist notions such as the universalism of art and democracy. With Vacláv Havel installed in the castle of Prague one would be excused to

think so but the vanity of such notions was brutally and abruptly laid bare some ten years later, in Manhattan, on a clear day in September.

The War on Terror and all the terrible mistakes made in its name seem to have confirmed the deconstructive sceptics of postmodernism in their relativist attitude to the universalism of justice, beauty and meaning. And not only have we been witnessing a political melt-down of hopes spurred by the downfall of Communism; we have also seen how the art of writing has become increasingly marginalised by market forces in combination with the failure to insist on a central role for literature within education.

Justly so, one might add, concluding that it was only right for Havel the author to become Havel the president. Only in a totalitarian society does the writer have a role to play as a clandestine moral reference. In a democracy, writers are just citizens like everyone else; providers of a slightly more sophisticated sort of entertainment. And I would gladly resign myself to that, having seen the hopes of 1989 go up in flames on 9/11, were it not for the restlessness taking hold of me; a ridiculous but persisting defiance on behalf of this art of making people real to themselves with words. Every time I meet with readers, I am reminded that as writers, even as writers in postmodern democracies, we still have a different perspective to offer. And I recognize once more how the perspective of literary writing, even today, is reminiscent of that of the Flemish painters in the 17th century who redeemed the banality of individual experience.

I have little faith in the grand, abstract humanism of old but I am appalled by the cynical conclusion to recent history which has it that

democracy is a European speciality unsuited for exportation. I am not at all attracted to the worn-out avant-garde strategies which see transparency, narrative, identification and coherence as sell-out measures, taking refuge in opacity and affectation, turning literature into some sort of freemasonry. But I am equally repelled by the inanity of a market culture where art and literature are mere ornament, something which can easily be dispensed with. And I am heartened by the fact that there are still readers out there who need words to make them real to themselves. I am myself such a reader.

Speaking of news and the writer, it is fair to remember that events, even dramatic ones, are not alone in adding up the crucial characteristics of a given historical moment. Literary narratives are also a language of the pauses, the silence and the cavities where something otherwise hidden can make itself felt. And when public events bring real change one is left to ask if the world is still ours or if it is becoming someone else's. News are always about power and values and I don't think that it is literature's job to celebrate change for its own sake. I rather think that writing has to do with counting the dead, overcoming our losses and integrating changes, even devastating ones, into the story of who we are.

Each generation of writers will have inherited a language in the widest sense of that word, and first they have to take possession of it, make it express their unique historical experience. Secondly, they will have to share it; open up the words again for others to feel real, too. This is the process by which a language stays alive, old and yet forever young, and in that process it becomes clear that for literature, "news" are not identical

with the events being told, and they are not the telling either; the more or less original, more or less inventive play with form and genre. In literature, we are the news; we, the writers. We always were.