

A MANIFESTO

by

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‘So we may indeed have “readers”—though nearly everyone I know who reads seriously is, of course, a writer—but we have no “literature.”’

‘In other words, we have an official, corporate/state approved “literature” like those of the Soviets and other dead, repressive societies before us.’

‘Today, there is no need to ban literature, for the powers that be have hit on something better: The creation of an alleged “market” comprised of people who will read only a certain kind of book, . . . while all other books go ignored, especially those that might question not merely U.S. society, culture and politics itself, but the very mediocrity of what Big Media. . . deems “publishable,” i.e. adhering to the correct formula and sticking to approved topics.’

We are in a serious crisis, not only ecologically and economically, but culturally. The novel is dead, poetry has been marginalized. But literature must live if we are to retain what remains of our “humanity,” or the noblest traits of it. In order to live, literature must grow and change, as the novel has not since the early 1980s and the poem has not, significantly, since the late seventies’ experiments of the LANGUAGE School, the significance of which is debatable. Just as a relatively small star expands at the end of its life many times its natural size to become a Red Giant, then collapses into itself again and again by orders of magnitude until it becomes a cold rock, perhaps the size of Manhattan, so dense that a teaspoonful of it dropped on the earth’s crust would collapse the planet like an egg, so must 1500 page tree-killers, like David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*, be dense-packed into one-to-twenty pages of “highly concentrated” prosody. Not into “synopses” like Cliff’s Notes, but impressionistic portraits in the “colors” of sound and vision, like Gertrude Stein’s *Matisse* and *Picasso*. Printed words have been studied as “object-oriented technology” for several hundred years. For, like the computer variable or object (or DNA), every word carries within it a history of its own use and meanings in the form of etymology.

Why bother? We who do not get paid to provide entertainments, yellow journalism, or advertisements for Big Media, or we who get paid to write *that* stuff during the day and then attempt to write seriously in our “spare time,” must ask ourselves “if it’s not for money, is it for fame that I write?” Highly unlikely. Even the most celebrated of mainstream authors are nowhere close to “famous” in the way celebrities of sports, entertainment, politics, scandal are. The last serious author recognized by the general public, mainstream readers, alternative press readers, and non-readers was J.D. Salinger. Ask a non-reading American to name great American authors and you’ll get, besides Stephen King and other genre writers, Poe, Hemingway, Mark Twain and Salinger. Lewis Carroll might be confused as an American author because, like Twain, selections of his work have been reified into major themes, rides and exhibits at Disney Land.

If we do not write for money or fame, do we write simply because it’s fun? Possibly. But why do we attempt to publish and promote our creations if they were done merely “in fun”? More importantly, why bother writing words at all when we can simply imagine words, scenes, images in our heads?

ANSWER: We write in order to read the books we’ve always wanted to read but can’t because they haven’t been written yet. Hence, we must write them ourselves.

But these books, or this book, cannot just come out of nowhere. It must be informed by other books, other styles, drawn from all that came before us. We have an inheritance: Thousands of volumes of world-literature to turn to in search of our *own voices*. We have the tools: The Internet contains nearly all the information known to humanity but very little wisdom. It is possible, indeed imperative, that we convert at least some of this data into wisdom.

No one can teach you how to write. If that were true, we’d have at least one great book for every one of the umpteen-hundred “writing workshops” and MFA programs out there. All these programs can teach you, really, is how to write in such a way that the “workshop” approach will be standardized across the board and these written-by-committee pieces will be criticized not for what they say or even how they say it, but rather according to what “works.” In other words, what will be marketable by Big Media as magazine stories and novels. The Gotham Writer’s Workshop is a prime example of this bizarre “workshop cult” that began in the 1930s at Iowa. The founders of The Gotham Writer’s Workshop started the enterprise when they were just out of university “writing programs,” fresh MFAs in their hands, and neither the skill, knowledge or inspiration to write seriously. What they did have in abundance was the knowledge of how to run writing workshops and ensure mediocrity and conformity through the writing-by-committee approach. Their idea was to create writing workshops for far less money than the University programs charge—but without the offer of student aid—and pay “writers” eager to tap into the system chump change—\$900/class—to teach classes that were so uniform, so assuredly geared to the production of mainstream stories that “work,” that they created a patented “method” called “the booth,” in which the writer must sit silently as if he/she were literally in an invisible booth, while his/her work is “critiqued” by the class (again, not for form, style, or content, that is, what it says and how it says it, but according to what “works,” the coast-to-coast formula for American poems, novels and short stories).

So now we have an abundance of MFAs running around looking for classes to teach; perhaps more “writers” per capita than have existed anywhere, ever; and a new “print-on-demand” vanity press established nearly every day (many if not most owned by Big Media parent companies such as Amazon’s own print-on-demand book factory, Booksurge), urging these writers and their “professional” teachers to “drop out of the system” and publish their own masterpieces.

There are only two things missing. For one, readers. And for two, any wide distribution of “real” books, those that are launched from various literary “inheritances” but take on the forms and styles needed to deal seriously and effectively with the multi-media, chaotic, desperate, data-saturated world of today. Rather, the books that are disseminated by Big Media, the mainstream books that wind up on the shelves of Barnes and Noble and Borders (I think there are still almost a dozen bookstores-that-are-not-Barnes-&-Noble/Borders left in NYC), are essentially 19th century linear narratives with 21st century “characters” and scenery. As for poetry. . . well, poetry is so marginalized that it can only be spoken about in relation to academia, where it is allegedly read, albeit not for its own sake, but as fodder for graduate papers and theses.

So “writing,” as we have shown, is still “big business.” Reading, unfortunately, has all but disappeared. Oh sure, there is an abundance of functionally literate Americans who can read traffic signs and directions; advertisements; tax forms; and whatever they need to know for their jobs, but such functionally literate people rarely, if ever, volunteer to read for its own sake; when they do buy books, they’re often of the self-help or “How To,” or “[Enter Name of Subject Here] for Dummies” variety. Those who are considered “avid readers” are indeed often the ones buying and reading the updated 19th century-style novels, essays, fictions, etc., on the Barnes & Noble “new fiction” tables.

So we may indeed have “readers”—though nearly everyone I know who reads seriously is, of course, a writer—but we have no “literature.” That is, it’s as if the 20th Century—Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Modernism, Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, the Beats, Pynchon, Nabokov, Gaddis, Kathy Acker, etc. etc.—had never existed. We are stuck with fat linear tomes about the antics of a particular character, or the change a character goes through during the book, or narratives about “modern family life” that say and achieve less in 500 pages than Grace Paley and J.D. Salinger used to say and achieve in ten. In other words, we have an official, corporate/state approved “literature” like those of the Soviets and other dead, repressive societies before us. All the great novels, from *Don Quixote* to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, tended to have two things in common. Nearly all of them were about the great moral, spiritual, political economic, etc., issues of the day; and nearly all were comprehensive representations of the societies from which they emerged. (Fielding noted in *Tom Jones* that just as Homer had to know everything about the world of his time, the novelist must know everything, at least in relation to the themes he/she is tackling. Hence, *Moby Dick* can tell you all you would ever want to know about whaling and certain of the issues facing America in the mid-19th century, just as *Gravity’s Rainbow* showed an encyclopedic knowledge of England and Germany during WWII, in addition to the various themes—physics, colonialism, the impersonality of Big Science, communications and information theory, the sights and sounds and styles of the day, etc., etc.) The great novels were

also often critical of the State or of the enforced morals of their day, and were often banned, as in the cases of *Ulysses*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Huck Finn*, and *Gravity's Rainbow* itself, in certain sections of the country, along with many other novels that we now consider "classics," especially of the 20th century Russian variety.

Of course, in the modern age of specialization, this encyclopedic knowledge is difficult if not impossible to achieve—which was perhaps one reason *Gravity's Rainbow* took place during the "simpler time" of the 1940s. Perhaps the genre of the novel has been stretched to breaking point. Perhaps we can only get small glimpses and intimations of the Great Mystery around us, as in a Borges story. Or perhaps other forms must be invented to deal with our particular modern dilemmas. That's fine. As Harold Bloom pointed out years ago in his "Anxiety of Influence" theory, literature sustains itself, stays alive and thrives, not merely through writers addressing pressing contemporary human problems, but by their attempting to break away from the Literary Inheritance, or whatever part of that inheritance they are most beholden to, in order to create works that are unique and of their time.

Today, there is no need to ban literature, for the powers that be have hit on something better: The creation of an alleged "market" comprised of people who will read only a certain kind of book, as their education prepared them to, while all other books go ignored, especially those that might question not merely U.S. society, culture and politics itself, but the very mediocrity of what Big Media (six conglomerates own *all* mainstream media on the planet) deems "publishable," i.e. adhering to the correct formula and sticking to approved topics.

What we have is a situation in which the conformist books are promoted and widely disseminated, are "reviewed" favorably by the tabloids owned by the conglomerate that owns the publisher, and are turned into movies or television shows by the studios owned by the same conglomerate and further endorsed by the same tabloids that helped sell the book.

Do you see what we have here? Unless people go out of their way to find real—that is, nonconformist—books, what they are surrounded by, and grow accustomed to, are "made-for-TV-novels" and other commercially viable linear fictions. Linear like American History, where, of course, the "good guys won." The Heroes, who dared to dream The American Dream.

Extra! Extra! Read all about it!

Though you'll probably wait for the movie. . . .

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