

THE BELIEFS OF WRITERS

What follows is the lecture delivered at the Hopwood Awards ceremonies at the University of Michigan, April 1985, as revised by the author for publication.

All writers relish stories from the lives of the masters. We hold them in our minds as a kind of trade lore. We hope the biography of the great writer yields secrets of his achievement. As many writers as Hemingway inspired to write he probably inspired to hunt or to box. I imagine many of them crouching this very moment in their duck blinds. Writers always want to learn how to live as a means of bringing out the best they have in themselves.

The master's life I've been thinking about lately is Tolstoy's, in particular his crisis of conscience at the age of fifty. Always at the mercy either of his passions or his ethics, Tolstoy lived in a kind of alternating current of tormented resolution. The practice of fiction left him elated and terribly let down. It's said that he had to be prevented from throwing the finished manuscript of *Anna Karenina* into the fire. In any event, at the age of fifty he decided that his life lacked justification, that he was no better than a pander to people who had nothing better to do with their time than to read. And he gave up writing novels.

Of course, his resolve did not seem to cover the shorter form and over the years he lapsed into the composition of a few modest pieces—"The Kreutzer Sonata," "The Death of Ivan Ilyich"—but for the most part he employed his position and his talents to militate against some of the overwhelming misery of life under the Czar. He indulged a prophetic voice. He preached his doctrine of Christian non-violence. He wrote primers designed to teach the children of peasants to read.

Now theoretically, at least, there is for every writer a point at which he or she might come to the same conclusion as Tolstoy, a

point at which circumstantial reality overwhelms the very idea of art or seems to demand a practical benefit from it; when the level of perceived or felt communal suffering or danger makes the traditional practice of literature for traditional purposes, intolerable. But even a casual examination of literary history finds a readier disposition for this crisis of faith in Europe, where the passion of art has often been a social passion. So in Russia we have not only the example of Count Tolstoy stomping around in his peasant boots but the young Dostoevsky and his circle arguing everything about fiction except its enormous importance to history and human salvation. And in France we have Sartre and Camus, among others, conceiving a response to the moral devastation of World War II, a literary Resistance that includes drama, allegory, metaphysics, and handing out pamphlets in the streets.

With certain exceptions, American writers have tended to be less fervent about the social value of art and therefore less vulnerable to crises of conscience. The spiritual problems of our writers are celebrated but of a different kind from those having to do with the problem of engagement. Our nineteenth-century masters lived in sparse populations. Forests, the sea, the prairie, were images of terrifying freedom. So we've been brought up on solitude as much as society. We have a different faith to lose. I think of the despair of Hemingway, for instance, that led him to turn one of his shotguns on himself, or Faulkner's and Fitzgerald's that led them to drink themselves into ruin. The problem as they lived it was a torment of success or failure but in any event some recognition of mortal limits, some inconsolability of rugged individualism formulated entirely as a private faith. Tolstoy, we should remember, lived to write his last novel, *Resurrection*, when he was in his seventies. His ego is no less colossal but our American masters thought with theirs to hold up the earth and sky.

So in thinking about Leo Tolstoy's attitude, I'm very much aware of its foreignness. We have had one decade in our own literary history, the 1930s, when politics and art, engagement, seemed to be on everyone's mind, but we take this period as a time of misfired artistic energy, of duped intellectuals and bad proletarian novels. Having been turned ideological, we suffered for it, or so the lesson goes. American novelists since then have tended to cast themselves resolutely as private citizens and independent entrepreneurs. There is certainly no tradition among us for serving our country as senators

and ambassadors like our European and Latin American colleagues. Our ancestry reveals an occasional customs inspector. We see the public value of our work as an accident of its private diction. Our attitude is expressed succinctly by the naturalized American poet W.H. Auden, who said a writer's politics are more of a danger to him than his cupidity. We worry that if a work is formed by ideas exterior to it, if there is some sort of programmed intention, a set of truths to be illustrated, the work will be compromised and we'll produce not art but polemic. We want our novels pure. We dislike about *War and Peace* that Tolstoy lectures us on history. He was always that way, we think, not just after the age of fifty.

Oddly enough, the aesthetic piety just described places the artist's idea of himself centrally in the American heartland. The notion that we are the independent entrepreneurs of ourselves is a national heritage. Irving Howe, among others, has pointed out that working people in the United States, unlike their European counterparts, refuse to identify themselves as a class. They tend to define themselves not by their work but by what they own from their work, the property they've accumulated, their ethnic background, their social activities—by anything, in short, that points up their distinction from the larger community. For the independent entrepreneur of himself, there is upward mobility, at least across generations, and there is the road—he can hit the road when things go bad, pull up stakes, move on. All this including the writer's idea of what he can allow in his art and what he cannot expresses our great operative myth of individualism.

We are thought as a country to be non-ideological and non-systematic in the way we go about conceptualizing our problems and solving them—or not solving them. We are chronically and by nature suspicious of systematic solutions. We're pragmatists. We like to go out in the barn of the Constitution and tinker. Writers no less than blue-collar people share the national aversion for the intellect, for the passion of the intellect, and the voices we find for our books are a shade more ironical and less epic than the Tolstoyan *basso profundo*. In preference to the Olympian view from the mountain we settle for the authority of the egalitarian witness, the pragmatic deposer of what he can confirm with his own eyes and ears.

If there was a moment when this piety of literary practice was set to harden, perhaps it was in 1940 with the publication of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. What preceded it was a

decade of intense debate carried on both within the work of novelists and critics and outside it in journals and in symposia or conferences. Almost no serious work of the era was not informed by the presumption of social crisis. Confronted with the miseries of the Depression, and the rise of the modern totalitarian state, writers and artists and intellectuals argued the alternatives to industrial capitalism. We are told this in Malcolm Cowley's book *And I Worked at the Writer's Trade*. The spirit shared inescapably by every American artist was the longing for ideal community. Among writers this spirit moved as much in the thought of conservative Southern Agrarians like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate, who could project a utopia based on the civilities of Southern farm life; or T.S. Eliot, behind whose *Waste Land* lay a golden, God-lit medieval city; as in the more numerous prophets of the varieties of Marxian socialism.

And outside the books the value and justification of literature, of any art, came into furious debate. Whatever position a writer took, from formalism to communism, the need to take some position was inescapable. The writer's destiny was to be confronted with his conscience, to find his place, draw his lines. Commitment—to what? Engagement—of what sort? The process was both brutal and complicated. The world didn't stay still but moved along. History contaminated pure thoughts, the right causes got mixed up with the wrong people, ideals gave away to expediency, and hateful writers did good work and noble writers did lousy work. But everyone—good writers, bad writers—seemed to be in touch with what was going on in the world.

Hemingway himself had published a novel in 1937, *To Have and Have Not*, in which the Hemingway hero, a smuggler off the Florida coast, came as close as he ever had to articulating a communal sentiment. His name in this book is Harry Morgan and he's made to say "A man alone ain't got no bloody fucking chance." This is a monumental insight coming from the younger sibling of the romantically self-involved expatriates of the earlier novels.

Hemingway's next novel was to take place in Spain at the time of the civil war. He had seen the war firsthand, he was more worldly and more in touch with things than either Faulkner or Fitzgerald. Though he was a Loyalist, he deeply mistrusted and came to detest the Communists who ran things for the Loyalist side. This judgment, which turned out to be sound, was not unlike that of George Orwell in *Homage to Catalonia*. But it was Orwell, the European,

who took what he learned to the point of revelation, the political prophecy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. We find by contrast in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* that a man alone may have no bloody fucking chance but it can be very beautiful that he hasn't. The Hemingway hero is now named Robert Jordan and he's a young American volunteer on the Loyalist side, a demolitions expert who is coming to the mountains to blow a bridge held by the Phalangists. He ends up dying alone, heroically, having taken over the leadership of the partisan band he's joined, and sent them away to live on, his own code of honor the only enduring value of The Civil War of the Spanish people. The most international of American writers, was, morally speaking, an isolationist. War is the means by which one's cultivated individualism can be raised to the heroic. And therefore, never send to ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls: so that I can be me.

Now before you or I overread my claim, or what it is I'm getting to, let me take a moment to clarify something. I mean not to make pronouncements about literature but to speak of literary belief, which is something else than literature. Literary belief is the culture of presumptions and ideas that govern those of us who make literature our lives as writers. So I do not intend here to contrast Realism and Experimentalism or to speak of the Romantic tradition or the influences of Modernism or any of that sort of thing which properly is the province of the literary critic and historian. What I'm doing is thinking out loud about where we are now, all of us, in our practice of fiction and perhaps how we got here. What do we believe about our writing, our calling, what do we think its possibilities are? In a catalogue of publications by the University of Chicago Press, I recently noticed a title that interested me, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, by Professor Katerina Clark. The copy advises that Professor Clark's study of the Soviet novel turns on the idea of its serving as a repository of official myths. Knowing the fate of dissident Soviet authors and meeting them now in numbers in this country, it seems a reasonable claim and I look forward to reading the book. But I warrant that some of the serious works of American fiction, no less than our kitsch, in some ways serve as repositories for our myths, though of course not by direction and of course our myths are not official, at least not until recently. And a consideration of Hemingway now fifty or sixty years later has to include the possibility that his popularity with the public and among young writers was in part due to his service as a repository of American myth. The

entrepreneurial self had come in for some rough treatment from Melville in *Moby Dick* and from Dreiser in *Sister Carrie*. But Hemingway found its most romantic face. Withdrawal from society, distrust of it, despair of it, has been preponderant in our fiction ever since Robert Jordan withdrew from life and love and looked out over the barrel of his rifle on the last page of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It is as if given the self, nothing but the self — not God, not the state, love, or any conviction of a universal order — we have made ourselves its annotators. We may have rejected Hemingway's romance — the self has become absurd, blackly humorous, and, finally, shattered and fragmentary — but, and this is the point, it is ours.

Surely we can say of contemporary fiction without fear of contradiction that it suffers from a reduced authority, certainly for its readers who seem to be reading less of it. It may be that the most avid readers of new fiction in America today are film producers, an indication of the trouble we're in. But what is more peculiar is the reduced authority of fiction in the minds of writers themselves, who seem to want to take on less and less of the world with it. This is an impression, of course, nothing more. And even as I test it in my mind with several significant exceptions, it nevertheless seems valid to say that there is a timidity to serious fiction now, some modesty of conception and language, that has pulled us back from its old haunts. There seems to be a disposition many of us have to accept some rule largely hidden, to circumscribe our analysis and our geography, to come indoors and lock the door and pull the shades and dwell in some sort of unresounding private life.

Of course, fiction as traditionally practiced has always dealt with private life. High seriousness in literature is attached to the belief in the moral immensity of the single soul. If the artist is lucky or a genius, the specific creation of his belief, Emma Bovary, Carrie Meeber, Stephen Dedalus, Jay Gatsby, Joseph K., implicates the universe. We become more who we are in the imposition on ourselves of these morally illuminating fictive lives. But of these characters I've listed, the books in which they find their animation make society at large the antagonist, whether as middle-class provincialism, religious culture, or government bureaucracy; the fate of these individuals issues from their contention with or concession to the vast world around them. And the geography of the book is vast. The heroine of *Sister Carrie* is, like her lover Hurstwood, a soul domi-

nated by the material lures of the big city. We witness her sentimental education, not in the emotions of love for which neither she nor anyone else in the book has endurance, but in the emotion of social and economic advancement. There's no claim in Dreiser for the consistent government of the human mind, exactly the sentimentalism at the root of so many well-written, fashionably ironic novels of private life done today. And so our awareness moves out concentrically over Chicago, over New York, over the whole United States. And then it keeps going.

It is that moving outward, that significant system of judgment, missing in much of our work today. Of course, we have now a considerable history of this reduced literature and of course it's not exclusively American. An early retreat was sounded in the 1950s by Robbe-Grillet. But it's the American phenomenon I'm trying to understand and locate: an exhaustion of the hope that writing can change anything, or the discovery that all the wickedness is known and thoroughly reported, that all the solutions to the wickedness are known, that nothing changes, it all goes on with only the freshness of expression lost, and the power of the art. Some sort of raging, amoral system inside of which the artist is only astute in the act of withdrawal.

There are many exceptions to this generalization, of course. We've had novels about Vietnam. And certainly it is less true as applied to black writers and to writers who are feminists. Yet it is true for all of us that rather than making the culture, we now seem to be made by it, even when we are being traditional novelists reporting on what we see and making a morally comprehensive world. Somehow in this post-modernist time we have been cowed. We lack some rage of imagination, the imperial earth-shaking intention on the one hand, that—the world not responding properly—would cause us to give up our writing altogether on the other. So that, with Tolstoy, we would rail against art as we had before railed against life.

And there's a corresponding drift among critics. I think of the few works by my contemporaries which are examples of political fiction. They only accentuate the prevailing rules. There is no poetics yet devised by American critics that would treat engagement as anything more than an understandable but nevertheless deplorable breakdown of form. It is my impression, perhaps unjustified, that for some segments of our critical community, the large examination of society within a story, the imposition in a novel of public matters

on private life, the lighting of history within an individual, places a work in aesthetic jeopardy. Thus the social novel is seen always as ideological. In fact, if the subject of the novel is of a certain sort, if the novel is about a labor union organizer, for example, or a family on welfare, it is assumed to be political, that is, impure, as for example a novel about life in prep school is not. Political is always to be distinguished from what entertains. The CIA novels of William Buckley are thought to entertain. Whereas some many months ago in the *New York Times Book Review*, a critic, Robert Alter, said of Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22* and a novel of mine, *The Book of Daniel*, that they were flawed by a spirit adversarial to the Republic.

The final distinction is, of course, between political and literary, a quaint distinction and probably a source of amusement to writers in other parts of the world, Nadine Gordimer in South Africa, for example, or Milan Kundera of Czechoslovakia, Günter Grass of West Germany, García Márquez of Colombia, and it would have given a good laugh to Stendhal, Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Malraux. I think it is no slander to suggest that some of our critics are more likely to accept the political novel and even acclaim this or that example as long as it is written by a foreigner about a foreign country. This is analogous to President Reagan's support of workers' movements as long as they are in Poland.

Let's get back for just a moment to the 1930s. No one could seriously want the '30s to be held up as any kind of model age. There is nothing remotely desirable that I can see in Depressions or Crystal Nights or show trials. I don't imagine the purpose of history is to inspire art. I don't agree with Faulkner that "Ode to a Grecian Urn" is worth any number of old ladies—or old men. I don't think Faulkner is worth the antebellum South, and I would rather not have had Kafka at the price of twentieth-century European carnage. But in trying to locate contemporary American writing I look at the '30s, that supposedly meager decade of misfired artistic energy and of duped intellectuals and bad proletarian novels, and I see: not just Faulkner and Hemingway and Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe but James T. Farrell, Katherine Anne Porter, Richard Wright, Nelson Algren, William Saroyan, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, Nathanael West, Dorothy Parker, Edward Dahlberg, Dalton Trumbo, Horace McCoy, Erskine Caldwell, Lillian Hellman, James Agee, Edmund Wilson, Daniel Fuchs, Henry Roth, Henry Miller.

For starters. A literature of immense variety and contention, an argument from every side, full of passion, excessive, self-consuming.

Literary life in the present is, by comparison, decorous. It's very quiet today. Is it because our society is sunlit and perfect? Are all our vampires staked through the heart? Or have we, as writers, given up our presumption of the authority of art, of the central place of the sustained narrative critique in the national argument?

Alfred Kazin has an idea about the '30s that might be appropriate here. "That crucial period," Kazin says, "turned out to be stronger in counter-revolution than in revolution, in the power of the state than in the apostolic freedom of the individual soul." He goes on to say, "Orthodoxy was becoming the norm in the '30s, not radicalism. The period that seems so easy to sentimentalize as one of struggle against poverty and oppression actually saw the triumph of Fascism in Germany and Spain, the unchecked dominion of Stalinist terror over what was radical in Communism itself. In this country the statism seemingly necessary for the crisis legislation of the New Deal was soon with Pearl Harbor to hammer out social regimentation and forms of intellectual control that many Americans now regard as the norm."

Of course, I'm taking his remarks out of context. But if Kazin is right — and listening to the shrill voices of conservatism in culture as well as everything else, how can we doubt it? — then we have some suggestion of the ultimate dependence of the artist upon the people he would speak for. And why not? We conceive the work of art as the ultimate act of individuation, but it may be seen also as a production of the community. Narrative is the art closest to the ordinary daily operation of the human mind. People find the meaning of their lives in the idea of sequence, in conflict, in metaphor, and in moral. People think and make judgments from a confidence of narrative. You will note that anyone at any age is able to tell the story of his or her life with authority. The narrative mode of thought comes naturally to everyone, as for instance mathematical or scientific reasoning does not. One imagines in the dawn of prehistoric human life that storytelling did not have to be invented as, say, counting or the wheel. In one sense a novel is nothing more than an intricate construct of opinions. Opinions are the novel's molecules and altogether these opinions, judgments, facts, yield a world view. These opinions, furthermore, are maintained by means of sensual evocation as much as by intellect. Every sense we have is stimulated by the

vicarious instrumentation of words; and we derive from the prose we read a harmony of judgments, both explicit to our mental selves and intuitive and felt, that very nearly evokes the way each of us in every minute of consciousness composes the world in order to make sense of it.

Everyone, all the time, is in the act of composition, our experience is an ongoing narrative within each of us. The critic Isaac Rosenfeld once said every life has a theme. That's a literary word, theme. The theme of a life as a book is the disinterested central judgment we make of it. The novel duplicates the temporality of life and the authority for the telling of the novel is most often the death of its characters—the same authority, in the words of the great critic Walter Benjamin, “which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him.”

Thus, ironically, in our withdrawal, our nonpolitical pragmatic vision of ourselves and our calling, we may be expressing the general crisis of our age. We are writing as we live, in a kind of stunned submission to the political circumstances of our lives and the establishmentarian rule of our politicians. We are being bought off by our comforts while great moral outrages are committed in our name. As two superpowers hold the world hostage, a statist ideology encroaches on the realm of individual thought.

I would not mean to imply that the problems of writers under these circumstances are not the least of America's problems. But the coercion of Realpolitik, the ideology of Cold War, and the shadow of the bomb, may have robbed us of the passion of our calling, which is the belief that writing matters, that there is salvation in witness and moral assignment. These days many of our best writers do a kind of passive prophecy. They concentrate on the powerlessness or haplessness of our lives, and the inappropriateness of our public places for human life or the inadequacy of our culture for the conduct of human emotion. An inadvertent social critique comes off their pages without that level of rage that would drive them to and fro, like Leo Tolstoy, from art to the conviction that nothing is more important than teaching the children of the poor to read. The young writer today who picks up tonally, philosophically, on the Hemingway romance, is in danger of misperceiving the predominant condition of things, which is that the future for any of us is not individual. As independent entrepreneurs of ourselves with no control over our destiny, we may be failing the task. How will we be

able to stay true to the changing nature of our lives if we hold to a myth that is being nullified by history? If our response to what is going on today were appropriate, it would probably produce books of a grubbier, sloppier and more energetic sort than we are doing. Books with less polish and self-consciousness, but about the way power works in our society, who has it, and how it is making history. In order to begin to rebuild our sense of ourselves, we may have to go back to childhood, to the past, and start again. In order to reclaim our society, we need the words to find it. If we make that effort everything I've been pondering here may not be an end but a beginning. And that should dilate your nostrils, young writers, and give you a scent of the chase.