

RICHARD FORD

## WHAT WE WRITE, WHY WE WRITE IT, AND WHO CARES

It's probably not a novelist's proper calling to give lectures. Philip Larkin called writers standing up in front of audiences, "me pretending to be me." But it's a chance we jump at because it's so much easier than writing stories. In lectures, glibness is acceptable, sometimes even appreciated—whereas in actual writing it usually isn't. At the lectern you get "help" from your actual voice and persona being already more or less in place, whereas in stories you have to start new every time. The many disparate opinions, biases, vindictivenesses that usually float around useless in your head can in a talk like this be corralled and advertised as: "a far-ranging, widely-referential, no-holds-barred address stressing the value of Mr. Ford's age and experience."

And finally, of course, in a lecture there's the promise which real writing doesn't offer: that if the content's no good, or not even there, it'll quickly be forgotten and do no harm as we float off toward cocktail hour.

On the other hand, writing and its more august cousin, literature, are permanent. Once we commit them, they last forever. And, in a sense, what I want to talk about commences and ends in that important fact.

I've been away from the university for what seems like a long time—twelve years—and away from this one for nearly sixteen. But when I was here, writing a novel for the first time, and being a stuffed-shirt Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows, teaching creative writing, and being a cringing preceptor for Mr. Weisbuch's introductory literature course, I frankly thought it was just great

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here. This was before the deconstructionists took a stranglehold on the Modern Language Association, and started turning students of literature against literature. Then, at least, beginning in 1971, it seemed to me that literary study, and literature itself, and “writing” were all part of one continuum, and that I was in the world here—the applause of my colleagues was the world’s applause; their disapproval or indifference a credible cultural milieu for the writing I was beginning to do. I have no wish to overturn that view now. I was encouraged and welcomed here and my status as a non-entity wasn’t held against me. I was here to learn, not just to perform.

It’s true that in the years between then and now my experience of the university in general has made me think that literary study, imaginative literature itself, and ongoing writing, are more of a continuum-by-consent than a manifestation of some natural law. And beyond that, I’ve been struck by how much of university life is involved with the practice of judging—judging others, their acts, their attitudes, making discriminations, assigning moral values, and conversely, by how much of life outside the university is not concerned with that, indeed hardly has time for it.

My first evidence of this judging came, in fact, in 1975, when my office-mate over in Haven Hall (we’ll call him Professor Jones) explained to me one afternoon—one in which in his absence I’d dispensed some good-willed but he thought incorrect “instruction” to some of his students about how to pronounce some Middle English vowels in *The Canterbury Tales*, that (he explained) *Writers really didn’t belong in the university, that it was not the correct place for us. We could be here for a while, okay. But we needed, he felt, to be out living our lives, having adventures, finding things to write about.* I don’t remember if he finally said where our place actually was. Just elsewhere. Out. This—the university—was his place. He did seem certain of that.

But in truth, I had no body of specialized knowledge to teach. I had no controversial research underway requiring the university’s shelter. In fact I had no real care about aiding young women and men to become writers—especially not at the expense of my own desires, which were to write novels. It may just’ve been as Eudora Welty wrote about herself, that I “lacked the instructing turn of mind.” And so, shortly after this conversation and for reasons related to it, I departed the university. It was, as the saying goes, one of my

“earliest influences,” one of the negative ones I had to try to turn into profit.

So, I know acutely—and poignantly on a day like today—that now is an influential time in the life of you young writers. The barely conscious convictions you begin to form now about who reads, and how well, and where’s the ideal destination for your work, what are the right elevations to set for your seriousness of purpose, and what should you be writing about, and what public tolerance for your work can you rely on—where’s your “place” in other words—these’ll have to direct and console you for your whole life.

Thinking about these same things, myself, I sense in the American air now an unhappy censoriousness—something much different from when I began writing stories in the sixties, even though I thought I began at a time of relative aesthetic and political tumult. But from all angles I hear people saying “no” to someone else. We can hear it in our politics and political processes: people telling us what we can’t do. Few people seem willing to admit or say “yes” to much of anything; and both as a cause and as an effect, there’s a wide feeling of bad apprehension and distaste for current life, a national feeling actually of powerlessness even to perceive accurately our private lives; a hunger for governance; a lack of courage. In many parts of America the powers that be would rather you own and use a Mac-10 than *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Obviously, this censoriousness is perceptible in the arts; and not just in the high administrative levels which control, for instance, the NEA and the NEH, but a censoriousness among ground-level commentators—often novelists themselves—saying “no” to this, “no” to that, unable it seems to like something without disliking something else—a habit more typical of critics than artists.

\*Tom Wolfe complains in *Harper’s* magazine that there are actually good subjects and bad ones, and practically all contemporary novels but the one he wrote are neurasthenic because they don’t choose—or at least he doesn’t perceive them to have chosen—to reflect recent social history or economics or immigration patterns—the way he thinks Balzac did, or Trollope.

\*Edward Hoagland, the distinguished essayist, complains in *Esquire* that very little’s good at all in current American literature.

\*Patricia Hampl complains inexplicably in the *New York Times* that there’s something second-rate about writing in the first person.

\*Madison Bell complains that minimalism (whatever that is) has eroded the longueurs within the American narrative impulse—the antidote being to write like Peter Taylor, or by implication, like Mr. Bell, himself.

It is, I hardly need to say, a Republican mood—pinched and conservative, peremptory and uncharitable, dismissive and afraid, a national temper in which it's appealing to shout art down. Though simultaneously, of course, in such an unpretty national temper, the arts take on a very special and resuscitative responsibility (a bad time in the world is often a good time for art). Indeed, in these moments of powerlessness the impulse to write or read a novel ought to be a saving impulse.

Consequently, I've thought to myself from time to time lately that it might be hard starting out writing today—during a period in universities when stories and novels were reduced to being texts said to mean the opposite of what they evidently mean and what their privileged authors rashly thought they meant; when literature was treated as bankrupt and boring, and a writer a figure of fun for writing it; and when what you thought was no good was actually deemed excellent—only you weren't the right race or the right sexual orientation or the right gender to understand what excellence is.

I know I'm sensitive to this peculiar air we all breathe and that's supposed to inspire us: I write novels myself, and this mood influences my work and how I think about literature, just as I'm sure whether you know it or not it influences you—influences what you choose to write about, what you will and won't take credit for, what you believe literature is and what it isn't. It's certain that some of what feels like moral imperative now will pass, and seem like a vogue in five years. So, it's important for us all to decide—by looking closely at the world and at language—what's worth accepting and what's not.

I have a friend who teaches at a major Eastern university near Boston. He's a writer like I am, and he teaches creative writing. And last autumn, a young male student turned in for class a particularly graphic story in which a good deal of heterosexual fornication was described in vivid documentary detail culminating in an act of climactic anal intercourse. The story was read and given if not exactly loving at least respectful treatment by the class, except for a young woman who said that such writing as this was not literature, and shouldn't even be allowed into the dignity of class discussion.

Women were being degraded in this story, she felt. She thereafter went home and wrote and turned in for class an even more vivid and detailed story of heterosexual roguery *also* eventuating in a climactic anal intercourse—which I guess is now the *ne plus ultra* in heterosexuality—whereupon the class and my novelist friend deemed this her best work.

But the young woman was stricken. She felt she'd written her story as a protest, to outrage and anger her colleagues and to illustrate for them their errors by putting them into the distressing place she'd occupied before: certainly a time-honored use for literature. She felt she'd carefully calculated the response of her audience, yet unfortunately she'd been wrong—which is, of course, one, though only one measure of writing's success or excellence.

My friend told me this story a bit in the Art Linkletter spirit of “kids saying the darndest things.” We were both of us amused. But we were surprised by the events as a small but serious piece of ethical business. The young woman in question (and it might as easily have been a young man) had failed to appreciate not only that her claim to write such a story in protest was equal to the previous young man's claim to write his to titillate or annoy. She likewise seemed not to appreciate what, in fact, was the inspiration for her own story (Larkin wrote once that “One of the reasons one writes is that all existing books are somehow unsatisfactory”). And beyond that, and even more worrisome to me, was her choice not only to exercise her freedom to write what she pleased when it suited her, but also to violate her own apparent criteria for good literature when she felt she had a high enough purpose for doing so. I couldn't help feeling at the time the similarity on a small scale to the situation Bret Ellis faced in publishing *American Psycho* two years ago—that being a book, curiously enough, more people wished to condemn and suppress than read, but which quickly disappeared not because it was suppressed but because the culture dealt with it ultimately and proportionately as a book—not as a war-crime.

This past September, I took a trip to Sweden, to take part in a colloquium on multiculturalism at the University of Lund. Lund, I was told at the time, was Sweden's Yale. Whereas Uppsala was its Harvard. I never found out where its Michigan was. And, this is what writers do now instead of going to war, something also easier

than writing—colloquializing in foreign countries. Spreading American influence.

Present in Lund were a “Native American Female Poet”; a “Native American Male Professor” from the University of San Diego; a Fulbright Professor of American Studies representing the U.S. State Department—and me. And while we were addressing as a panel a group of Swedish journalists and students of American culture, giving witness to the convergent and variegated forces of ethnicity and race and gender in our society, I happened to observe that I was the token Living White Male in our group. And when I said this, I noticed a ripple of discomfort go across my colleagues’ faces. And in the course of continuing our panel I was asked eventually by the moderator if I myself had a Native American heritage. And, natch, I did. And thereafter on several occasions I was told that I was not really a Token Living White Male, but in fact was arguably a Native American, myself—that is, their kind of Native American, not the kind I already thought I was.

This of course was amusing to me since not so long ago, practically everybody I knew was claiming to be part Cherokee as a way of one-upping somebody else. It became a cultural cliché, after which there dawned a period of rather severe credential checking and loudly expressed indignity over the Indian’s sole ability to speak for the Indian.

In my own family, our Indian-ness was always a subject of some dystrophic unease. My great-grandmother had been born on the Osage Strip in Oklahoma and had married a non-Indian and moved across the border into Arkansas, where apparently there weren’t as many Indians. Thereafter there was a considerable scramble in my grandmother’s generation to keep their Indian-ness quiet and to seem like what they thought were regular white people—Irish and Germans. This issue eventually devolved upon my mother as ethnicity often does upon succeeding generations: clumsily. From time to time she gave evidence of believing Indians were second-class humans, but then she would fight you if you said so. There was a good deal of looking at our profiles and wondering if they “seemed Indian,” and making wry insider jokes about “Italian Indians” in the movies, and admiring the Navajos for baffling the Japanese cryptographers in World War II, and shaking our heads about what a raw deal Jim Thorpe got from the Olympic Committee. There even

began to be some lack of clarity about whether we were actually Osage or Cherokee, ourselves – if indeed we were Indians at all.

But here now in Sweden I was being unexpectedly conscripted into the tribe, so to speak, and for reasons I had to think about, since I hadn't wanted to be. And the reason I felt I was being made an ad hoc member – I came to believe this later – was not so much so I'd feel at one with anybody, but so that I'd feel I spoke for others and not just for myself, or for whomever I might've thought I spoke for; and, importantly, so that I would try to calculate or modulate what I said in behalf of not offending the putative beliefs of unnamed others.

I'd been made part not just of a tribe, but of a special interest group, which depending on the Indian or the professor you spoke to, had a way of looking at things, and perhaps a way of looking askance at or of casting aspersions on non-members. Something about me – my good will or my complex sense of myself, or my freedom from some cultural biases and clichés, or indeed my own experience with my own past, or maybe just my willingness to see myself as I chose to, wasn't exactly being credited.

And I didn't like that, no more than I like hearing somebody say what should or shouldn't be read. Not that I wanted to speak for all Living White Males any more than I wanted to speak for Native Americans – whom I wasn't very familiar with as a group. I was in fact just making a little multicultural joke – jokes being a rare commodity in multicultural circles.

As a writer, I don't believe in "groups." Generalities – about women or men, or blacks or whites – have never been sufficiently consistent with my experience. A kind of truth-telling god lives only in details for me. That's one of literature's appealing conceits – that it is specific and often takes as one of its challenges to test with details (even invented details) the truth of conventional wisdom, and even to supplant that putative wisdom if it's found lacking. What I wanted was to speak not *for* my group but simply *from* myself – even if I might've been wrong, offensive, or finally chastised. Indeed, I wanted to imagine not what made me or Native people special; but what made me – a non-native – like them. What made us alike.

To me this is what multiculturalism is worth – in colloquiums and in writing short stories and novels: it's an invitation to imagine more meticulously the distinctions and similarities which make us able to

share the planet together; it's an opportunity to challenge and if need be break the hold of conventional wisdom, of history, and to complicate our responses on behalf of extending the beneficence of sympathy to others who aren't just like us but may be more like us than we know. Good intentions, of course, don't make good literature. There's still the obligation in exercising free sway about humanity to get it right. But I'd rather risk doing my best and getting it wrong and being ignored and castigated than to be scared off by what a University of Chicago sociologist recently referred to as the "hegemonic vision of single-minded interest groups," which — to me — is nothing but a lower form of ward-heeling, small-time power politics where truth is not the goal.

To my mind, one good definition of a political issue is an important human issue somebody decides to treat politically, just as a political novel is a piece of persuasive art somebody decides to treat as politics. There's a sentiment which says you can't just speak *from* yourself, that you can only represent your group, and all is politics. Be that as it may be, those determinations are usually made after the fact of artistic utterance, in an attempt to influence the future. And I merely try not to be misled about my own first principle: that I'm responsible for my book, and nobody else is.

During the writing of five books and a relatively short time as writer — sixteen years since the first novel I wrote was published — I've had my share of influential forces worked on me. And in that time I've tried to be faithful and stay alert to what I was ignorant of so I could see my miscues and not go on making them. But, I've been accused of being a racist in the *New Yorker* because a reviewer thought a character in *The Sportswriter* had insensitive racial views. I've been accused off and on of having "problems with women," though my accusers were almost always men. I've been accused of being cruel to animals any number of times, and of condescending to the "lower classes," although I don't believe in class distinctions. I've been accused of writing "male books," of being a phony westerner, a failed southerner, and to having no right even to write about the people I've written about. I've been told in print, in the *Washington Post*, that I actually had no subject at all and should quit writing; and that a rather simple-seeming book of mine which I thought was just about a young Montana boy growing up in the world, being abandoned at home with his mother and once inadvertently seeing her naked one night, was actually a book about

incest—an accusation which I didn't think was true but which frankly troubled me.

I've had it the other way, too: some good reviews that said I was doing a good job—though I don't mean to confuse book reviews with serious judgment. My friend Joyce Carol Oates has told me on several occasions that I wrote very strong and good and convincing female characters. I often find myself clinging to that endorsement like a piece of thin driftwood. And if it's true I attribute it to giving my female characters as many good dialogue lines—lines that possess drama or the potential for affecting human action—as I give to my male characters.

Once, indeed, I wrote a story in which a little Anglo-Canadian girl tells a young Blackfeet boy that “An Indian is just another bump in the road to me.” And shortly after that I got a phone call from a professor at the University of North Carolina wanting to know what I knew about “young Indian men lying out on public highways at night,” since his research showed this was a frequent cause of death among male native Americans. I had to tell him that I hadn't done any research on the subject. I'd just hit upon that line one morning, liked it and left it in the story trusting that if I could think of it, somebody'd certainly already done it. In other words, I'd just made it up without knowing so much about Indians, but having spent my life paying attention to human beings. Such, I guess, is the uncanny power of the imagination if not reliably to find truth—at least to shed light on new facts, which if we're persuaded by them become truth.

To bring this set of concerns down to a less politically-sensitive level, I think of writing about humans somewhat as I think of writing about places. In Kim Townsend's biography of Sherwood Anderson he claims that Anderson wrote so well about northern Ohio because he hadn't lived there in a long time and had forgotten all about it. Anderson invented Ohio using bits of memory, and using a habit and affection for language with which to give literary body to the strong, unarticulated feelings and torques he was subject to. And it's somewhat in this way that many writers make characters, recognizing as Paul West wrote about Robbe-Grillet, that language is a “uniquely human and subjective thing to begin with, and it can never with utter authority reveal the nature of anything,” people and places included, though language can certainly invent what we then believe.

The impulse to choose a line of dialogue which eventually will be understood as a component of a character is in some ways similar to the impulse to choose, for example, to set your story in a place called Winesburg, or in Great Falls. Admittedly, in the case of Great Falls, there's a town out there on the plains of Montana. But the Great Falls in *my* stories bears more resemblance to Anderson's Winesburg than to some actual place: it's made up principally of its name—Great Falls, a two-word combination I like (the long A sound giving way to the short A; an appealing iambic or, if you choose, trochaic foot; the idiosyncratic picture it puts in my head; the appearance of its letters on the page—these among other qualities I ascribe to it).

These spontaneous, sensory, rather less-cognitive considerations are close to how I chose the line I had my little Canadian girl say to her Indian friend and that then became part of her character and his, and turned out to be the object of someone's "distinguished research": I just liked the line. I thought it was vivid, raw, memorable, funny.

I chose Great Falls, in fact, before I'd never been to the actual place or knew much about it. I just sensed for some of the reasons I've just said, that it was for me what the poet Richard Hugo called a "Triggering Town"—a name, a place that provoked me to write sentences and from whose earthly actuality I needed to be free so I could write something new.

Later on, of course, I'm free to return to my sentences, as we do. I can decide if I want to use Great Falls, if it makes sense, if I'm using it in an interesting way; or, in the other case, if I want to be the author of a line that says, "An Indian is just a bump in the road to me"; does it mean, if I write it, I have to believe that sentiment myself? Can this woman's character survive it? Can the story go on to something redeeming? Okay, maybe I'm compensating, in my unconscious, for an ambiguous feeling about my family's disputed Native American heritage, and I'm trying in writing a line like that to obliterate it. Freudian or multicultural critics can declare about that, if the story's any good, once they've read it.

But I wish primarily to be close to that which seems like early impulse—as romantic as it might be—the one that brings words and phrases to my consideration early. It's the impulse Miss Welty described as a writer "writing at his own emergency." I know that when I fret that I've lost it, the "it" is always that—the impulse to associate freely and haphazardly in language and in the ideas and

associations words carry with them, to play loose with the ordinary ways of organizing the world in words.

Stephen Spender once wrote in his journal that Louis McNeice knew everything he thought and had a clear response to everything he experienced. But I'm not like that; and I doubt, frankly, if McNeice was either. Things come into my rather chaotic mind — bits of language, self-awareness — and they hide there, swirling and randomly attaching and separating like electrons, coming back, if ever, into consciousness or onto the page sometimes profoundly reconstituted. And it is indeed there, in that inchoate stage of writing—which-is-actually-thinking, that I suspect great invention and surprise and new intelligence occur. In a writing life in which you try to keep yourself open to random experience, it's unwanted and also impossible to keep yourself entirely "un-influenced" at this early stage. But it's at least worthwhile to think where the surprises in your work come from.

I believe — and you probably do, too, at least in principle — that it's sometimes literature's project to outrage and offend and to shock and upbraid and make readers uncomfortable, and that Randall Jarrell was right when he said that we need to be sure our writing offends the right people. (In reviewing Richard Wilbur's poems in 1951, he wrote rather self-interestedly that, "If you never look just wrong to your contemporaries you will never look just right to posterity — every writer has to be to some extent, sometimes, a law unto himself.")

Though putting up personally with being a law unto oneself is an ambiguous and often unpleasant and ethically precarious business for a writer. On the one hand, of course, we're aided by our ignorance, and by slogans about our putative freedoms. We're too young, many of us, to remember those famous books which were a law unto themselves and were actually banned — *Ulysses*, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, more recently *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catch 22*. And then my friend Rushdie; well, we may think, he's sort of an Englishman and far away, and maybe we didn't think *The Satanic Verses* was worth it anyway. He certainly outraged the wrong people, and has been subject to considerable influences upon his freedoms. But maybe we think he should've been more prudent.

Myself, in truth, I don't like outraging people, and I don't mean my work to offend, and actually think that it shouldn't. I worry

when people say to me I should quit writing, or that I write “male” books. (Though there are other days when I worry that my books are tame, not offensive enough, and that I’m not a technical innovator). In any case, I don’t want to be unduly affected by reactions to my books such that I might next time decide differently what to write or not to write. If I continue, I want to feel free to write whatever I think I can write well. I want my stories, if they can, to affect readers in the way great literature has affected me: to be the ax for the frozen sea within us; to be, as Dürrenmatt wrote, a rebel against death.

It is one of the privileges of being a writer, and likewise one of its high prices, that we intend the effect of what we write to be permanent, and accept responsibility for it. Proportionate to our aspirations, we can’t escape responsibility, for example, for those effects of our writing that naturally and reasonably come into the purview of “multiculturalism,” or “race consciousness,” or “sexual orientation,” or gender concerns—because, most intimately, those are human concerns. And in any case, the world out there, the world that has no interest in anything as privileged as imaginative writing, has now ordained these concerns as facts.

Free as we are, writers do come to these issues—as least in our work—differently from other people. Freedom and Art are not institutions, and as writers—just as is true of filmmakers or photographers or painters—no one has a claim on us. We employ no one, we give no one tenure, we have no clients, or fiduciary relationships; we’re not *in loco parentis*, and we owe no one fairness unless we choose to. Writers are not required to be democratic. And our obligation is not to flatter you, or to create positive role models, but to try at the height of our aspiration to tell you something you didn’t know about a subject you care for, and which once you know it, becomes essential. We expect a voluntary audience if we have one at all. And consequent to such freedoms as these, we accept—even if we don’t exactly relish—marginality in our culture.

From time to time, in variable moods, I’ve wondered how I can make my stories be *more* “multicultural,” more sensitive. Whom I can stop oppressing, whom I can appreciate more in my own workplace? Should I have more narrators be women, or maybe Mexican women (though perhaps I can’t because I’m not a Mexican woman myself). Maybe I should have more white males be hoodwinked by clever lesbians who are CEOs of large corporations, or more gay

men be brain surgeons, or more African Americans be Supreme Court Justices.

In actual practice, it might suit me to write about a minority character in an unflattering light, some light which doesn't corroborate all of humanity's best possibilities. I might have a woman get socked in the mouth, or portrayed as a prostitute. I might decide to have a living white male depicted as a figure of fun or even killed. I may diminish one character, flatten another, if I think the whole justifies it, if I can say to myself that I take this decision proportionate to a high aim, to discovering something important — such as the connection, as James wrote, between “bliss and bale.” Or if I can answer affirmatively the question: does my writing it this way make any good difference in the world?

And maybe someone will think any one of these decisions makes my book no good. And if he does think that, what he can do is not read it. But unless *I* choose it, he can't stop me.

In the news a month ago you might remember there was a story about the film *Basic Instinct*, an especially fatuous and egregious bit of movie prurience. Gay and lesbian groups didn't like this movie, and protested it publicly, threatened to shut down theatres; there had been efforts to obstruct the actual making of this film by cutting electrical lines and disrupting the movie's production. These groups were offended that lesbians and bisexuals, all of whom I guess they represented, were in the movie depicted as homicidal — which the lesbians and bisexuals actually portrayed in the movie certainly were.

And this strikes me several ways at once. First, I think it's the right of interested people to protest what they don't like and to make their feelings and thoughts known. I think it's at the very least defensible that they argue for a benigner public perception — for sympathy. But I think it is not their right nor is it right forcibly to suppress the making of this movie or any movie inasmuch as doing so takes their own freedom and sets it against itself in a stupefying way.

Living in and around Mississippi, as I do, I think about Miss Welty a lot these days. In a letter to her literary agent in 1942 she commented upon what she called rival validities, by which she meant *actuality* as it's encountered upon the page (in her case, short stories) and *actuality* as it's encountered outside of books — actuality in the world so to speak. She was being urged at the time by editors, powerful people in New York who, like movie producers, thought

they were mindful of what were the tastes of the American readership—an urge which almost always establishes a low water mark. They wanted her to write stories that seemed to them “more like life.”

Only that wasn't what she cared to do, even at the cost of being kept out of print. Her belief of course was that her stories—stories that offended no one, I suspect—were good the way they were, and that what was on the page had its own sovereign validity. And what underlies her claim is the conviction that what comes to the page is free—free to be what it is, free from any allegiance to how somebody other than the writer thinks the world or literature is, or should be, or shouldn't.

Art always thrives as some function of freedom, which isn't to say that oppression will kill it, only impede it, and deprive some of us of its generosity and its light. To accord others freedom is, however, not such a noteworthy virtue when you *agree* with what they're doing. It's only a great virtue when you agree to allow what you don't like. It is that odd, uneasy, vertiginous quality of art—that it may surprise you and tell you things you won't like to know—which makes it different from politics. And it is also this quality of art which makes it so fragile and precious and attractive.

When people suppress art—a movie, a book, a collection of photographs showing a representation of Christ in a tray filled with urine—the target of that suppression is usually, at least in this contemporary and moralizing atmosphere, thought to be the artist, who's stopped from making what he wishes to make because his rights are said to interfere with the passive unspecified rights of others. But the actual and more vulnerable victim of such suppression is the audience who's stopped by others from seeing something which might affect them, stopped from reading what might illuminate the world for them by shocking them, by turning the world or language in a way it never was seen to be and thereby revealing the world clearly. Indeed, suppressing art stops us even from being able to exercise a valuable moral or aesthetic judgment by saying, “no, I don't like that. I see that, and I reject that sensibility. I seek the beautiful and that's not it.”

Real censorship—and that's ultimately what we're talking about—is not merely a personal attack which says, “you can't say that,” but one which insidiously says, “you can't hear that; you can't

think that; you can't know that." It's an impulse which caters to moral lassitude in all of us.

As Rushdie wrote long before he became a victim of oppression and censorship, and I quote him from his book *Imaginary Homelands*, "Literature is not in the business of copywriting certain themes for certain groups. . . [indeed]. . . the most insidious effect of censorship is that, in the end, it can deaden the imagination of people. Where there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of what the suppressed things might be. It becomes easy to think that what has been suppressed was valueless, anyway, or so dangerous that it needed to be suppressed."

Confoundingly enough, it may even be in universities that subtle forms of oppression find a home. Universities, after all, are places where a rather inert politeness unknown elsewhere in the world dominates, so that varying ideas (good and bad – and there *are* bad ideas) are often viewed as having the same neutralizing weight; where scholars write without the expectation of a large readership so that the possible crucialness of any single piece of new writing is less felt. Writing programs themselves (and I went to one) stress the importance of writing and the romantic sovereignty of the writer herself or himself, more than they stress the destination of writing and its most important power – readers and their need to be told things.

The basic character of the academy is conserving and self-preservation, whereas the nature of art is to be on the "dangerous edge of things." Art is frail, and optional and precarious (we hardly need to be protected from it). But the academy is armored against frailty by a history of great books and great thought and great writing already done. It may be, simply, that here truth may seem more available than it really is, less a matter requiring personal courage and vision.

My former teacher, Mr. Doctorow, who, I know, once delivered the Hopwood Lecture, spoke last October to a committee of the Congress in defense of the National Endowment for the Arts, and he remarked then on what he called "the latent underlying jealousy we have for elevated expression that is personal, uninvited and powerful, that almost automatic anger we have for a kind of witness and

truth-telling that is not endorsed or accredited by church, or corporation or family, or other governing institution of our society.”

Jealousy or conservatism or whatever are the other forms of timidity which lead to censorship do indeed press peculiarly upon the contemporary arts by assuming their existence matters somehow less than the apparently unsuppressed art of times past—whose excellence we come to take for granted, though they may only be survivors of some other kind of oppressive society.

But that sort of bias, for a writer, propounds a lie, because there's no reason to suppose that work going on this afternoon is likely to be less excellent than work which came into being a hundred years ago. In fact, there may be good reasons to expect quite the opposite.

The larger point here, having said these few words about artistic freedom, is not so much to boast that “I can write what I want and no one can stop me,” but rather it's a point less certain of answer but much to the heart of what it is to be a good writer—a fact young writers have to address somehow and so do I, and not just once but again and again. That old white, middle-class literary critic, Lionel Trilling, wrote it this way, in 1940: “A culture is not a flow, nor even a confluence: the form of its existence is struggle—or at least debate—[and] it is nothing if not a dialectic.” The challenge for any writer of high aspiration is this: given my quarrel with a culture complexer than I ever guessed, how with my freedom intact can I be better? It's art's premise, after all, that there can be better. And it's not enough merely to do what you're free to do. The challenge is to change, adapt, find new means, new enthusiasms, to move past the limitations of vogue and politics and most cunningly past your own fear that you can't do it.

Richard Shweder, the University of Chicago sociologist I mentioned a while ago, wrote on the Op-Ed Page in the *New York Times* that “. . . the authority of a voice ought to reside in what it says and not in who says it . . . [T]o grow is to exceed the limits of parochial experience . . . [and] people have written brilliantly about cultures and genders other than their own . . . our humanity [being after all] polymorphous and complex.”

And so, to be better, I take that as my own premise: to exceed the limits of parochial experience in what I write; and to try, using my little freedoms, even occasionally moderating them, to represent mankind not so as to endear myself but so as to dignify it by insisting on its humanity and its complexity, its finality.

And I try harder. I try to stay thoughtful of what is humanity's best self. If I diminish a character, make assaults on humankind in some way, I try eventually to replenish the account in other ways; and I don't part with a book unless I feel I've authorized every line.

The feminist literary critic, Carolyn Heilbrun, wrote more than a decade ago that "Today's youth, whatever the reasons, no longer go to literature and what we used to call 'culture' as to the fountain of wisdom and experience. Youth . . . responds rather to an alternative culture, outside the English classroom, vital, challenging, relevant, and usually electronically transmitted. . . . If students are to see literature as capable of informing them about any of the aspects of life, they must become convinced that literature is as capable of revolutionary exploration as their own lives are."

Ms. Heilbrun made this observation in behalf of teaching feminist criticism, a good cause. I borrow it now in behalf of saying to you writers who're very likely writing the books the next generation will be reading in universities and that critics will be explaining, that you must re-vision in some humane spirit the orthodoxies that seem even new to you now. (Since mostly they're already just the conventional wisdoms posing as taboos.) And do it as a way of attracting readers to literature. Or else you'll leave to the David Dukes and Pat Buchanans and Jean-Marie Le Pens of the world to decide what art is and who ought to get to see it.

My modest hope for young writers—those of you who won these awards and those who didn't and who might just as easily become good writers—is the same hope I have for myself and for readers: that you not be timid. That you not let others make you that way; that you not think that being a writer is just another profession with another set of networks to master, another ladder to climb, another set of well-placed elders to impress. Since there's no one who can tell you what to write, or how to do it, you're entitled to your own vision, but it ought to be worth your life to put it to words the best you possibly can.