

What if versus what is. Surplus

About a year ago, not long after Russia invaded Ukraine, a journalist named Julie K Brown threw out a tweet that caused quite a shitstorm. “So I’m going to get slammed for this,” she said, “But I have to ask how can you be obsessed with fiction—yes “we” get how important it is—but at a time like this. I’m reading history books about how the fuck it came to this.” The “this” that she was referring to was apparently the war in Ukraine. So the first thing I might say is--she might be better at expressing herself if she read more fiction; that second sentence is a bit of a mess. The second thing I might say is that is that she is prioritizing the horrors of her particular historical moment as if they were of a greater magnitude than, say the Thirty Year War, the First World War, the Holocaust? I mean, come on. Isn’t it always “a time like this.” She did indeed get slammed for the tweet, and eventually took it down. But this question has recurred again and again since the novel was born, some four hundred years ago—assuming that we take Don Quixote to be the first novel. Why Bother to read novels, or write them. Readers of Northanger Abbey and Madame Bovary may recall that both books satirize the then common notion that Novel reading for women was associated with inflaming of sexual passions; with liberal, radical ideas; with uppityness; with the attempt to overturn the status quo.

Closer to our own time, the philosopher Theodor Arno famously declared. “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” The writing of fiction would, presumably, be even more barbaric. And yet, poets and novelists and short story writers persisted and engaged the tragedy of the Holocaust—including such realistic writers as André Schwarz-Bart and Imre Kertész, the satirist Jiri Weil, along with the almost surreal works of Aharon Appelfeld, as well as W. G. Sebald and Primo Levi. And in the wake of the war there arose a vibrant generation of American

Jewish writers who seemed more than capable of writing after Auschwitz, including Saul Bellow, Norman Mailer, Phillip Roth, and Issac Bashevis Singer, to name but a few. It would be safe to say these guys reinvigorated the American literary tradition in the wake of the great modernist generation of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner. And readers continued to read.

Then of course, there was September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Many novelists despaired of being able, qua novelist, to adequately respond to the historical moment. Martin Amis wrote of his own response, “the part of him that produced fiction, he felt, was shutting down forever.” Ian McEwan wrote, “Even the best minds, the best and darkest dreamers of disaster on a gigantic scale, from Tolstoy to Wells to Don DeLillo, could not have delivered us the nightmare available on television news channels yesterday.” I’m afraid I’m part of this narrative, as you will discover if you Google me and September 11<sup>th</sup>. I said to Bret Easton Ellis that day, “I don’t know how I’m going to be able to go back to the novel I’m writing.” A quote which seems to turn up in many essays about fiction and 9/11. I remember also feeling sorry for Jonathan Franzen, who had just published his novel “The Corrections.” It seemed pretty obvious that it would get lost in the wake of the catastrophic event, buried beneath all the commentary and post mortems. Although, strangely enough, it didn’t. It made him famous. So, that fact itself, was, in a sense, a empirical refutation of all our mournful end of the novel commentary. Several hundred thousand people decided to read it, even as the smoke poured off the site of the destruction downtown. Perhaps as an escape from the horrors of the moment, although it should be said that this was a serious and complex work of literary fiction. But we shouldn’t discount the value of the novel as a diversion from, even an escape from, the trials of the historical moment, from quotidian reality.

The way that I eventually got back to the novel I was writing was to rewrite it, focusing on the reactions of my characters to the events of that day. I instinctively followed Aron Applefield's warning that "one doesn't look directly into the sun," writing about the emotional repercussions of the aftermath among the kinds of characters I had been chronicling for years. It's not for me to judge the success of that book but certainly McEwan and Amis went on to write fiction that responded, with various degrees of obliquity, to that event. Amis, may he rest in peace, even went on to write a second novel about the Holocaust, for God's sake, somehow having put aside his scruples about engaging historic atrocities in fiction.

But this nagging refrain, why write novels, has been with us for centuries. "What use is fiction?" Growing up in the sixties and seventies, I revered the novel above all other forms of expression, but I couldn't help noticing that it was suffering a bit of crisis of confidence. Truman Capote, whose literary career was in the doldrums, revived it by publishing a so-called non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, which was a documentary account of a murder in Kansas, based on a massive amount of research and written with the benefit of novelistic techniques. Norman Mailer did something similar with *Armies of the Night*, writing a non-fiction account of a March on the Pentagon in 1967 which drew on his skills as a novelist. An extremely talented generation of journalists, partly inspired by their examples, started borrowing the techniques of fiction to take on the subjects of the seething social upheaval of the sixties and seventies. Gay Talese, Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, Joan Didion and many more created something that was eventually labelled the New Journalism. And Wolfe, in 1972, wrote a famous essay in *Esquire* in which he more or less declared the novel dead and crowned the New Journalists the Kings of Olympus. Ironically, some fifteen years later, Wolfe published a novel called *Bonfire of the Vanities* which made him far more famous than his journalism had. So much for the death of

the novel. But back in 1972 he argued that the novelists had abandoned social realism and in doing so had left the genre desiccated and irrelevant. And if realism was the ideal against which achievement was measured there was some truth to his charge. Many of the novelists of the period were experimenting with metafictional devices and declaring their independence from the “real world.” Post-modern writers like Donald Barthelme, William Gass, John Barth and Robert Coover rejected realism in favor of self-conscious narratives which highlighted the artificiality of storytelling. These writers tended to believe that the novel or short story was an object independent of the world, an aesthetic object. Like a Fabergé egg. There was a famous debate between the novelist John Gardner and William Gass dealing with these questions. Gardner wrote a book called On Moral Fiction, and he believed that the novel had a moral purpose, that reading and writing helps you to understand the world and one’s place in it, helps, ultimately, to make one a better and more conscious human. Gass believed that the purpose of the novelist was to create beautiful objects, which have no moral or instructional component. He wanted to sever the Keatsian connection between beauty and truth, something that Immanuel Kant had also proposed in his critique of Judgement, where he argued that the judgement of beauty must be separated from the judgement of the good. Gass argued that beauty and the creation of beautiful objects was the purpose of art and fiction and that their relation to the real world was irrelevant.

I think most of us are sympathetic toward Gardner’s point even as we are uncomfortable with overarching claims about literature overtly fostering morality. We want to believe that reading fiction makes us better people. No less a novelist than Tolstoy believed that this was the purpose of literature and of art. In his book *What is Art*, he proclaimed, “just as in the evolution of knowledge – that is, the forcing out and supplanting of mistaken and unnecessary knowledge by truer and more necessary knowledge – so the evolution of feelings takes place by means of

art, replacing lower feelings, less kind and less needed for the good of humanity, by kinder feelings, more needed for that good. This is the purpose of art.”

The problem with Tolstoy’s formulation is that he discards to the fires any work of art that is not inherently didactic and uplifting, including his own masterpieces, *War and Peace*, and *Anna Karenina*, not to mention Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. William Faulkner had a very different notion of the value of literature, which seems to pretty much eschew morality: “The Ode on a Grecian Urn is worth any number of Old Ladies.” Extreme? Perhaps. But thought provoking. How many old ladies is Ulysses worth?

Unlike Faulkner, both Tolstoy and Gardner believed that there was bad art and good art, but they believed that the latter could improve the human condition. This seems to me to be a lot of weight to put on the novel or the short story. For Gardner, the enemies of moral fiction, by which he means “hard-won, defiant affirmations,” are writers who dishonor the seriousness of their calling, writers who are more concerned with technique than with content, writers who think of their work as a species of play. “Motion, glitter—texture for its own sake—has come to be the central value in the arts,” he writes.

So this was basically the state of the argument when I entered the picture, going to college in the mid-seventies. The novelists were arguing about the value of realism while Tom Wolfe was declaring that the novel was dead. Or rather, this is the oversimplified version. Writers like Thomas Pynchon and John Updike and Phillip Roth were doing a pretty good job of keeping the realistic novel alive, while a new generation of short story writers like Anne Beattie and Raymond Carver and Tobias Wolff were injecting new life into it. I was lucky enough to

have Carver and Wolff as mentors when I attended the Graduate School of Writing at Syracuse University. I wrote a short novel at the end of my last year there and submitted it to Random House, where my best friend from college was working as an assistant to the legendary editor Jason Epstein. Epstein, amazingly, approved of my book, and bought it for publication. This was a huge deal. A few months before the publication he took me out for lunch, in part, I think to temper my expectations about the reception of the novel. He had a couple cautionary notes for me.

Number one, he said, people my age didn't read novels anymore.

Number two, there hadn't been a successful or even mildly popular novel written about New York City in years. The rest of the country didn't care about New York. They hated it. Interestingly enough, this was one of Tom Wolfe's points in his famous essay about the New Journalism—that the novelists had abandoned New York and the big cities. Epstein also told me that even if young people did read novels, my book, which was written in the second person, was too literary to appeal to a large audience.

But still, he wished me well. And he was publishing my book. And I got a spectacular meal out of it, at a grand French restaurant called Lutece, with a lovely bottle of Puligny Montrachet. This was back when publishers still drank at lunch.

Well, he published the book. And he was wrong about both of those things. Turns out, young people would read novels, at least a certain type of novel. In fact, my editor at Random House, Gary Fisketjon, was determined to aim the book at young people by way of printing it in a relatively affordable trade paperback edition and creating a book jacket that looked, as he said, more like an album cover than a book jacket. And through some concatenation of circumstances and timing, the book became a cultural phenomenon, and hundreds of thousands of young

people, along with, presumably, some older ones, bought and read this one. And the New York setting turned out to be a huge part of the book's appeal. After teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and surviving crime and heroin epidemics, New York seemed to be the place everyone wanted to be—not to take too much credit but if I had a dollar for every person who said they moved to NY after reading *Bright Lights*, I could buy a Ferrari. Pretty soon, every publisher in New York was looking for books by twenty something authors which were set in New York City. It became a damn genre. Drugs, nightclubs, career angst, sex, city lights, the search for love, more drugs. Bret Easton Ellis later published what was taken to be the Los Angeles version. And he, too, found a huge audience, if not much love from the critics. Many complained, about Bret and myself, that our novels were more like rock songs than novels.

There was a fair amount of pissing and moaning and hand wringing about this new wave of fiction from tradition minded critics. We were seen by some as celebrating sex drug use, conspicuous consumption. One critic complained about *Bright Lights* that I quoted the Talking Heads alongside Shakespeare, as if this was the literary equivalent of inviting a homeless man to dinner with the president. My generation of New York based novelists created a serious cultural ruckus about the purpose of literature and the state of contemporary society. One particularly irate reviewer, writing about Bret Ellis and Tama Janowitz in *Vanity Fair*, wrote, "Kerouac knew that certain waters could be baptismal. The stream of consciousness in these novels snakes along the gutters, strictly urine." I mean, really? Of course, Kerouac in his time was castigated by most of the self-appointed guardians of the culture. No less an authority than Truman Capote said of *On the Road*, "That's not writing. It's typewriting." This was apparently a reference to the fact that the novel was famously typed on one long continuous roll of paper. But most reviewers of the time were baffled and/or outraged.

And I would say, this is one of the reason why we bother to write novels, to spark this kind of debate. Or to, be less polite, to piss off self-righteous guardians of antiquated cultural norms. The more popular our novels became, the angrier a portion of the critical and journalistic establishment became. And I think this is a positive good. Particularly in the twentieth century, one of the purposes of the novel has been to announce the arrival of new generations, to carry the voice of youth into the world. Think of the *This Side of Paradise*, *The Sun Also Rises*, *On the Road*, *a Catcher in the Rye*. *Bright Lights, Big City*, was in some ways, a traditional Bildungsroman in the tradition of these novels, all of which influenced me.

The term Bildungsroman—literally novel of education--was coined in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) is often cited as an early example, along with Goethe's hugely popular and influential William Meister's Apprenticeship, published in 1795. Broadly speaking the term refers to novels about the transit from youth to adulthood, about the education and eventual integration of a young man or woman into the social order, although a sub-genre of the Bildungsroman, the Kunslderroman, or artist novel, often ends with the protagonist rejecting the values of conventional society in favor of an artistic vocation, Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man being the classic example.

The best coming-of-age novels give voice to emerging generations, bringing the reader into intimate proximity with the Zeitgeist, delivering the thrill of the new along with a tingle of recognition for readers who have already lived through adolescence. This Side of Paradise delivered news of a new postwar social order, exposing, if not actually creating, the first great generation gap--delivering the message of a younger generation to an astonished older one. It might be argued that there is a music of the spheres which is only audible to those in their youth, that writers in their twenties are in touch with aspects of contemporary experience that are



inaccessible to their elders. At least, that's how the best coming-of-age novels make us feel. Ideally, they have a sensibility and a voice that feels new. And they deliver news about the culture. And on a superficial level, they tell you what to wear and how to talk and what to eat and drink and smoke.

On a less superficial level, the best novels create narratives and myths that become illustrative of their time and place in a way that the best histories do not. If I ask you about the texture of French provincial life in the mid nineteenth century, does your mind go to a volume of history? Or does it perhaps, as mine does, go to *Madame Bovary*. Emma and her fellow provincials are as vivid to me as my neighbors, far away in time as they may be. Flaubert makes you feel the texture of life in his time. How about Parisian life in the mid nineteenth century? Balzac gave us a bountiful and vivid set of narratives and characters that tell us what it was like to be alive in that moment. Lucien de Rubempré from *Lost Illusions* is much more vivid to me than any actual historical figure from that period. Can you name me a work of history that encapsulates and dramatizes the Napoleonic Wars with as much immediacy and vivacity as *War and Peace*? Does anybody know a non-fiction book that captures the experience, the feel and taste and smell, of fighting in the trenches as *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It would be nice to think that that book might have helped to stave off the next war, but of course it did not. Even the greatest novels, I think, don't bend the course of history. The great novelists distill and shape the shapeless flow of experience into narrative forms that help us to understand our world. The name Gatsby conjures an entire era. Doesn't it? Can you think of a work of history or journalism that conjures that era so thoroughly? But of course, fiction is not only documentary: it is also speculative and imaginative. Reading and writing fiction is an escape from the world

and it is an attempt to make sense of the world. Certainly the impulse to write fiction implies a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of the world, a desire to rearrange, embellish, and embroider reality.

I think it's possible that literature can marginally aid in the development of a moral sensibility, but unlike John Gardner or Leo Tolstoy I don't think that this is the primary purpose of fiction or of art in general. Far too many aesthetes are terrible people. Celine was a fascist bastard. But I do think that the reading of fiction can make us more empathetic, more in tune with our fellow human beings, and more knowledgeable about the varieties of human experience. One of Raymond Carver's best stories is called "Put Yourself in my Shoes," and this strikes me as a great summation of one of the primary purposes of reading and writing fiction, to project oneself inside the skin of your fellow human beings. In her book *13 Ways of Looking at the Novel*, Jane Smiley says, "When I have read a long novel, when I have entered systematically into a sensibility that is alien to mine, the author's or a character's, when I have become interested in another person because he is interesting, not because he is privileged or great, there is a possibility that at the end I will be a degree less self-centered than I was at the beginning, that I will be a degree more able to see the world as another sees it." Novels and short stories have an interiority that films and journalism do not.

Michael J. Fox starred in the film version of *Bright Lights, Big City* and I spent a lot of time with him in New York during filming. I observed the fans hounding him and I told him it must be very annoying. And he said a funny thing. He had observed some of my fans, too. He said, my fans don't really know anything about me. I play a role that's not me, I play a dozen roles that are make believe. But your fans, he said, they think they know you, and in a sense they

do. They've spent hours inside your head and they know your mind and your emotional makeup in an intimate way. They can see inside of you in a way they can't see inside of me. I don't think I'd want to be that exposed. It's like living in a glass house. And he was right about that, I guess. Movies speak to us on the level of voyeurism—reading a novel is more like having actual sex.

Another anecdote: I just spent a week at a retreat with twenty friends at a bucolic property in Northern California that is owned by my wife's family. We were a diverse group, a couple of financiers, a real estate broker, a newspaper publisher, an heiress, a historian, a lawyer and a very prominent scientist. The scientist was in fact, quite famous, and he was hugely entertaining when explaining the cosmos, or, on the last night of our stay, walking us through his favorite film, the Matrix. His exposition of the film was brilliant. At one point over the course of the week, when some of us were talking about contemporary novels, he admitted that he never read fiction. And I have to say, in retrospect, that at the end of the day he seemed to me the least emotionally sophisticated and worldly member of the group, the least able to interpret the human behavior around him. And there's a lot to interpret when you coop twenty smart people up together for a week. I think it would do him a world of good to read some of the world's great literature. I think it does us all a world of good.

Reading fiction makes you emotionally smarter, more empathetic, more emotionally complex and damnit—it makes you cooler. People who don't read fiction don't know what they're missing. How could they? They tend to be emotionally underdeveloped. They have never experienced the exquisite courtship rituals in Jane Austen, nor the lavishly erotic musings of Molly Bloom in *Ulysses*, nor the exquisitely tortured moral dilemmas of the young adults in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. They believe that the world is a collection of facts, they

believe in What is, and they have an underdeveloped concept of What If? Writing fiction is still the most challenging and interesting thing I can imagine doing. In doing so I am adding to the sum of the world's stories and myths. Marx had his surplus theory of value and I have mine. Fiction is entirely superfluous and yet it creates a beautiful surplus of meaning and content and myth in the world. Can any of us imagine a world without Don Quixote, without Becky Sharp or Little Nell or Ahab or Lucien de Rebempre or Madame Bovary or Huck Finn or Jake Barnes or Gatsby. Can you imagine a world without Beethoven's Ninth or Boticelli's Venus or Michaelangelo's David. The novel is a hybrid art form, a bastardized art form which communicates in a variety of modes but which ultimately inspires in us a powerful emotional and aesthetic response which transcends any transcription of the day's, or history's events. But don't take my word for it. Read the opening of Virginia Wolff's *The Waves*, or the final paragraphs of the *Great Gatsby*, or the ending of James Joyce's *Ulysses*—Molly Bloom's exhilarating soliloquy ending in a thunderous affirmation:

He kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.