



NYRblog : Roving thoughts and provocations from our writers

## The Writer's Job

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Byron: National Portrait Gallery, London; Sophocles: Hulton Archive/Getty Images; Pamuk: Erzade Ertem

*Lord Byron, Sophocles, Orhan Pamuk*

Since when did being a writer become a career choice, with appropriate degree courses and pecking orders? Does this state of affairs make any difference to what gets written?

At school we were taught two opposing visions of the writer as artist. He might be a skilled craftsman bringing his talent to the service of the community, which rewarded him with recognition and possibly money. This, they told us, was the classical position, as might be found in the Greece of Sophocles, or Virgil's Rome, or again in Pope's Augustan Britain. Alternatively the writer might make his own life narrative into art, indifferent to the strictures and censure of society but admired by it precisely because of his refusal to kowtow. This was the Romantic position as it developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Let's leave aside how accurate this is historically; it's what they taught us and it got stuck in our heads: on the one hand the writer as artisan whose personality was hardly important, a position dominant in pre-industrial times when writers were few and held subordinate roles in fairly rigid hierarchies (a Petrarch or a Chaucer); on the other the writer as a charismatic superman (the Byrons and Shelleys) whose refined sensibility and

creative powers gave him the right to transgress and question his community's rules. This vision suited a time of tension between individual and mechanized mass society. The Romantic writer helped the reader fight back against the homogenizing pressures of a modern industrialized world.

As we know, T.S. Eliot rather complicated matters by telling us that the writer had to overcome his personality and find his place in a literary tradition; his work would only be truly distinctive when it marked the next development in the natural unfolding of the collective imagination as manifested in "the canon." To the perplexed adolescent I was when I read Eliot, this sophisticated consideration seemed to offer a compromise between the classical and Romantic positions. But only at first glance. Read carefully, Eliot was more Romantic than ever: only those who had real personality, special people like himself, would appreciate what a burden personality was and wish to shed it. Literature became the drama of this special person's sublimation or sacrifice of self through exploration of the work of other equally special people who came before him, to whose achievements he then added his own individual contribution. There was something painful and noble about this endeavor that raised the writer to a pantheon worshiped by an elite. Above all Eliot stressed that the creation of literature would require endless hard work over many years and quite probably a degree in the classics and/or modern European literatures. The young aspirant now had a core curriculum to follow to become a writer, but knew he'd have to hang in for the long haul.

Still, none of this prepared us for the advent of creative writing as a "career." In the last thirty or forty years, the writer has become someone who works on a well-defined career track, like any other middle class professional, not, however, to become a craftsman serving the community, but to project an image of himself (partly through his writings, but also in dozens of other ways) as an artist who embodies the direction in which culture is headed. In short, the next big new thing. A Rushdie. A Pamuk.

It's rather as if the spontaneous Romanticism of the nineteenth-century poets had become a job description; we know what a romantic is (his politics, his behavior patterns), we know that is the way to literary greatness, so let's do it. Coetzee's novel *Youth* captures with fine wryness the trials of a methodical young man seeking to make a career out of becoming the kind of writer he is not.

Let's consider a few of the changes that led us to this state of affairs.

In the twentieth century people stopped just reading novels and poems and started

studying them. It was a revolution. Suddenly everybody studied literature. At school it was obligatory. They did literature exams. They understood that when there are metaphors and patterns of symbolism and character development etc. then you have “literature.” They supposed that if you could analyze it, you could very probably do it yourself. Since enormous kudos was afforded to writers, and since it was now accepted that nobody needed to be tied to dull careers by such accidents of birth as class, color, sex, or even IQ, large numbers of people (myself included!) began to write. These people felt they knew what literature was and how to make it.

In the second half of the century the cost of publishing fell considerably, the number of fiction and poetry titles per annum shot up (about forty thousand fiction titles are published in the US each year), profits were squeezed, discounting was savage. A situation was soon reached where a precious few authors sold vast numbers of books while vast numbers of writers sold precious few books. Such however was the now towering and indeed international celebrity of the former that the latter threw themselves even more eagerly into the fray, partly because they needed their declining advances more often, partly in the hope of achieving such celebrity themselves.

It became clear that the task of the writer was not just to deliver a book, but to promote himself in every possible way. He launches a website, a Facebook page (I'm no exception), perhaps hires his own publicist. He attends literary festivals all over the world, for no payment. He sits on the jury for literary prizes for very little money, writes articles in return for a one-line mention of his recent publication, completes dozens of internet interviews, offers endorsements for the books of fellow writers in the hope that the compliment will be returned. It would not be hard to add to this list.

In the first half of the twentieth century the decline of the gentleman publisher coincided with a rapid growth in the number of writers seeking to storm the citadel. Along with the increasing complexity of book contracts—hardbacks and paperbacks, bookclubs, bonuses, options, sliding scales of royalties, film rights, foreign rights, territorial divisions, remainders, and a host of other niceties—these conditions created and consolidated the figure of the literary agent.

The emergence of the agent signals an awareness that there is a clash between the idea of writing as a romantic, anti-establishment vocation and the need for the professional writer to mesh with a well-established industrial and promotional machine. Hopefully the agent would reduce the tension between the two. Soon, however, agents found themselves so overwhelmed by pressure from would-be new arrivals and contract

complications that they could no longer be seen either as a gateway into the world of publishing, or as middle men who could spare writers from getting their hands dirty. It was at this point, in the 1980s, that the creative writing course took off and the figure of the career writer began to assert itself.

One of the myths about creative writing courses is that students go there to learn how to write. Such learning, when and if it takes place, is a felicitous by-product that may or may not have to do with the teaching; the process of settling down to write for a year would very probably yield results even without teachers. No, the student goes to the course to show himself to teachers who as writers are well placed (he imagines!) to help him present himself to the publishers. Most creative writing courses now offer classes on approaching agents and publishers and promoting one's work. In short, preparing for the job.

At the same time the perceived need for an expensive year-long creative writing course on the part of thousands of would-be writers affords paid employment to those older writers who have trouble making ends meet but are nevertheless determined to keep at it. One of the problems of seeing creative writing as a career is that careers are things you go on with till retirement. The fact that creativity may not be co-extensive with one's whole working life is not admitted. A disproportionate number of poets teach in these courses.

Creative writing schools are frequently blamed for a growing standardization and flattening in contemporary narrative. This is unfair. It is the anxiety of the writers about being excluded from their chosen career, together with a shared belief that we know what literature is and can learn how to produce it that encourages people to write similar books. Nobody is actually expecting anything very new. Just new versions of the old. Again and again when reading for review, or doing jury service perhaps for a prize, I come across carefully written novels that "do literature" as it is known. Literary fiction has become a genre like any other, with a certain trajectory, a predictable pay off, and a fairly limited and well-charted body of liberal Western wisdom to purvey. Much rarer is the sort of book (one thinks of Gerbrand Bakker's *The Twin*, or Peter Stamm's *On a Day Like This*, or going back a way, the maverick English writer Henry Green) where the writer appears, amazingly, to be working directly from experience and imagination, drawing on his knowledge of past literature only in so far as it offers tools for having life happen on the page.

So then, a would-be anti-conventional public enjoys the notion of the rebel, or at least

admirably independent, writer, but more and more to achieve success that same writer has to tune in to the logic of an industrial machine, which in turn encourages him to cultivate an anti-conventional image. This is an incitement to hypocrisy. Meantime the world opens up; books travel further and translate faster than they ever did in the past. A natural selection process favors those writers whose style and content cross borders easily. Success and celebrity breed imitators. Lots of them. Nobody can read everything. Nobody can read the hundredth part of everything. Nevertheless international prizes purport to tell us which is the best novel of the year, who the greatest writer.

The ultimate achievement of the career writer, after a lifetime of literary festivals, shortlists and prizes, readings, seminars, honorary degrees, lectures, and, of course, writing is, or would be, to place himself inside “the canon.” But in the publishing culture we have today any idea that a process of slow sifting might produce a credible canon such as those we inherited from the distant past is nonsense. Whatever in the future masquerades as a canon for our own time will largely be the result of good marketing, self-promotion, and of course pure chance.

Is all this bad news? Only if one is attached to dreams of greatness. In a droll lecture entitled “Ten Thousand Poets” delivered at the annual conference of The Association of Literary Scholars and Critics at Boston University last October, the excellent poet Mark Halliday reflected:

“I think all of us who keep striving and striving to publish another and another book of poems are still in love with the ideas of GREATNESS and IMPORTANCE.”

As Halliday concluded such ideas were simply not compatible with the era of the career writer.

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