

AT ISSUE

Words' Worth

When a wrecker's ball divides the facade of an old building, or a switch is thrown to ignite efficient charges at its core, you see how the physical work of years can be undone instantly. There's less show to the death of a tradition. It's hard to fix the moment, or sequence of moments, at which breath goes out of it and decay takes hold of the remains.

Yet every so often you do get to watch a tradition disappear almost as expeditiously as a blown building. A recent article in the *Washington Post* describes what has happened to literature in post-Soviet Russia. "For more than a century," writes reporter David Hoffman, "Russian writers occupied a special place in society. Literature was at the forefront of opposition to power, and in the Soviet era totalitarian rulers went to great lengths to bend writers to their will." But writers resisted, risked prison and death, and fought back with words. For their words, their alternative prose visions of the society, there was a vast audience.

Now writers in Russia are free, and the good ones seem not to matter at all. The literary journals essential to cultural life a decade ago barely survive, their sales not a tenth of what they were. Capitalism's triumph has made them beside the point. Television owns the platform now, and visual sensation is still so novel to the Russians that they don't mind if it flickers to the rhythms of an elevator prose as nondescript as elevator music. "There is great literary prose, and there is junk," says one despondent Russian writer. "It's only junk that you can earn money from."

Sound familiar? The displacement of literature, the devaluation of the word, and mass indifference to nuance have been a longer time coming in the United States, and their insurgency can't be attributed to arriviste capitalism (commerce and literature worked out an arrangement, like part-

ners in a cold marriage who stay together for the sake of the furniture). Who can recall the last time the publication of a book that might reasonably be called literature—that aspired to more than an extended author's tour and a celluloid afterlife—raised the nation's hackles or lifted its spirits or shook its premises?

It's not that we lack words, Lord knows, or books for that matter, which can be bought in spaces the size of hangars.

WQ

Those aisles of books are mostly for burning, though a whole stack of them alight would not give off the heat of *Othello*. We don't expect enough of words anymore, that they be crafted, beautiful, purposeful, careful, true. The edge has gone off discrimination (it's on its way to becoming the "d" word), and fine judgment has flattened almost to the horizontal. We're losing the disposition to read closely, listen critically. Why so? An odd lot of suspects seems to have worked at the reduction, but there's no evidence of a conspiracy, and space to indict only a few.

Start with the media (irresistible: each now wears a neon "kick me" sign), with television, for example, the same television whose glow has enchanted the Russians and whose deeper infection they are yet to feel. On TV news shows, the standard patter is strictly anodyne, and the standard patters as individual as Pringles. Their words, the means through which tens of millions of citizens get a fix on the world, work like a narcotic on the memory of eloquence and complication. On midafternoon dramas, charmless actors prattle, strip, couple, and scatter farcically, but the truest confusion is often grammatical: "A selfish person who always expects to get their own way better not look to Dawne and I for favors." On talk shows—circuses that are all freaks and clowns and no acrobats—participants use

a common language of sentiments borrowed from psychos and psychotherapists. They have learned this language, these emotions, from the media, and they live for the opportunity to demonstrate what good students they are, to show-and-tell their constricted hopes and blasted dreams in homeroom. These shows insistently exploit race and class in America, yet there is in them none of the sometimes fierce poetry of the lived vernacular, flung straight as a weapon or a curse.

Our civic discourse is bland and evasive. "senior citizens," the verbal equivalent of a pat on the head for the family dog, gets the tone just right. Every wrenching issue invites a pulled punch, like this from a pro-choice advocate explaining a particularly grim abortion practice: "The foetus is demised" before its skull is cracked. We've recently seen a million-man march that wasn't quite, and we read daily of presidential hopefuls who seem neither.

The most high-minded culprits in the drive to sideline literature work at institutions that once knew better, our universities. We read (accurately?) of faculty members in literature classes who are there not to celebrate texts, let alone be in awe of them, but to unmask them, like so many yapping Totos pulling the curtain. Language is construct, snare, and subterfuge. Every text is just a text, to be eyed with suspicion, every sentence much as good as any other. You are taught not to love literature but to be wary of it. Words subvert the intention of their author, and they will trick readers too. The value of a work is not aesthetic but mechanical—artifice maybe, art surely not. This seems akin to ignoring a great building's breath-taking shape, elegant skin, and material audacity to study its elevator shaft. One does not wish to impinge on the freedom of these folk to give students the shaft, so long as they situate it in its proper place.

Have the universities engaged in a great leveling process in the presentation of literature, as in much else, and, by so doing, have they forsaken traditional notions of what a liberal education should be? Such an education has to be about discrimination, dismissive and embracing judgments,

differences calculated with an unclouded eye. Let technical vocational skills be uniformly imposed: the bridge should remain suspended, the tunnel unflooded, the spacecraft aloft, the ship afloat, the accounts in balance, the patient alive. Let liberal education champion value, disagreement, rank, all the elements celebrated by guileful Ulysses in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*: degree (not the same thing as a university's production-line piece of paper), priority, place, course, proportion, form, office, custom, in all line of order.

The "canon," about whose hegemonic hold on curricula we have heard too much in recent years from those uneasy with degree, is really no more than an A-list of things to consider reading. Life is choice; you have x amount of time to spend reading, so apportion it wisely. If you're a serious reader, look here. It's a list both porous and expansive. What's canonical is so, by and large, because it has for some time satisfied minds and hearts, not because it has met some Noah's ark notion of inclusiveness. Those who scorn the very idea of a canon had better come up with a powerful alternative. It won't do to mandate that work be read because it represents the category of, say, hermaphrodite fiction—and right-handed hermaphrodite fiction at that, sinister hermaphrodite prose being a separately privileged genre. All literary texts are not created equal, and their worth is not in their provenance or their good intentions, just as their achievement is not to be gauged by their conformity to the moment's panethnic pansexual Panglossian social or political enthusiasms.

Imagine that in time the society will divide into readers, who want information and don't much attend to the form in which it comes, and Readers, who want music, implication, wit, transformation, resistance. You can guess who'll be in charge. The Readers will shrink to a circle as sealed as the Druids', and as irrelevant and doomed. At least the tree folk lost out to Rome and Christianity. Where's the glory in reading your fate on a pulsing blue screen, or in a friend's shrug and blank stare?

—James M. Morris