

# Writing and the Zeitgeist

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Have contemporary writers anything to say about their times  
and, if so, have they the nerve to say it?

There is much failure of vision and failure of nerve on the part of today's writers. Because they lack the clarity and courage to come to terms with the times, at least on the sort of scale and with the sort of depth I think necessary, they succumb to its deceptions and seductions.

It is not that I am asking contemporary writers to stop writing about landscapes and loneliness and falling in love and facing death and to write instead about unemployment, emigration, crime, drugs, homelessness and health cuts. Perhaps writers are shirking these issues, but to say so is not to go to the heart of the problem. I am not asking for pseudo-street-wise obsession with drug-dealers and lumpen layabouts grovelling in ghetto squats, nor for prototypical proletarians speaking pidgin agit-prop. In fact, I think a lot of the worst writing in recent times has come from a Dublin 4 fixation on Sean Mc Dermott Street as the true locus of relevant urban contemporary drama (especially in film).

My focus is not so much on issues that writers are shirking and should deal with in their writings, but on the whole temper of the times and the degree to which writers feel the pulse of it and how effectively they probe and portray it.

My thesis is that the power and the pre-eminent value of writing is in the scope and depth of its engagement with the zeitgeist; in how perceptively a writer captures the spirit of the age, expresses the temper of the times; in how much of what is there in the air, throbbing in the collective psyche, pulsing in the ever shifting social order, a writer gathers up and expresses in accurate and resonant images, in provocative and paradigmatic stories.

I know that there are problems with the notion of zeitgeist. What is it? Is there such a thing as the zeitgeist? Is it possible to perceive it, even if it does exist, whilst we are in the midst of it? Does not the owl of Minerva only take flight at dusk, if indeed there is any longer such an owl and, even if so, could it take flight at all?

The zeitgeist is the spirit of the age. Fintan O'Toole queried with me the validity of this concept for our time. Is not what is distinctive about our times the lack of a spirit of the age? he asked.

My argument is that there is such a thing as the spirit of the age, although it is not one monolithic thing. It is a cluster of things. It is an intersecting nexus. It is a field of forces. It is a complex of currents bearing upon us, buffeting us, indeed constituting us, making us what we are, such that we cannot know ourselves, name ourselves, without knowing them and naming them. It is not possible to deal credibly with the human psyche without coming to grips with its socio-historical context.

It requires great sensitivity to get a reading of the zeitgeist, but this sensitivity is the stuff of great art. It is complex and elusive. There is both organic development and sharp recoil. There are both continuities and contrasts. There are both sunny days and stormy nights. There are both predominant winds and countervailing currents. There is undertow and riptide. It is not easy to navigate it. But striving to trace the rhythms of it, to characterise the living dynamism of it, to capture the distinctiveness and vividness of what made the 50s, the 60s, the 80s (how different are the resonances of each of these decades) what they were is the stuff of great literature.

But hasn't it all got too complicated to make such generalisations? Such is the fragmentation of contemporary experience, postmodernist writers tell us, that narrative coherence is no longer possible, for the author is no longer a coherent subject who can organise past, present and future into a coherent psyche, a coherent biography, let alone a coherent social history. Never has a time been more complicated than ours. There has never been so much to know and so difficult to know what it is to know, if indeed it is possible to know at all.

But, insofar as there is a zeitgeist in our time, is not postmodernism it? Paddy Woodworth put this to me in an *Irish Times* interview about this. Isn't postmodernism the best reflection of our times with its fragmentation, its acceptance of the irrational, its healthy scepticism about philosophical systems which attempt to encompass our fragmented experience? he asked.

Postmodernism is perhaps the most characteristic expression of the zeitgeist in our time, but it is not the only current blowing. Postmodernism rides the surface of the prevailing wind, but does not navigate its way through it. It does not see above or below or behind or ahead of its riding of it. Works which simply take the fragmentation, the blankness, the flatness, the irrationality, the scepticism as given and skate upon it and wallow in it, rather than shedding light on the roots of it, grappling with it and bringing the highest rationality that our species has evolved to bear upon it, cannot be great art. *Miami Vice* may have been an expression of the zeitgeist of the 1980s, but it did not illuminate it, but *Hill Street Blues* and *Boys from the Blackstuff* did in their way.

As for Irish examples, there was in the 1980s and is now in the 1990s little that was as sensitive to the rhythms of the times and the subtle ways in which they played themselves out in individual lives as the writing of Eugene Mc Cabe did in the 1960s and 1970s. My book *Irish Television Drama: A Society and Its Stories* was an attempt to trace the zeitgeist through three decades of Irish life and Irish television. I argued that writers who did not know they were doing it or even denied they were doing it were reflecting the times, even if they were doing it inadequately or badly. Not that those who knew they were doing it and said so were necessarily doing it well. Eugene Mc Cabe became for me the outstanding figure in the story I was telling. It was not just that he went to the edge of every point of stress in Irish society in its painful transitions, the class tensions, the sexual tensions, the national tensions, but did so in a way that was far more penetrating and far more panoramic than other writers who were trying to do the same thing. No one was more surprised, I think, than Eugene Mc Cabe to find himself cast in this role in this book.

I read (as well as watch tv and films, listen to radio, etc.) to feel the pulse of the zeitgeist. Obsessively I read books, periodicals, newspapers. I browse around in the bookshops. I read reviews upon reviews. I buy books I don't read or only half read. I attend seminars and watch arts programmes. I am active in the Irish Writers Union and the Irish Writers Centre. I engage with contemporary writers and listen to what they have to say. I am constantly disappointed. Most of it is so small and short-sighted, so petty and particularistic. I forget so much of it so quickly.

Am I expecting too much? Perhaps. Some do small and simple things, illuminating some little corner of the world as they see it. They are modest in their aspirations and offer their sensibility with few pretensions. However, the act of publishing does assume public significance. It assumes that this writing is of relevance to the world and not only to its author. Much of it seems to me simply too masturbatory, too esoteric, to warrant publication.

What most lets me down, however, is writing that seems to offer what it does not deliver. A title arouses expectations. *Fables of the Irish Intelligentsia* betrayed virtually every expectation it aroused in me. I know something about life and times of the Irish intelligentsia and it seems to me rich in artistic possibilities, as well as full of satirical potential. It is farcical, funny, searing, serious by turns. This book illuminates no aspect of it. It is instead full of cutesy disingenuousness, of narcissistic hide and seek. Fable can be a way of stripping down to the essential and reaching for the universal. This is instead playing about with the inessential, the particular, but without taking responsibility for saying anything about it.

On the other hand, there are times when I am expecting little and I am delighted at what I find. One night last winter at the IWC during a series in which contemporary writers spoke about why they wrote, I was there more or less out of duty as a member of the board of the IWC. Aidan Mathews, whom I was aware of from reviews, but had never read, looked most unpromising with crunched shoulders, crumpled clothes (with no colour co-ordination whatsoever), scraggy grey hair in a pony tail, a radio producer who dealt with a microphone as if an alien horror, he began speaking stumbingly, but then built to an eloquence that nearly knocked me off my seat. It wasn't even that I agreed with him. His view of the world certainly did not match mine, but intersected it

in a surprising and disarming way. It engaged me with my own world, added to it, as I accepted perceptions that came to me from this oblique and unexpected angle, even as I argued back against what I could not accept. There were all sorts of ironies in it. I woke up the next morning with a sense of exhilaration at the power of words in the world, which was enhanced by what I received in the post, one of those letters we live for as writers, responding in a most moving way to something I had written.

But I am more often disappointed than delighted.

A focal point in my gathering disappointment was the 1988 International Writers Conference in Dublin as an indication of the evasiveness prevailing in contemporary literature in general and the anti-intellectual nature of Irish cultural life in particular. The theme of the conference was literature as celebration. Most speakers affirmed literature as pure celebration and begged questions as to what to celebrate and why. The audience on the whole adopted an utterly idolatrous stance to speakers and clapped most loudly for the most anti-intellectual and anti-social statements, such as proclamations that there is no connection between art and politics and that a work of art evaporates with socio-historical inquiry.

The dominant view expressed at this conference was that literature is autonomous and ought not be contaminated with philosophy, politics, sociology or history. Sean O Tuama denounced the notion of poetry as surrogate philosophy. Poetry was at its best when it shunned philosophy. Yehudi Amichai said that he had heard too much in his life about the duty of writers, that he was tired of commitment and prophets. Poetry was to celebrate the happiness of everyday life. It didn't need ideology.

Coming up to the conference, Seamus Deane had expressed in the *Irish Times* the hope that the conference would bring a constructive collision between those who saw literature as autonomous and those who saw it as some form of socio-historical expression. It did not. It was very difficult to dissent from the floor, although I did at the beginning and someone else near the end said that we were not there to worship the speakers and the platform was not an altar. When one person, whether in knowingness or innocence or naivete I can't say, asked: What's it all for? from the floor, the prominent poet on the platform said that it was a dangerous question, a question asked by regimes. The most powerful voice of dissent did eventually come from platform. Chinua Achebe, not only embodied something antithetical, but told them that the powers-that-be would be very happy with the division of labour that the writers at this conference had staked out.

Otherwise, those who did see a role for politics mostly confined it to opposition to Eastern European socialist regimes (some still existing then) and to 3rd world dictatorships. Some even envied writers in countries where they could be put in jail for their writings.

This theme was re-iterated at the 1991 International Writers Conference. What will Eastern European writers do now without the state to oppress them? Eastern Europe has returned to a state of 'normality' now. Writers can write anything and nobody cares.

This point of view is so superficial and fallacious. It is so simplistic to reduce a writer's relationship to the social order to the state. It masks the task of western writers to engage in a critique of the prevailing assumptions of their own society, which exercise a far more subtle dictatorship over contemporary consciousness and a far more deeper (and perhaps more dangerous) challenge to the writer. Our writers have a far too cosy and uncritical relationship, not only to the Irish state, but to the elites and assumptions that determine the prevailing orthodoxies in our universities, media, publishing and reviewing, etc.

As to Eastern European writers, there is the stuff of great literature in the new scenario, if they could bring themselves to stand in a more honest relationship to this 'normality'. The truth is that many of them have been cowardly before and they are cowardly now. Writers who said not a word in public against the previous order until 1989 have not a single word to say for it now. It is shameful and it is stupid for audiences here to be taken in by it.

To give an example, there was the performance by Daniela Crasnar, who had the audience in the palm of her hand at the recent conference. It was a highly effective evocation of poverty, fear, darkness and suffering, above all suffering, and of bravery in Romania. You could feel the wave of human sympathy flowing toward her. It was hard to resist. But, in all honesty, how much did someone who was for 15 years an editor in a publishing house and now a deputy in parliament suffer? More importantly, how much respect can we extend to someone who could live with the cringing compromises required by the previous orthodoxy and now emerges as a voice of the new orthodoxy?

The great writers of Eastern Europe, if there are to be any, are those who will have the courage to stand against this new orthodoxy. Will anyone question whether it is really so wonderful for Leningrad to become Saint Petersburg again, whether it is really so wonderful to see public property passing into private hands once again, to see a disturbed space where the hammer and sickle used to be? Who will write of the tragedies of lives being turned inside out and upside down, of those who have committed suicide or who live on in shock, bitterness or despair? Who, east or west, will have the courage to write honestly about the left, of its high ideals, of its honourable efforts, of its respect for knowledge, of its generosity of sympathy? Who will write, in the way that it is crying out to be written, of the tragedy that has engulfed it?

The new orthodoxies, which are the old orthodoxies, of Europe dominated the conference: religion, anti-scientific and anti-technological humanism, anti-theoretical pragmatism, flaccid pluralism - generally more premodern and modern than postmodern. But it was a postmodern scenario in that it was a babel of incommensurable discourses, confused contributions read and spoken past each other, rarely engaging with each other or the audience. Occasionally an interesting critical voice, but no real clarity and certainly no positive vision.

The difference between the first conference and the second was that the emphasis of the first was on the renunciation of public discourse and the second was on entering into it. The theme 'Europe and its Legacy' invited public discourse in a way that 'Literature as Celebration' did not. But the overwhelming impression I am left with after it is how inept writers are at it, or at least how

desultory were the efforts of the invited writers, those leading writers with whom our elite writers most want to mix, to engage in it. The inadequacy of contemporary writers as thinkers, rightly remarked upon in the *Irish Times*, was painfully obvious, and it is, I believe, not only a problem with their conference performance but with their writing.

This confused and confusing public discourse only fuelled tendencies to revert from the public back to the private, from trends and theories back to the supposedly untheorised particulars. John Mc Gahern spoke against 'big words', which should be kept out of 'private things'. Eavan Boland appealed to 'the frail obsessive quest for a private reality'. Andre Bitov, amidst the vast ferment of Soviet society, said that what he wanted was privacy. Anne Stevenson denounced 'isms' and 'ologies' and recommended a sceptical attitude to all theories.

Writing is about writing is about writing was the consensus at the first conference and still a strong position at the second. Indeed art for art's sake now has a growing following in Eastern Europe. One of my sharpest arguments on aesthetics in recent times took place late one night in Eastern Europe with someone who was until 1990 an apparatchik in a Department of Socialist Realism in the party academy, who insisted that art was pure, that all art was particular, that the artist was above politics, that art as politics was 'old' and 'out'.

This is at best an illusion and at worst a deception. All writing, at least implicitly, embodies a world view, in the sense that it symbolically conveys certain premises about what sort of world it is, about how the social order is structured, about what the rules of the game of life are. In doing so, it either acquiesces in the status quo or queries it, challenges it, dissents from it or poses alternatives to it. It either exposes or eclipses the underlying structures of power. It either legitimates or subverts the taken-for-granted assumptions that make the dominant ideology seem to be only common sense. It either induces or inhibits the exploration of alternatives to it. To ignore it is to consent to it.

All literature embodies philosophical, political, socio-historical assumptions. The only question is: are they acknowledged or not, are they defended or defensible or not? A lack of insight as to what these are or lack of courage to defend them shouldn't be disguised as something else.

There is such a failure of vision, such a failure of nerve, among contemporary writers in the face of this. I do admit that there is an experiential base in the very character of the social order in this era of history for this epistemological and ethical paralysis, although this does not excuse the failure of vision and nerve prevailing among contemporary writers.

Both this anti-intellectual assertion of the autonomy of literature and the prevailing schools of literary studies in intellectual institutions provide no viable criteria for judging literature.

What is it that makes some writing great or good and other writing mediocre or bad ?

We do need glasnost in this area. There are special problems about this in Ireland. We do not have strong critical intellectual traditions. We are a small society. So many of us know each other. This

makes for too much mutual back-scratching, excessive flattery, cowardice before the task of criticism. It also makes for bitchiness, begrudgery and score-settling. But the tendency to categorise as begrudgery all criticism of anyone who has achieved a certain status is a symptom of our low critical standards, as was the critic-bashing which took place in the Arts Club session 'How relevant are critics?' during the 1991 Festival of Literature in Dublin.

We recently held a weekend seminar at the IWC on critics and criticism. It was very good. Speakers, who were literary editors and academics, gave interesting contributions, but the discussions stayed fairly focused on what gets reviewed by whom, where and why, rather than moving on to the question of critical criteria in the way I had hoped.

We tend not to face up to the question of criteria. It is true, as Fintan O'Toole stressed in his article in the *Irish Times* 'Literature 91' supplement, that we no longer have common criteria, because we no longer have common convictions about the way the world is. We have a plurality of opinions. You have your opinion and I have mine and we tend to leave it at that. Even Fintan O'Toole, from whom I tend to expect more, more or less leaves it at that in the *Irish Times* supplement, although in his work as a whole he does not.

But the lazy pluralism which prevails is evasive. Why do I have one opinion rather than another? Is one opinion just as good as another? If so, why have it? Each person's intellectual, moral and aesthetic preferences are treated as autonomous and unanswerable to anything beyond themselves. Any judgement on anyone else's aesthetic criteria is considered particularly out of order. Anything goes. The astrologer speaks with as much authority as the astronomer, justified by an extremely ignorant interpretation of Heisenberg's principle of uncertainty.

But what can we know? As a philosopher, I have written about the whole epistemological crisis of our times and made my own arguments about knowability and rationality. Basically, I believe that we have got to stop whinging about uncertainty and to take our risks in an uncertain universe, to stake our lot with well-grounded, but uncertified, possibilities and probabilities and move on. We have evolved standards of rationality, ie, of logical coherence and empirical adequacy, which are complex and problematic, which need to be always evolved to a higher level, but are not nothing and most certainly not to be scrapped. I find it unseemly to evoke a half-baked and ill-informed interpretation of quantum physics and relativity theory to play at pseudo-primitivism and transmute into a Celtic earth goddess baying at the moon.

But literature is about emotion, it is not rational, it is said. Write with your heart, not with your head, I have been told. But what is emotion? It is being moved by ... by what? why? I am happy about ... I am angry because ... Emotion needs to be justified. Healthy emotion is in harmony with rationality. How can I write about how I feel without writing about what I know? The more fully I see, the more intensely I feel. I feel most emotional about what I take the most trouble to know. The opposite of rational is irrational, not emotional.

We need to bring criteria of rationality to bear upon our emotions and upon our literature, not in the same way in poetry as in science, not in the same way in drama as in documentary, but not in a

totally different way either. Even fiction has to meet truth criteria.

The question of whether *The Book of Job* is truthful or not does not depend upon whether an actual man named Job actually existed, but whether the image of Job, as Prometheus, Dionysius, Oedipus, Sisyphus, Narcissus illuminates certain patterns in our experience. Applying truth criteria to fiction is subtle, but there is a kind of relative truthfulness to Kevin Arnold (*The Wonder Years*) and Michael Steadman (*thirtysomething*) and even Miley Byrne (*Glenroe*) that is missing in JR Ewing (*Dallas*). An author has to earn his right to that of which he writes. eg, Tom Stoppard has earned his right to write of philosophers, even to caricature them, in *Professional Foul* and *Jumpers*, by taking the trouble to know, in a way that Tom Murphy has not in *Too Late for Logic* (although the Abbey audience loved and laughed at every anti-intellectual line.) This is not to say that Tom Murphy is not truthful in the rest of his work.

Not anything is ok, even as fiction. If everything is ok, then nothing is ok. I have recently been in the US and encountered articles by 20somethings who have come of age in this anything goes world and they complain that they have no bearings. Everything is devalued, unless we have values, unless we can say that one thing is better than another, unless we not only come out and specify our criteria, but are willing to justify them, to defend them vis a vis alternative criteria.

I am not calling for a new orthodoxy. I am not attacking democracy and pluralism in cultural expression. I am calling for critical engagement and I am attacking intellectual laziness and flabbiness. I am asking for us to take our own and other's views seriously enough to try to persuade each other. It is a common world of which we speak and it matters what we say about it.

To take up my own challenge, I put forward a strong argument about criteria: Great / good writing is writing which articulates the spirit of the age, exposes its texture and its tensions, expresses the epochal in the immediate, the general in the particular. It portrays the characteristic conflicts and choices in the vividness of concrete lives. It synthesises common experience. It cleanses perception. It illuminates what is dark. It orders what is chaotic. It combines epic scale with intimate detail. It captures the rhythms of the historical process in the most resonant images.

Writing should be judged by its scope, depth, integrity, authenticity, clarity, immediacy, purposiveness, proportion, relevance, resonance, rhythm, resolution. It should be judged by the degree to which it is probing, insightful, challenging, consequential, cathartic.

All true art is a striving toward myth. Paradoxically, it is in expressing the truth of a time, it has a power for all times. The most enduring patterns in our history exist at all times only in the specificity of this history.

The great writer does not burst forth with a great novel, play, poem or essay *ex nihilo*, but brings to a sharper focus what is there in the air, hovering around in confused juxtaposition in others, synthesising the stuff of common experience in a new and striking way. Genius is not some mystical inner essence, nor is it divine inspiration. It is sensitivity to common experience and the ability to bring it to a higher level of synthesis.



All true art is a striving toward totality. This is admittedly highly unfashionable. We are told, by Richard Kearney among others, many but not all of them Parisian, that grand narratives are out. I don't agree. I believe that we have to be bold and engage in the process of constructing grand narratives, on the other side of the post-modernist critique. On this post-post-modernist terrain, we can know as much as we can know and we can synthesise it to the best of our abilities from one day to the next. It is an open-ended, never-finished, never-perfect process, but it is not nothing.

We start with the story of our own lives and we integrate into it as much as we can of the experience of others as well as the best knowledge of our times and we create a wider and wider story, seeing our own story in the context of the history of our times and the history of our times in the context of the history of other times. We can order our personal and socio-historical experience into a coherent story, if we have the drive to do so in the most difficult times there have ever been for doing so, if we have the vision to see our way toward it, if we have the nerve to risk it.

Writers do live in a world that is beyond their powers of synthesis, but the answer is for writers to improve our powers of synthesis, not to say so be it and add to the clutter. Our international writers conferences only added to the clutter.

The process of artistic creativity is rooted in the whole of the artist's perception of the world. Literature is shaped by the richness of the writer's life experience and by the degree to which they have creatively assimilated the most advanced knowledge, the most basic emotions, the most fundamental socio-historical processes. It is deeply dependent on the degree to which they can feel the pulse of the times about which they are writing and on the degree of intellectual, emotional and moral clarity they can bring to bear upon it.

The best writing comes of writers who have a world-historical mentality. There is no attribute more fundamental than wisdom. There is nothing more important for a writer than to work out a philosophy of life, grounded in personal experience and integrating the socio-historical experience of the times. Nevertheless, there is a deeply-ingrained prejudice against writers with a well-worked-out philosophy of life and social commitment. It is not only considered unnecessary, but a barrier to the process of artistic creativity. But it is not only compatible, but necessary, it is intrinsic to the process.

Creativity is not chaos, but an impulse to bring order into the chaos. The world may be fragmenting before our eyes, but what do we do in the face of it? Do we add more fragmentation, wallow in the fragmentation, or do we probe it, seek to penetrate the roots of it, look for deeper patterns in it?

I am not saying that every piece of writing has to embody total vision to be a worthwhile expression of meaningful experience. I am not nearly so dismissive of so much writing as I probably sound. Not every writer needs to have attained a coherent, self-conscious, all-encompassing world view to create anything of any value. But it makes all the difference whether the drive is toward coherence and totality and not away from it. The pressure to write must come

from a push to cleanse perception and not to add to its murkiness, to order the fragments of experience and not to add to the clutter, to illuminate the world and not to contribute to its darkness.

Creativity is an ordering, synthesising process. It necessitates breaking with dominant dualistic patterns of thought at the most fundamental level, breaking down the barriers between style and content, emotional and intellectual, personal and political, etc. It requires wholistic, contextual thinking.

For example, rejection of dichotomy whereby fiction and poetry are considered creative writing and theoretical writing is not, whereby intellectual criteria are considered irrelevant to the one and literary criteria are considered irrelevant to the other. Some works of philosophy, such as writings of Nietzsche and Camus, are far superior as literature to many works that present themselves as literature, just as some works of literature, such as Dostoevsky and Brecht, are superior as philosophy to works that present themselves as philosophy. My English teacher once gave me a book of physical anthropology, which he considered to be literature. I read Loren Eiseley's *The Time of Man* and then all his other books and asked why shouldn't anthropology, sociology, philosophy, etc be literature? Literary criticism can be more artistic than the literature it is criticising. However, most academic writing is appalling.

The best writing is not only brilliant but brave. In saying that contemporary writers lack courage, I do not mean so much that writers know something that they are afraid to say, but more that they are afraid to know, to push themselves to come to terms with the times, to scale the heights, to plunge the depths of human experience.

To quote Nietzsche:

Error is not blindness, error is cowardice ...  
Every acquisition, every step forward in knowledge, is the result of courage,  
of severity toward oneself, of cleanliness with respect to oneself.

Truth has to be fought for every step of the way,  
almost everything else dear to our hearts has to be sacrificed to it ...  
what does it mean to be honest in intellectual things? ...  
one makes every yes or no a question of conscience.

Of all that is written I love only that which is written with blood.

A young girl encountered in Loren Eiseley's explorations said to him:

Those that hunt treasure must go alone, at night, and when they find it,  
they have to leave a little bit of their blood behind them.

Thomas Pynchon wrote on back of Marge Piercy's book *Vida*:

Here is somebody with the guts to go into the deepest core of herself,  
her time, her history...

It is not all or nothing, of course. Writers who have found themselves in the eye of recent storms, such as Salman Rushdie and Christa Wolf, have been both courageous and cowardly, but it is not courage that marks them out just now. Christa Wolf's *Was Bleibt* and Salman Rushdie's *declaration de foi* are not the most edifying pieces of writing of our times. Neither is Alan Bleasdale's *GBH*. Most cowardice among writers is not such conspicuous running for cover. It is most ordinarily simply a species of slackness, shallowness and smallness.

Very heavy, you are probably thinking. Can't she lighten up? Isn't there a place for writing that is pure entertainment, harmless escapism, simple fantasy? I don't believe that any entertainment is ever pure, that any escapism is ever harmless, that any fantasy is ever simple. What entertains and why? What do we want to escape and why? Why do we fantasise in one way rather than another? When I reflect on what I find funny and why, there is a very direct relationship to what I find serious. When I consider what I find entertaining in one way or another, there is a striking correspondence to what interests me intellectually.

Nothing is autonomous. Everything is related to everything else. But some things relate more accurately, more perceptively, more strikingly, more deeply, more encompassingly than others. Why?

To quote TS Elliot, writing as a critic:

Why, for all of us, out of all we have heard, seen, felt in a lifetime,  
do certain images recur, charged with emotion, rather than others ?

I ask myself this. I try to trace the recurring images in my own life as best I can and to ask why. We all have our own canon. It is bound to vary, but it is bound to converge as well. There is still (at least with those of us of a certain age) something of a common culture. My reasons for my own are autobiographical, but they are socio-historical as well. My recollections have led me to many reflections, including to the complex position I have on the current 'pc' (political correctness) debate. So many of the most powerful writers in my life have been 'DWEMs' (dead white European males), which is not an easy conclusion for a left activist and feminist, although my favourite novel has been by a much under-rated female writer, a Northern Irish woman, Helen Waddell, who wrote the exquisite *Peter Abelard*.

But I could not turn away from the power of these images: of Plato's Socrates proclaiming the unexamined life as not worth living and drinking the hemlock; of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor upholding the rule of miracle, mystery and authority; of Camus's Sisyphus rolling the rock up the hill and defying the gods and finding the meaning of life in life itself; of Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaiming that man was something to be overcome; of Joyce's Daedalus seeking intellectual, sensual and moral integrity amidst the political, religious and sexual tensions of his time. As for

poetry, most of the poetry of my time was in the songs of the 60s. Otherwise, what echoes on in me is Brecht:

*To a Doubter*

*To Those Born Later*

Reorganising my shelves recently, I went rummaging through back issues of *Graph*, a journal which has engaged in a lively and perceptive discussion of contemporary literature in the contemporary world standing here in Ireland. From this skimming, here is a sentence which stayed with me. From Aidan Mathews:

You can go on eating your hamburgers al fresco,  
but you are having them in a no man's land and you're likely to get shot.

I could go on and on about what has been written, but I'll end saying that there is much yet to be written. There is great energy swirling through notions of feminism, liberalism, nationalism, revisionism, post-colonialism, post-modernism, as well as our unfinished business between modernism and feudalism, as well as socialism and social democracy. Our own times, perhaps more than any other era, is pulsing with the stuff of great literature. To write it, we need to have the vision and the nerve to overcome the obstacles to it that I have outlined here. It would be a tragedy if it were not written.

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