

President's Address 2011

Frederick J. McGavran

To conduct a tour d'horizon of American fiction and inquire into the sources of its inspiration is to enter a realm so vast that objectivity alone cannot encompass it. It can only be described by the similes and metaphors that inhabit it, figures of speech that often elucidate but if poorly chosen or misunderstood curl in upon themselves and obscure. In an article entitled "MFA vs. NYC" in *n + 1* magazine's Fall 2010 issue, the unnamed author, without explicitly using the metaphor, describes contemporary American fiction writers as planets in a binary star system circling separate suns.

In 850 colleges and universities across the country, aspiring authors and their sometimes published professors circle the Master of Fine Arts in Writing programs. Both students and faculty are attracted mainly by Raymond Carver and Flannery O'Connor, whose "compact form and ashamed content" according to the author "have made them program icons," along with "verbally expansive writer-professors like Nabokov and Joyce Carol Oates." Other planets, populated by commercially successful novelists like Jonathan Franzen and Teju Cole, and short story writers like Ann Beattie circle in ever tighter orbits around the commercial publishers in New York City. Occasionally a writer such as New York's Deborah Eisenberg is attracted from the New York City star to the MFA by an out of town academic position.

According to $n + 1$, both star systems have their own funding and styles of writing. Financed by tuition of up to \$80,000 a year plus public and private funds, the MFA programs have become cash cows for many colleges and universities. $n + 1$ emphasizes that regardless of their academic or artistic merit, the MFA programs fill the important societal function of keeping recent college graduates out of a supine labor market, while providing employment for their own graduates in a burgeoning bureaucracy that would rival that of the Mandarin Chinese. Students and other writers-in-

waiting publish in small captive and endowed academic presses immune to market forces.

The MFA programs encourage minimalism, obscurity, and the bildungsroman because there is no commercial pressure to publish readable fiction and so many of their writers are barely out of their teens. For the MFA programs, says *n + 1*, the short story is the primary form because it takes less time to write and grade than the novel. Thus, academics encourage their students to imitate Amy Hempfel and other minimalists.

Driven by commercial publishers, however, New York City writers are often more readable, at least according to *n + 1*. Not confined by the minimalist academic press, they prefer the novel form. Here I believe *n + 1* goes too far. New York City writers vie with graduates of MFA programs to produce unreadable fiction. If you doubt me, pick up *The New Yorker* and tell me if you have read its fiction with the exception of John Updike in the last 30 years with any real interest or pleasure. Test me. Order a copy of Ann Beattie's *The New Yorker Stories* and try to read them. Interest and pleasure are not terms critics in either the MFA or the New York City orbs use.

Both orbits were recently excited by Teju Cole's *Open City* (Random House, Inc. 2011), a novel where the narrator wanders about New York City with an interlude in Brussels that mixes some very well written and

evocative prose with the aimlessness and inability to connect with other people longer than a conversation or a tryst that is the definition of contemporary fiction. The action is psychoanalytic; the psychiatrist narrator reveals almost enough about himself to become a complete person, but then draws back, perhaps aware or afraid of what he or his reader may discern.

There are, however, forces that destroy stars and scatter galaxies into infinitudes. Thanks to the Internet and on demand publishing, hundreds if not thousands of new publications have swept into the orbs of the MFA and New York City stars, and, on occasion, have overcome their attractive forces. Due to electronic technology, the greatest surge of new publishers since Gutenberg has suddenly appeared. Almost anyone can set up a website, make up a name, and issue a call for manuscripts for a new on line magazine. It is so easy to enter into an agreement with one of the print on demand publishers than people can call themselves publishers without any investment in property, plant, or equipment, or even any talent for the business. It is among these newcomers that writers like me, hovering like wandering comets outside the MFA and New York City orbits, most often look for a publisher.

In the August 19, 2008 edition of *Slate*, the on line magazine, I read a memorial by Gerald Howard to Ted Solotaroff, who had then recently died.

Solotaroff was one of the great editors and essayists of the last part of the 20th century. Unlike so many of our new internet editors, he was a man with a deep and passionate understanding of American literature and the ability to share his appreciation with his readers. In his essay “A Few Good Voices in My Head” republished in a collection under the same name (Harper & Row 1987), he describes an encounter with a younger writer, who asked him, “Who do you write for?” Solotaroff replied, “I guess I write for a few good voices in my head.” To define “a good voice in my head,” Solotaroff quotes Gorky’s statement about Tolstoy: “As long as this man is alive, I am not alone.”

As a recent college graduate in the early 1950s, Solotaroff was attracted to literature but was unconnected to the New Criticism that was then a leading force in American literature. Perhaps reflecting an American Protestant inclination to separate a text from its author and historical setting, New Critics such as John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate concentrated on the text as a self-referencing entity about which various forms of ambiguity would congeal and then separate in the light of their own close readings.

Although technically competent in the New Criticism, Ted Solotaroff did not find that it resonated with him or led him to the understandings he sought. Unlike the New Critics, also called Southern Agrarians from their

imagined origin in an idyllic antebellum South, Solotaroff was Jewish and lived in New York City. After a few years supporting himself and his wife as a waiter, perhaps an obligatory part of a New York City writer's career, he finally entered graduate school at the University of Chicago. He had read the fiction and essays of the then recently deceased Isaac Rosenfeld, who, Solotaroff says, "like a terrific older brother" confirmed "that literature was first and last a criticism of life." Then the *Times Literary Supplement* asked him to write an essay on American Jewish writers. The graduate student took the assignment and discovered that the good voices in his head were those from his own tradition that confirmed and expanded his consciousness and values and sensibility.

Now I have to be very careful about how I say this. He did not discover that only American Jewish writers resonated with him or that only they were good. What Ted Solotaroff discovered was that they taught him the good. If this sounds Neo-Platonic to you, it is. We read to discover the good that enlightens us and informs our actions and confirms who we are. When we find it we seize it, remember it, apply it, aspire to it, and measure ourselves by it. Having a few good voices in your head is the difference between being a man of letters and being a crank.

Solotaroff does not say it, but these voices will change with time. If I had not found other good voices besides Thomas Wolf and Tennessee Williams, who got me through my teens, my knowledge of the good would never have matured. Recently I read *The Word Exchange* (W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. 2011), a new translation of Anglo Saxon poetry by contemporary poets. Anglo Saxon poetry's power, humanity, masculinity, yearning, sadness, and faith defy contemporary American literature. We read the product of the MFA programs and the New York City writers searching in vain for any sense that "The Seafarer" or "The Dream of the Rode" ever existed or are even possible.

Thus, sometimes the good voices in your head will cause more sadness than delight. Unless we keep reading and expanding our vision and our sensibility, however, we will atrophy like the inhabitants of the MFA and New York City star systems, who see new galaxies erupting all about them and turn their faces to the ground. If, as in Teju Cole's *Open City*, the only dramatic action is making literary and historical allusions without being either formed or changed by them, then literature is reduced to being a companion for an inverted, incestuous, self-absorbed egotism.

For unlike the MFA and New York City writers living in self-defining and self referencing circles, the spirit of literature itself is erratic and

uncontrollable. In his essay “German Literature in the Age of Bach,”¹ Argentinean Nobel laureate Jorge Luis Borges investigates the important question why German literature from about 1675 to 1750 was in his words inelegant, obscure, and seemingly inert. Borges found unsatisfactory the traditional answers, such as Germany suffered from political divisions and war, or that it was obsequiously mimicking foreign models. Other nations have produced great literature during periods of turmoil and conflict, and if a nation has a strong native literature, foreign influences strengthen rather than debilitate it. Seeing Hölderlin, Lessing, Goethe, Novalis, and later Heine about to appear in the Teutonic firmament, Borges concluded that in the age of Bach, the German literary spirit was undergoing a period of preparation.

Although Borges mentions in passing his frequent citations to Paul Valéry’s project to write a history of literature without using the name of any author, he does not pursue this concept to its logical extreme. The most convincing explanation for the absence of literature from Germany during the Age of Bach or from any other nation in any period is that the spirit of literature is absent. Wars, calamities, foreign influences, periods of preparation for greatness to come are equally irrelevant. Apollo either visits a place and sings to its poets, or he does not.

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, edited by Eliot Weinberger (Viking 1999).

Today American literature is more tormented about delivery systems – shall I buy a Kindle or a Nook; is my vision good enough to read *The New York Times* on my iPhone – than it is about substance. The obsession with the economic realities of paper versus electronic publishing has overwhelmed concern about the content of what is being published. Regardless whether the text billows out of printing presses or streams out of servers, it is not worth publishing or reading if the spirit of literature is absent.

This is why we gather at our Club tonight and every Monday night to hear a paper. Perhaps our drinks and civility are as close as men of the 21st century can bring themselves to a rite to entice the god. I thought of beginning our meetings by strumming a lute instead of banging a gavel, and asking Nico to place a bowl of wine on the mantle as an offering. Flush from election as your President, I even fantasized of leading a garlanded heifer out onto the lawn at our summer outing and sacrificing it. Fearing to offend the religious sensibilities of our members, I have held back.

Despite our inability to compel his presence, however, Apollo does pay us an occasional visit. We never know through whom he will speak. This is the reason to keep coming here, week after week. We never really know who will be touched that night. Who knows? We may see a star

invisible to the tormented worlds of the MFA programs and the New York City writers, and hear another good voice to join the chorus in our heads.