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WHAT MAKES LITERATURE IMMORTAL?

Editor's Note: This address was delivered on June 10, 2011, at the Iowa Writers' Workshop 75th Anniversary Reunion, Iowa City, Iowa.

When I say I love American movies of the thirties, I'm really praising the filter of time: how eighty years eliminate the worst thousand cinematic turkeys. Ticket buyers, attentive distributors, and critics have spared me that very bad movie regarding roadhouse amnesia. It likely starred George Brent wearing his lumpy toupee plus Miriam Hopkins barking like a Pomeranian locked into an overheated roadster. Time refines. It instead awards me Carole Lombard wearing white satin and visibly not needing any bra. She plays off Cary Grant, who seems to have designed himself by pure athletic will. Time is actually a pretty good judge. True, we lost Vermeer for a couple of centuries there, but that oversight has been corrected.

The very force that daily steam-shovels us into early graves is concurrently judging our poems and stories—with all the care of the pickiest jurist at a Society Flower Show in England. And though our mortal fates are guaranteed, our literary leavings might all someday marry up into Timelessness.

What makes Literature immortal? This entails other questions. First, how can we make the lasting sort of writing? Second, how do we somehow know Literature as we recognize, on sight, a bluebird? Third, if Literature is *not* immortal, what the hell else is? The inerrancy of a Pope who spent his boyhood as a Hitler Youth? The sanctity of Marriage that publicly collapses fifty-one percent of the time and privately fails how far oftener? Are these institutions our culture's certainties?

Of course Literature is our mecca, our true polar North in a world overheating. Everybody concerned long ago staked everything on the hope that writing will last, if anything can. Let's discuss.

Literacy is both a hunger and the food such hunger daily requires. But what makes some poetry and fiction immortal? As a Supreme Court Justice said of Obscenity, "We know Lit when see Lit." I just bought, in a used copy, *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* for three dollars and ninety cents. Not only is Literature our single greatest hope for spiritual renewal, it's an even better bargain than Netflix.

Q: How does a text come to show itself immortal?

A: By voting across time. How to distinguish written entertainment from the higher form called “art”? The reader’s own body remains the wisest critic on earth. Literature is recognized as it arrives, through retinas, registering smack in your solar plexus; from there it can shoot up through your chakras or fire down to your genitals. Either way it usually earns out. Lit is secular holy writ. It’s our spirit marrow, brothers and sisters. It remains our only chance.

I once taught an undergraduate whose first-person story was a veritable Swiss cheese of missing information. In my office, I prompted him, “Is your main character going to date this Edna a second time? Is your hero the virgin he seems? How is he even paying for all of Edna’s expensive dinners?”

The freshman gave me such an eye-popping look. “I’m not going to write any of that *down*,” he yelled. “That’s personal. You’re trying to *know* me. And you’re *sick*.” Right on all counts.

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To qualify as immortal literature, writing must first be very personal, then almost instantly actually not. Much architecture is required to take a mound of emotional human nougat, then to forge of that a habitable marble state capitol.

In 1819, John Keats exclaims in a letter to his brother George, “The great beauty of poetry is that it makes every thing every place interesting.” Language itself becomes both a descriptor and the very source of concomitant surprise, elation. So, look for Language striving toward a justice as vivid as creature sensation.

I just read the Pevear and Volokhonskaya translation of *Anna Karenina* and was struck by the fact that there are no servants in Tolstoy. Assuming his role as the God of his fictional universe, the Count makes sure every walk-on counts: a faceted unrepeatable character. Take the nameless waiter on page thirty. He emerges as a figure so striving he’s pretentious; after a lifetime spent on his feet, he’s suddenly sixty-five, with dyed hair, and still too in love with the French pronunciation he ladles over tonight’s menu; he is a being no less comi-tragic than the fuddled richer folks he’s served for life. And he comes to life in his forty words of Tolstoy’s heat-seeking justice.

The novel as a form emerged to answer the leisure needs of middle-class readers who could afford successive volumes as they appeared in serialized editions, people who—crucially—also had the space to store them. The novel in its sheer crowdedness became a form inherently democratic. That might

be why there are so few great right-wing novelists. Evelyn Waugh? A bitter hilarious Tory, of course. But if you just countered my charge by retorting, “Tom Wolfe, Ayn Rand, and Pat Conroy!” the exits are located here and there.

One morning at Yaddo, the art colony, while out on my early hike around the lakes, I encountered composer Ned Rorem, then about seventy. He strode with especial briskness. Famous for his candid diaries, his several Pulitzers honoring chamber music, and his continuing handsomeness, Ned actually smiled. He always rose at dawn. When I asked how he fared this morning, Rorem answered with the energy of a day’s work behind him: “Even more immortal!”

This adds a new wrinkle to our topic. Are there degrees of immortality? Like some rheostat of pregnancy? I thought one either *was* or *wasn’t*.

But as someone about to turn sixty-four, I realize I’ve already seen how ephemeral the starting lineup of immortals truly is. Does today’s George Brent become tomorrow’s Cary Grant? No, Brents just fade away. A genius grant gets granted but once.

When I was a young writer escaping the South, my parents’ friends and my high school teachers held up—as the very model of a Modern Major General—William Styron, major writer. Big themes (Holocaust, slavery), fat novels released at noble intervals—five to seven years. Huge star. As opposed to, say, some crazy kid on a Harley like Barry Hannah, out of Mississippi and evincing every one of that state’s countless wild streaks.

Hannah was considered clever, if in short bursts—but more a barroom-tale-peddler than any true, middle-aged novel-builder. Hannah seemed likely an early casualty, a brilliant flash appropriate only to New Year’s Eve or Independence Day. I lived to meet both men. And to read both. And now both are dead. (That each proved a chain-smoking alcoholic with a wandering eye for the ladies went—then at least, alas—without even ever mentioning. They were straight, white, bourgeois, Hemingway-endorsed, midcentury American writers, weren’t they?)

Styron, like Cormac McCarthy, lifted his tone, subject, and grandeur all from Poppa Faulkner. (Neither McCarthy nor Styron ever quite understood that Faulkner, as immortal as a star called our Sun, is primarily a writer of *comic* vision. He does not simply make jokes. The very weave of his outlook is comedic.) Let’s add that to our list of requirements for immortality—inherent eloquence, empathy, a fierce sense of justice, a restless joy in architec-

ture—and a gigantic funny bone. To my ear, Styron's books now sound gaseous and hollow, if always blessed with a great journalistic sense of subject. His sense of dramatic humanity? More Rachmaninoff than Bach.

Barry Hannah, like any great jazz soloist, works best in short, layered, improvised arias. His form, the Story, set him behind in the immortality ratings game. Like all else in America, Narrative follows the lead of Commerce. (On U.S. airlines, there are no seats better than business class.) True, Hannah's bad-boy subjects can prove repetitious; yes, his themes are what all academics are this year calling "transgressive": "You're not going to believe what I did today!" But the language itself! It can be as funny as Faulkner and as insane in its risk-taking. Hannah's language often feels as promising and terrifying as tomorrow.

His tales and talents rush you—caffeinated, self-replenishing, side-splitting in their pitiless self-disgust. And every syllable is drenched with morning dew or bourbon or both.

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Styron, liberally well-intended, impersonated at novel-length Nat Turner, the slave leader of a pivotal plantation revolt. Styron admired young Nat so much that he made him a first-person contemporary, sounding very like Styron. His Turner sounds less furious than aggrieved, less a human being bought at auction than a property owner discussing, over drinks, some unattractive new village zoning law. Styron's black hero sounds like neither a black man nor any man, not when an Idea will do. Turner might be a recent Duke University grad, not the fearsome revolutionary, self-taught into being ruefully self-sacrificial.

I'd encountered both Styron and Hannah as decent mortals, and so it feels odd to note the speed of their treatment in the immortality sweepstakes. No waiting for probate processing. It begins before the obits. Because we write, our very leavings become bravely subject to such posthumous demotions or such sweet, belated resurrections.

Woody Allen says, "I don't want to become immortal because of my art. I want to become immortal because I never die." Nice work if you can get it, Woody.

And, finally, this brings us to the funniest paradox of all: along with living language, with tenacious guardian empathy, with essential design sense, and a saving sense of humor, in order to achieve immortality you must be most eloquent about one topic: your own and everyone else's mortality.

The greatest writing is that which is most luminously and searchingly mortal. Us? We are Eternity's larval stage. But our literature, that's where, at our best, we might end up. Paradise is real: you will see it plain, it's black and white.

How to achieve such pure permanence about sheer bodily transiency?

Well, there are, at Midwestern universities, whole workshops dedicated to just this question. Because such shops were founded by educated, working-class, Lutheran males seventy-five years ago, such sites are not called "art studios." "Art" is a noun and not a verb and is therefore un-American. *Workshop* means you damn well better labor there. You'd best put in long hours at these tinkerers' garages, "The Writing's Work Sheds."

A work-shop forged for and by and of writers. Beautiful notion. Can't you hear every striving clang from every busy anvil ringing inside each separate Quonset hut? Ambrose Bierce, genius author of *The Devil's Dictionary*, is immortal. Why? Because he's being read aloud this morning, despite his literally disappearing in 1913 into Texas or Mexico, leaving no body and therefore no known cause of death.

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Definition: "Immortality":
A toy which people cry for.
And on their knees apply for.
Dispute, contend and lie for.
And if allowed, would be right proud,
Eternally, to die for.

Will our work outlive us? That's certainly the hope. That, for want of an activist God, is our one banked-up and long-prepared-for money shot. We none of us will be around to know.

Maybe immortality is the ability to move others long after you yourself have stopped moving?

Immortality, brothers and sisters, is the condition of a dead person who does not believe she is dead. And exactly that, my fellow producers of work-sheets at the Workshop, is what I wish for us and for our pages.

To see a video of Allan Gurganus delivering this address, please visit www.iowareview.org.