

Call for A Renaissance In Literature And Art

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If one removes oneself from the literary historicist view founded on modernity since the 20th century – consigning to the garbage heap all the nonstop negations and aggressive provocations, along with the sensationalism – to re-examine the history of literature and art, it will not be hard to see that the past century has led to nothing culturally new, but simply gone around in a wretched circle...

In the present globalized era of all-intrusive politics and advertising, where even culture has become totally market-oriented, is it possible for literature and art not to degenerate into a form of cultural consumerism, and still retain spiritual independence and adequate creative freedom? This is the question we will discuss today. It's not a new question, and has been around for quite a while. It goes back to the 20th century, so it's necessary first of all to revisit the 20th century to see where the source of the problem lies.

The interference of political authorities in literature and art is not unprecedented in human history, but it had never been like it had been during the 20th century when large numbers of writers and artists willingly used literature and art as tools and weapons for changing society. It was not that the political authorities had forced writers and artists into submission, instead it was a specific ideology firing writers and artists with a religious fervor never attained by religion that caused havoc verging on madness. Indeed, in the name of revolution, ideology fabricated the illusion of utopia that stripped people of their conscience and normal rational judgment. The communist revolution that had created havoc for the larger part of a century then collapsed just like that, and nowadays even the literature that had served it is already of no interest to anyone. However, the broad Marxist ideology behind it all did not end just like that, and continues to influence literary and art creation today. To be engaged is to be politically engaged, or else this can be interpreted as submitting to a particular political correctness, and it still occasionally impacts upon the world of contemporary literature and art in both the East and the West.

The question then progresses to whether in the contemporary world there is any politics that the individual writer or artist can control, apart from party politics. And if writers or artists are not included in a particular party politics will it be possible for their creations to change society or influence the political situation? Does the unfortunate solitary writer or artist have other choice?

Liberalism that makes human rights its catchword is likewise an ideology. In real world individual freedoms are always restrained by politics or society, and it goes without saying that they are suppressed under authoritarian political systems. Today, this remains an existential predicament that humankind cannot escape. If creative freedom in literature and art cannot liberate itself from practical utility, it will continue be the empty talk of political correctness and saying the right thing. If writers and artists refuse to play the role of embellishing this or that politics, and so win genuine creative freedom, there will inevitably be a return to independence and autonomy in literature and art. By not serving politics or seeking practical gain, there will be a return to the primary motivation of literature and art, that is, within the purely spiritual domain giving expression to human cognition, confronting various human existential predicaments, deeply plumbing the profundity and complexity of human nature, and in so doing, leaving behind substantial and vivid testimonies.

However in the present world of all prevailing globalized market laws how can this kind of non-utilitarian literature and art gain a foothold? This is the real question that needs to be discussed. The commercialization brought about by the dynamics of capitalist profit has spread into all spheres, including that of culture. To use moral or ethical judgments against this cast iron mechanism is futile, as it can probably only be restricted by law. But how can laws be established to guarantee this kind of non-utilitarian literary and art creation? It will still be empty talk on paper, and this is the real predicament confronting writers and artists today.

Is there the possibility in present times for literature and art to transcend politics and the market and not seek practical advantage? This kind of literature and art will absolutely not shun the existential problems of present-day people. The writer or artist will have no taboos, will directly confront life, independently reflect, and moreover give full rein to free expression. This is the kind of literature and art that we want to discuss.

This kind of literature and art must arise initially from the personal experiences of

the writer or artist, and totally stem from personal uncompromising reflections that will cause discomfort unless they are articulated. In fact, this is the primary motivation of literature and art. This kind of literature and art is the crystallization of human consciousness, and are testimonies to humanity's existence and human nature. The history of literature and art is the aggregation of the works left by such writers and artists; it is the spiritual legacy that can be transmitted in human culture, and moreover can stand the test of time, has acknowledged value, and is not diminished by time. Whether writers and artists have the courage to accept such a challenge is the most serious test confronting today's writers and artists.

Such works of course transcend fashions, they totally disregard the popular tastes promoted by the authorities and the media, and moreover are not categorized as modern, contemporary, or even classical. Writers and artists must instead free themselves of all the fashionable indicators that are used to demarcate, and not seek to today to the media, Writers or artists engaged in this kind of creation must of course firstly reduce the emotions and calm the mind and become totally immersed; they must not be calculating the outcome, but be solely focused on achieving the best possible expression.

The value of this kind of work lies even more in whether or not it deeply touches upon the existential conditions of human beings and their predicament, and in how it demonstrates the complexities of the human world and the subtleties of human nature . However, it is its truth that is the ultimate arbiter of value.

Truth here does not refer to the recording of the news or the documentation of history; the truth here refers to human experiences that have undergone artistic recreation; the truth here refers to the aesthetic representation of the myriad manifestations of the human world, including the fabrications and the imagination of the writer or artist; the truth here is more striking for the senses than representations of everyday reality, and when visually perceived startles the heart and arouses the intellect because what it reveals are the inner subtleties of human nature and the human world. This truth is inexhaustible, and more profound, more penetrating expressions can always be achieved, depending on the capability of the write or artist.

This kind of creation does not of course require orders to be given by someone else, and furthermore has no readymade templates. Initially, it derives from a writer's or an artist's inner impulses and insights with respect to the human world, and following a lengthy period of gestation and refinement, an appropriate means of expression and corresponding artistic form are found. Even if the works of predecessors have served as references, the writer or artist will still have to rely on personal understanding and ability to be able to put his or her individual signature to it.

Such works are not the inevitable products of a race or an era, but are each disparate and unique cases. In history there are countries and eras that have been mute, and in which there are only the annals of changing kings or political authorities, but which are bereft of works that provoke deep thinking or can be read or looked at over a lengthy period. Literature and art do not follow the laws of evolution, and those of later times are not necessarily more enlightened than those of their predecessors. Historicism cannot explain the serendipity in literature and art. This serendipity is due precisely to the insight and talent of the individual writer or artist, and the key lies in the acuity and lucidity of the cognition of the individual writer or artist.

Since it is creation that under discussion here, rather than discussing the social conditions presented by the times it would be better to return to the cognition of the individual writer or artist. In other words, what is crucial is the awareness of the individual writer or artist, who, on realizing that creative freedom has never been conferred by anyone, will search for a way. So, as long as there is freedom of movement for the person, and basic security of food, clothing, and shelter, even Dante in exile in medieval times and Cao Xueqin in hiding at the height of the literary inquisition of the Manchu-Qing dynasty were able to leave behind enduring works. By comparison, today's writers and artists are definitely luckier. As long as they can escape the dictatorship of the collective, and extricate themselves from the thought restrictions and value judgments of prevailing ideologies, then creative freedom will be in their hands and it will simply be a matter of their exercising it.

Is another renaissance in literature and art possible? If one removes oneself from the literary historicist view founded on modernity since the 20th century — consigning all the nonstop negations and aggressive provocations, along with the sensationalism to the garbage heap — to re-examine the history of literature and art, it will not be hard

to see that the past century has led to nothing culturally new, but simply gone around in a wretched circle. The East and the West have simply changed direction, and are now making a circle again by following an old road already travelled by people. Such is the absurdity of the world.

Cast aside the overturning of aesthetics and trendy hype, and a renaissance in literature and art will logically follow. Cast away simple practical advantage, because literature and art are not weapons, nor are they tools, and they are certainly not merchandise. To return to the primary motivation of literature and art, return to the observation of human beings, return to human nature and human emotions, and return to the investigation of beauty is not a lot of empty talk. As long as writers and artists have a lucid awareness, they will be able to take control of their own creations. Such a renaissance in literature and art cannot of course be promoted by a race or nation as this would only bring literary and art creation under the control of a political authority and turn it into official paperwork for a certain kind of nationalism. Firstly there was the socialist realism promoted by Soviet Russia, and then there was Mao Zedong's so-called literature and the arts in the service of workers, peasants and soldiers. At present there is no shortage of various racial or regional identifications using political language to cause literature and art creation to submit present-day political party politics and election politics.

Such a renaissance in literature and art can only emerge from the individual awareness of writers and artists, and does not come from additional initiatives and developments in the cultural policies of government institutions; instead it is the exact opposite. What is indeed is that society should be open and accommodating. Government-administered cultural institutions would best be decentralized, and operated by the ordinary people to ensure maximum pluralism and diversity.

Such a renaissance in literature and art definitely requires the support of various non-profit cultural foundations, but in the first instance the awakening of writers and artists is critical in calling out, arousing attention, and at least causing a stir in cultural circles to gain traction, and thus generate a certain common understanding in society. So to publicly raise questions and provoke discussion is of vital importance.

Such a renaissance in literature and art in present times is not confined to some specific nations and regions, such as 15th and 16th century Italy or 18th century

France. The situation for writers and artists in the globalized present is generally the same. However underlying the present economic crisis and cultural degeneration is the prevailing intellectual crisis and spiritual impoverishment. Ideologies such as the social revolution theory, liberalism and nationalism cannot resolve the difficulties of the present age. Humanity needs new thinking to bring enlightenment, but where can such new thinking be found?

These are the grounds for calling for a renaissance in literature and art today. Obviously fresh thinking cannot be hoped for from the daily revelations by economists, social statistics and opinion polls contained in the media. The present is an era not only of spiritual impoverishment, but also one of philosophical impoverishment. Since all meaning has been overturned and dissipated, philosophical speculation often degenerates into games of semantic analysis.

It is not necessary to predict the future of humanity after all the nightmarish reality of the utopian promises of the 20th century that has just passed is still fresh in people's memories. It would be best to return to people's real situation at this particular moment. The spiritually and physically perfect man envisaged by old humanism was merely a notion, but innate human rights and freedom have never been bestowed without a cost. Instead, the frail individual, who is full of life, is always located in the existential predicament of reality, and human society has no idea of where it is headed. Philosophical speculation cannot resolve the predicaments of reality, so people resort to literature and art precisely to confirm their own perplexing existence.

Philosophy, religion, literature and art are different modes that people use to understand their own existence. Philosophy relies on speculation, and religion is led by faith, whereas literature and art, through aesthetics, provides feedback for affirming the human individual. In this era of religious decline, materialism is rampant. Ideology and political authority continually flirt with one another, and make philosophy's originally pure situation extremely untenable. Burdened by the dual weight of politics and the market, literature and art often lost their original aesthetic judgment, and by being politically correct became the lackeys of political power, and because of cultural consumerism became top end of the market. The call for a renaissance in literature and art requires a return to aesthetics, a return to human nature and human emotions, a return to life, a return to the truth of humans, a

return to spirituality, a return to the spirit.

Such a renaissance in literature and art depends on the conscience and awareness of writers and artists, and of course is not confined to a nation or geographical region or confined by the language of expression or by the genre. In every corner of the present world, as long as writers and artists have the awareness, they will naturally search for a mode of expression.

Such a renaissance in literature and art is possible just as during bleak periods in history there were still breakthroughs during mind-numbing times to produce loud and clear voices and colors. With predecessors as a reference, why would it not be possible for people in present times?

Such a renaissance in literature and art derives of course initially from a deep awareness on the part of writers and artists. Then, depending on the talent and skill of the individual writers and artists, by escaping political advantage and transcending fashionable taste, they will be able to use their insights to achieve outstanding aesthetic expressions.

Such a renaissance in literature and art allows the writer or artist to enjoy immense freedom, and in domains unattainable by authority and money, the spirit will soar. The process of creation brings such joy that it is possible not to consider the outcome, and to continue without end.

Such a renaissance in literature and art can be of this instant: one step is one footprint, every step reaches higher, and there becomes a structure. This process does not have an end point, and the heart and mind are higher than heaven.

Such a renaissance in literature and art is in fact a joining of hearts, and in the process of structuring there can at any time be dialogues with predecessors; there is direct communication, and there is no need to go through the interpretations and annotations of later people.

Such a renaissance in literature and art is built on the premise of the interconnectedness of human nature, so it will naturally arouse sympathy in others, and the response will put an end to empty prattle. There were be no need for

grandstanding, and it will go straight to people's hearts.

Such a renaissance in literature and art will start right below the feet of writers and artists, and once they awaken to this need, it will be irrepressible and unstoppable, and with the passage of time, the skills and techniques will follow naturally as a matter of course.

Such a renaissance in literature and art is not at all impossible.

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