



The Future of Literature

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IT SEEMS TO ME THAT any discussion of the future of literature needs to begin with the question: *Is there one?* I mean a *living* future in which books and reading are not confined to the classroom, the university department, to cliques of scholars. Is there any cause for concern? Independent bookshops are on the up after years of decline. No big publishing house has gone out of business recently. Libraries are beleaguered but hanging on. And most reassuringly, I've seen young people, teenagers (my daughter among them), with books in their bags, books in their hands, good books too. But I believe we now need to make the case for literature in a way that would not have been thought necessary in the past — though press me to locate that past, the point where it started to thin out and I'd have to withdraw into a degree of vagueness and say the 1960s, the 1970s, the 1980s. Perhaps I just mean any time before the mass ownership of computers. Not that I want to finger technology as the source of literature's problems: the digital world is no inevitable enemy of literature. But *something* has shifted. The good that was once assumed — literature as a key marker of civilization, an essential school of empathy and self-knowledge, a source of joy and solace — can no longer be taken for granted, an idea shared by any reasonably well-educated adult. The reasons, inevitably, are complex. We do not live quite where we once lived; we do not believe all our parents and grandparents believed. There is a suspicion — not baseless — that literature is elitist.

Essentially white, essentially middle class, too male, too narrow. And while the digital world is not the villain here — the web, among other



things, is a vast library – it has nudged us, I think, towards the visual and the spoken rather than the written and the carefully read. More tellingly, perhaps, it's provided us with ingenious and tempting ways to fill our time. And literature *requires* time. It thrives – the whole ink-spattered project – on something like boredom. It likes rainy afternoons in chilly rectories. It likes sea voyages, and long convalescences in mountain sanatoriums. To write, to read — these are beautiful and slow activities, but in this part of the world – pandemics aside – the character of our lives is less and less amenable to such pursuits. Boredom is to be fled from — and can be! Reading versus Netflix? Where would the smart money be? Where is it already?

So — the future of literature. Who knows the future of anything other than of our own small lives? And that, perhaps, is not irrelevant, for literature is a voice with a measure of immortality to it. It speaks across the generations. It is a great broad river of human thought and human dreaming. When we read or write we enter the river and are no longer quite the time-bound creatures we were. It will go on for a while yet, albeit with a slight limp. But those of us who are *in*, we need to radicalize the young (and not so young) into becoming serious life-long readers. Nothing else is quite the same. Nothing else can adequately replicate the experience, and without readers – passionate and discerning readers – literature is just so much fuel for a bonfire. I am hopeful. I'm optimistic. I'm also worried.