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The Call of the 'Readwriter'

Once upon a time in the Arab land, there was a young man who desperately wanted to write a poem to win his lover's heart, so he went to a famous poet who sympathized with him and showed him the way, "Go and don't return until you memorize one thousand lines of poems." The young lover isolated himself until he accomplished the target, then arrogantly turned back to him, without expecting the following: "Go back and don't return until you forget what you've memorized!"

There is no way to answer the question about professionalization in writing without rethinking our vision of writing, and this, therefore, requires us to seek an answer to the eternal question: Why do we write? To win hearts? Then the question that follows this like an infant clinging to his mother: To whom is our writing directed?

From the first moment, things were clear to me, reading was not for pleasure or amusement, but literature and the arts, in general, had the potential to play an alternative role to the bleak reality. Literature is not a compensation for the life we did not live but has the ambition to rebuild it as it is supposed to be in the first place. I have never read or seen a good piece of art without feeling this ambition behind it.

I became a writer when what I read was no longer enough to make the equation I was looking for. All that I had read was incomplete from the angle I sought: rebuilding the world. This vanity drives me to write—the belief that my production is the missing part, the answer to the existential crisis.

But any impulse to write, though necessary, is a small part of a complex process involving many elements, and our sacred views of writing must diminish its privilege in the face of an atmosphere that governs the many stages before it reaches the readers. That is an entirely different matter and the philosophy that governs it is not necessarily bound by our notions as writers about writing. It may even be in conflict sometimes.

The relationship between art on the one hand, and society and power on the other, has changed rapidly. We have no choice but to admit that writing has become like any other field, framed by rules of competition, gain and loss.

These changes were imposed by the entry of several parties into the writing process alongside the writer, but what particularly catches my attention is the emergence of a new powerful and influential factor produced by social media technology. I call him the "readwriter"— a reader who is rebellious to his job, reading is no longer enough for him, so he confuses it with other jobs that require higher 'skills' such as creative writing, and criticism.

The "readwriter" is a mixture of a reader and writer. He moves between the two fields breaking the rules, with much confidence in the power of his technological tools that give him the ability to reach and influence the audience more deeply than a professional writer does, who might spend a great deal of time pondering questions of quality: What is fiction and what is art?

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, April 1, 2022

Yasser Abdel Hafez (Egypt); Lueangpiansamut Jidanun (Thailand); Luíza Fazio (Brazil)

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The effects of the "readwriter" as I see it, are negative rather than positive. I am talking about my observations of the local situation. But I'm sure it's similar to other writing communities. It seems as if we are witnessing an era of public control over writing that has never occurred in the history of writing.

Today, all the institutions of literary production — the publishing houses, marketers, arbitrators of literary prizes — are now setting their eyes on this new object, the figure of the "readwriter" because they know well that is he who is actually, literally, a dictator: his judgments are final and indisputable; his impressions can influence more than the critical opinions written by professionals, they are what today drives the writing process.

Professional writing is led by this new stream of readers. For example, in recent years, we have been mired in a wave of literary writing directly inspired by history—the sought-after and successful works that guarantee victory in advance.

Simply put, there are two ways to deal with art. One of them sees its task as to make life bearable. This point of view doesn't mind the form of professional writing driven by the obsession of bored consumers looking for stories. One of its most important characteristics is that it is momentarily effective. But it does not remain long in the exhausted memory of thousands of daily scenes and posts.

I adopt the other way of looking at art. I see it as a tool to create new life. Therefore, every part of it has to be brand new and tested to ensure it's not fake. With such a vision, I consider myself that young dreamer whose mission is to forget what he has memorized.

I believe that is the only way to produce a unique piece of art is by disconnecting oneself from the external stimuli, competition, fame, victory. All of these mass consumer items should be kept away from any serious writing, or else it will become professional writing.

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