

Let Us Contradict

An Editor's Note

We are trying to make something happen. In past issues of this magazine, I stated my agreement with critic Roberto Calasso's theory of "absolute literature"—literary art freed from a "common cause, from any social utility," as Calasso says. Despite that, in this and other recent issues, *New Letters* seems to want to confront, in a pragmatic and direct way, circumstances of violence and oppression, especially ideologically driven oppression, rampant throughout the world.

We don't mind contradicting ourselves. Art for art's sake or for humanity's sake—they are the same and nothing to us. We are trying to insert a higher order of thought. When W.H. Auden said, in his elegy for W.B. Yeats, that poetry is, first of all, "A way of happening," he stood for the autonomy of the work of art—that its validity depended not one bit on who becomes our next president, or the outcome of a war that president will be called to manage. That's true. Also true, however, is the large number of writers who want to use literary forms to reflect, perhaps affect, the events of the world.

We humans are prone to judgments and condemnations; yet in literature we have the enduring example of Don Quixote, neither for nor against anyone: "It is for him to succor them as being needy," Cervantes wrote, "not to think of their goodness or badness, but only their misfortunes." Even so, in this little editorial, I am defending the magazine, as it takes on some big

topics and tries to keep its sense of humor and openness. Our only quarrel is with the truth.

New Letters is not alone in these times. As evidence of widespread concern, I want to step away for a moment from the convention of a purely editor's note, and cite three books by outside publishers designed to stand for or against certain political leaders, to lament the war, to make something happen. Most vociferous is the large-format and elaborately produced anthology *Cost of Freedom*, published by Michael Annis' indefatigable and independent Howling Dog Press. This book takes the direct, picket-poster, face-painting approach: "All the dead children of all the wars in our sad human history came together," writes Maria Allwine about Cindy Sheehan, "in this one mother's eyes." *Cost of Freedom's* co-editors, Mike Palecek and Whitney Trettien, have little need for indirection in art or writing and invoke the priest/poet Daniel Berrigan for their battle cry, "Know where you stand, & stand there."

Then, we have a curious and distinctive book, *God Bless* (Etruscan Press), by the poet and philosopher H.L. Hix, who has constructed poems entirely from the public statements of President George W. Bush, with attendant ironies; Hix intersperses those poems with "Interleaves," or responses, in the voice of Osama bin Laden. The latter half of the book consists of interviews Hix conducted with various people he believes could offer perspective on the tragic confrontation personified by Bush and bin Laden.

This book has the effect of opening up a conversation that never took place but, says Hix, should; it also will go into evidence for why Hix would be first among the poets exiled by Plato from his Republic. I know Hix to be something of a stealth poet, himself, mild-mannered, well groomed, thoughtful, and utterly fierce in his convictions. Not many authors would include a blurb on his own book such as this by William Heyen on the back of *God Bless*: "Yoiks . . . I feel a combination of stomach sickness

and vertigo." Hix, like all great literary writers of conviction, and like Quixote, himself, doesn't care what others think.

Finally, this little band of citations needs to include Marvin Bell's latest book, *Mars Being Red* (Copper Canyon), which reads at times like the measured release of steam pressure building since 2001; yet Marvin Bell cannot help writing poems that are intimate, emotionally complex, and lovely, even as he surprises the reader with an undercurrent of disgust or sadness. In one poem, "Unable to Sleep in Frost's Bed in Franconia," Bell indirectly illustrates the value of "absolute literature," by playing the resonances of familiar Frost images—two paths diverging; a stone wall being mended—against the subtext of ever-present divergences in the world today: "And by rock walls that rose only / to clear a field, [who] has listened hard to the voices / that blur the vision of one's time." Marvin Bell's allusions to Frost's poems mark, in effect, allusions to the enduring, or absolute, qualities of any struggle of conscience.

The writers presented in this issue of *New Letters*, also, have listened hard to "voices that blur the vision" and answered the way art answers: often self-contradictory, humorously, not taking the world more seriously than they take themselves. In his six short-short stories appearing here, Robert Olen Butler can do no better than put his own story in among the follies and pathos of world leaders, all of them in bed merely human; and Abed Ismael can do no better than to contrast the violence of life in Syria with the beauty of language inspired by the city of Damascus; and our literary award winners give us a stake in the lives of their characters, homeless men or generals, all rendered with attention to the minutiae required of our time, the here and now.

"The question of why people turn evil doesn't interest me," says Inge Genefke in these pages. Her interest lies in trying to help the victims—the first step of which must be a refusal to look away, which seems to be the nature of art, as well. To look clearly and without prejudice. The old dichotomies, "art

for art's sake" or "art for humanity's sake," are not mutually exclusive. We have a great task: to make an art that seeks not to improve the future or to save the past, but to be true to the world as it is. To not back down. In the words of the director of the Associated Writing Programs, David Fenza, delivered in February 2008, "Whatever else literature is, it is an exercise of humility over the purity of an ideology, a dogma, a theory, a school, a movement, a party, a faith." With such humility, we offer the literary voices and art in this issue of *New Letters*. It is the lowercase truth we aspire to, the one that laughs back at us, the one that allows us to celebrate all life and its integrity.

—Robert Stewart

UPCOMING IN *NEW LETTERS*



A conversation with Nathan Englander.

Continued stories from *Intercourse*,
by Robert Olen Butler.

Mary Jo Bang's new translation
of *The Inferno* by Dante.

Kim Addonizio's essay on the poetry business.

. . . *for starters.*