



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

10-26-2007

Literature as Impossible

Alexander Ulanov

Panel: Writing as Philosophy and Craft

Rights

Copyright © 2007 Aleksandr Mikhaylovich Ulanov

Recommended Citation

Ulanov, Alexander, "Literature as Impossible" (2007). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 738.

https://ir.uiowa.edu/iwp_archive/738

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](https://ir.uiowa.edu). For more information please contact: lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Literature as Impossible

Alexander Ulanov

More than 50 years ago, Albert Camus said “write novels if you want to be a philosopher.” Perhaps now, in the post-modern world, poetry and poem-like prose have become more like philosophy than like novels. The novel (in its classical variation) is narrative and linear. Now we perceive the world as a net of senses. The text is a map, and philosophy, perhaps, is only one kind of writing.

I would like to mention, first of all, that writing allows exploration of life’s different possibilities. Joseph Brodsky, for example, has some poems and essays written from a Christian point of view and, at the same time, some poems and essays written from a polytheistic point of view. Brodsky said that monotheistic religion is totalitarian, but also made a habit of writing poems every Christmas day. Who is Brodsky – a Christian or a polytheist? I think the question itself is incorrect: Brodsky explored both sides, and he lived both simultaneously.

Maurice Blanchot said that literature is the impossible thing. It isn’t interesting to speak of the possible, the “sayable,” when we can instead speak about what is impossible to say, about our unclear and complex feelings and thoughts, about things without exact meaning. Wittgenstein, in his early works, suggested we keep silent about things about which we can’t speak clearly. However, there are many things that fit into this category. There is a great world of extra-lingual experience – a kiss, a smile, sadness, a city, a sea, a stone. It is useless to try to name these experiences directly. We can try to circle around them, to approach them across associations or through connotative meanings of words. We try to obtain their individual portraits. And we understand, at the same time, that this approaching leads to no final success. Naming is always a part only. It is always a failure.

We can see the same process in life. All good things are impossible. We should be free, yet we depend on people dear to us; there can be no love without dependency and, at the same time, no love without freedom. We should be rational, we should understand what we do, we should keep to our plans. And, at the same time, a man is nothing without irrationality, playfulness, tenderness. Two weeks ago our guest from Malta, Simone Inguanez, said that she is a woman and an eternal girl. Truly, man has no age; we should have, at once, wisdom and playfulness.

It is important to keep our balance; because the point of balance shifts every moment, literature helps us find the center.

It seems to me that the most important problems have no solution. Or, rather, their solution is to live with the problems, to solve them again and again over the course of a life. This way, we return to philosophy as a lifestyle, not as a writing style only.

Though philosophy can be a source of ideas for literature, literature corrects philosophy. Literature is a superposition of meanings, so it keeps philosophy from the danger of becoming overly determined. Philosophy’s aim is to describe the world with the help of ideas. But philosophy, at

times, *reduces* the world to these ideas, and reduces, in turn, the diversity of the world. Sometimes philosophy is too sure in its ideas. Writing's ideas are always "partly," "probably," "perhaps." Writing tries to show many points of view, to provide a dialog. A text replies to itself. So literature opens to us an unsuspected, uncertain, colorful world. Thus corrected, philosophy now has become the research of a multitude of virtual worlds, as well.

Literature opens our minds. Perhaps you have read some poems written in the nineteenth century by poets under the influence of drugs. Today, we encounter texts with an even more complex movement of images, which were written by clear-minded poets. If a nineteenth-century reader were to see such a text, he might claim it was written by a madman, and that only a madman can read it. Now, however, we know it isn't so. We now entertain the possibility of being mad and not mad at the same time. Today, literature is the best drug.

Understanding literature is a very important problem. If I immediately understand what I read, I have no need for I've just read, for I have it already. Likewise, if I understand clearly what I have written, it isn't literature – it is information. I haven't written something, I have only *told* something. Perhaps the information I have recorded is useful to somebody, but it is not literature. It is only a newspaper account. The attempt to understand, the habit of endless approaching – these are fruitful practices. So I am glad to have written poems that I don't understand. They allow me to see more than I could see when I began to write. What is the source of these additional meanings? It is, on one hand, language, the associative net of words, and on the other hand, the memories contained in our culture and gathered throughout our lives. Thus, the experiences of many American poets, from Emily Dickinson to the members of the Language School, and beyond, are very important for me.

Literature helps us to listen, to understand the inner life of words, things and people. So a writer is also a reader and a listener, and a spectator as well. Literature and philosophy no longer dictate; now, they look on and wonder.

Though writing is craft, we should, at times, limit the exercise of that craft. If not, words will tell us only what we want to hear, but nothing more. At the same time, surrealist automatic writing isn't enough either. We must search for something in language; we try to find a way through it.

Because there are so many books, too many books for any one person to read, my task is easier: if I open a book and understand instantly the first line I encounter, I close it and don't open it again. It saves me a lot of time, really. Or if I see a chaotic everyday experience recorded there, but I don't see any work with language, I close that book, too.

Such books don't offer me a new way to see. They don't give me a new world. Suppose a book only offers me knowledge about how the people of a certain country live. I can find such information in a newspaper. Many people, of course, like to read about themselves, but in that case a text only returns them to them, to their usual experience, and their world is not extended.

Literature shows us something difficult: not everybody is a person, and every person is not always a person. Personality is a problem, not a gift from God; not every experience is interesting; we do not really live every minute of every day. We spend much of our lives simply realizing common standards.

Literature allows us to personalize our lives, to find our individual way to thinking, feeling, speaking, writing. Of course this process is difficult, so it pressures us into constant thought. Words are a good thing: they allow us to see our thoughts and feelings, to place them in hand. Is this really what I think? Perhaps not! Cut it! Is this really a new experience? Perhaps not! Cut it! This way, writing tidies our minds.

Unfortunately, because individuality is difficult, not many people dare to attempt it. Writing, therefore, leaves a man alone. At the same time, however, some words and some titles of books act like passwords. If someone else possesses a password I possess, it means he or she has had an experience that is near my own, and it is possible to approach him or her, seeking understanding. (If a girl reads harlequin romances, for example, it is no use speaking with her; if she reads Rilke or Valéry, perhaps it is worth a try. One day at a literature party in Moscow, Emily Dickinson presented me with an excellent girlfriend, so I thank her for it.)

Literature, I think, should be as complex as is possible. We should try for this complexity, though our imperfect feeling for language, our low standards of thought, and our lack of ability, in the end, will leave our literature not as complex as is necessary. But we should try.

Of course, complexity cuts literature from the market. Because of market forces, literature is impossible. However, philosophy isn't for the market, either, and writers and readers can be independent and make their living outside the world of literature. There are many voices, among them the voice of American poet-turned-critic Laura Riding Jackson, which argue that professionalization is a danger for both philosophy and literature.

At the same time, literature should not be taken so seriously. It is one pathway to a more interesting life, nothing more. If a writer thinks too highly of his own work, he slips from the dialog and out of our literary world.

I understand all these questions beg the further questions, "What is writing?" and "What purpose does writing serve?" We could not answer these questions in fifteen minutes, for we cannot answer them at all, but we can discuss them. And I will be glad to do so with any who find such questions interesting.