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Beauty is the Only Genre I Believe In

Eugenia Rico

Panel: Genre Lit: Bodice Rippers, Aliens and High Form

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Eugenia RICO

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I don’t believe in literary genres. I believe in greatness. Beauty and the search for a language that reflects the world is the only genre I believe in.

I cannot admit that there is such a thing as a good novel without poetry or a good short story that is not like a micro-novel; for me, the lyric needs the epic and the epic needs the lyric. Literary genres are a way of castrating the art, of making it become as small as any other way of categorizing people or things in life, when, really, the scope of art is to free reality from these categories. That’s why I am against the notion of genres.

At the beginning of my literary career when I wrote The White Death, I had two objectives:

1) To develop my own kind of novel, a novel that would continue the evolution of the novel
2) To finish with classifications and the distinctions among literary genres. Not only between fiction and poetry or theatre and screenplay but the distinction that separates noir from science fiction and the philosophical novel from the historical novel.

I think any great novel, any novel that is truly a work of art includes many literary genres; in some cases it is even true that the novel is great only because of the mixture of the genres: Joyce’s Ulysses is a catalogue of prose that uses all the literary genres, and this is his genuine value.

I also think that the evolution of the novel, like the evolution of the human being, is not yet finished. My position is against the present literary climate in which commerce has substituted itself for the value of genuine literature. Nowadays, so many new novels are merely copies of great novels of the past. The commercial market insists on producing bad copies of the great works of the nineteenth century. The “feuilleton” is one of the kinds of novels most often copied—and with sad results. Carlos Ruiz Zafon, for example, is not Alexandre Dumas, but at least he is one of the good disciples of Eugenio O’Sue.

Yet the history of novels, like the history of literature and the evolution of the human being, has not yet ended. The concept of the novel is like Einstein’s concept of energy; it is not created or destroyed but is only transformed. After Joyce, the novel is never created nor destroyed but is in permanent transformation. That is why I say that although we owe everything to the nineteenth century, the century of the novel, we are now in the twenty-first century, and we need to discover new horizons for the novel. Instead of bad copies of great works, my task is to look for new ways to write the novel. New paths, new directions.

About the novel, I am truly Hegelian.
Thesis: The great novel of the nineteenth century, the century of the novel. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Balzac—they lead the way for the novel like Stendhal’s idea of “a mirror that reflects the path.” Theirs is the realistic novel, the classical concept of the novel for us. Proust opens this concept into its antithesis; he is the last of the realistic novelists and the first of the avant-garde. The search for new aesthetic enjoyment in the fiction will characterize the twentieth century.

Antithesis: The avant-garde movements, from Joyce to Roland Barthes. Their formal search will open possibilities never seen before in fiction, but it will perhaps not produce so many great works of art.

Synthesis: The readers get tired of avant-garde fiction, which too often disappoints their expectations of literature as a joy. This leads into this massive return of very poor forms of entertainment fiction, from the historical novel to crime fiction or vampire series.

It is good to remember that when a novel is a work of art, it always surpasses the genre to which it is supposed to belong. Marguerite Yourcenar’s Memoirs of Hadrian is not a historical novel but a great novel. That is the reason I maintain that such thing as genre does not and should not exist.

Unfortunately, many young and not so young writers of the twenty-first century still think that the worshipping of the market should be their only aesthetic position. Others have completely given up the pursuit of beauty, the formal search, which is the reason that literature is an art.

I believe in the antithesis; the new novel of the twenty-first century must accompany its readers, meaning that it must tell a story without forgetting the search for language, the innovations that keep the art of the novel alive. This is why they say about me that I have created the “interactive novel.” In this particular kind of novel, the author—me—leaves empty spaces in which the reader can identify his or her own reality. The reader is co-author of the novel. This is why he can understand and sympathize with the mind of a murderer, a foreigner, or an animal. This is one of the miracles of any kind of fiction, but I intensify the phenomenon.

I try, too, to combine formal innovations with a story that is larger than life. The notion of story itself is to tell things that you are used to in a way you’ve never heard. This is the best part about storytelling, and you cannot confine yourself to a genre if you want to achieve its real miracle.

I believe the novel of the twenty-first century is one in which the things you don’t write are more important than the things you put on paper. The real novel is hidden behind your words; it is happening in the mind of the reader. My novels are like icebergs; the part you don’t see is greater than the part that you see, and the unseen supports the visible.

As Albert Camus says, a novel is never anything but a philosophy put into images. We can forget a good novel, but if it is any good we will never forget some of the images it brings to us as reflections of the world; they are the best present a human being can give to himself, the gift of art. Because art is the only genuine condition of human beings.
Which leads me to my personal definition of humans; the human being is the only animal able to write novels.

So let’s free the art of the novel from the burden of genres. Let art speak for itself.

Perhaps freedom, then, is the only real genre I believe in.