**The Monster and the Novelists: writers react to the election of Donald J. Trump**

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It is no great secret that Donald J. Trump has dominated the media for some time now, and no thoughtful reader (a category that, unfortunately, does not appear to include our president) should be surprised that the towering mass of his cantaloupe-colored shadow covers even The New York Times Book Review. What may be more surprising, though, is that many of the most barbed and brilliant verbal barrages that writers have unloaded upon President Trump have been composed not by policy analysts or political science professors but by prose fiction writers. And what is even more striking is that they have delivered their literary laments in writings that ostensibly have nothing to do with twenty-first century United States presidential politics.

                  In a kind of literary analogue to the return of the repressed, the election of Mr. Trump has so suffused the consciousness of fiction writers that this stark new reality cannot but seep into their post-presidential election prose. In her review of Magda Szabo’s novel *Iza’s Ballad,* which appeared in the November 13 issue of The New York Times Book Review(every review and quotation cited in this essay appeared in The New York Times Book Review unless specified otherwise),Lauren Groff spoke of “apocalyptic nightmares sparked by yam-colored men.” In her December 4 review of Therese Oneill’s *Unmentionable: The Victorian Lady’s Guide to Sex, Marriage, and Manners,* Leah Price dolefully asserted that the 2016 election cycle “seemed to hinge on how often a candidate compared beauty queens to barnyard animals.” And in the same issue, in her review of Sarah Gristwood’s *Game of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe,*Sarah Dunant somberly meditated upon how “[f]or a moment it seemed that a powerful American grandmother would join [current European female leaders] on the world stage. How quickly a few yesterdays harden into history.”

All of this foreshadowed the December 25 issue’s manic flurry of literary firecrackers set off by fiction writers, each raising their pens in protest of the president-elect. Zoë Heller, discussing Emma Cline’s *The Girls,*noted how Cline’s novel “about the charismatic power of an evil cult leader turned out to be a not altogether inappropriate fable for 2016.” In the same issue, Ann Patchett appeared to be alluding to the 2016 election season when she quipped that “[i]f ever there was a year to turn off the television, throw the phone out the window and pick up a book, this was it”, and Junot Díaz gloomily referred to “the darkness of these last months.” The verbal torrent shows no signs of abating; in the Jan. 8 issue, Parkaj Mishra—responding to the question of whether it’s possible for a writer to be objective—lamented how a “Twitter troll” is now “the most powerful man on earth.”

It is difficult to draw any conclusion other than that the election of 2016 has already affected fiction writers to a far greater extent than has the immediate aftermath of any presidential election in modern United States history. Something unprecedentedly awful has happened in presidential politics, many writers are saying, and the appalling electoral scenario that so many were dreading cannot but come through in their writing, even when the books they’re reviewing and the topics they’re discussing have nothing more to do with twenty-first century politics than an infantryman’s helmet has to do with applied astrophysics. It is the dawning of the age of Dada (and the Donald), and anything goes in this surreal era, even apparently absurdist associations like Victorian sexuality and the forty-fifth president of the United States.

But what exactly accounts for the torrential downpour of tear-tinged words written by fiction writers about Mr. Trump? The kind of rueful, indignant rhetoric writers are resorting to manifests something much more serious than a mere liberal bias; writers were not nearly this disconsolate after the election of George W. Bush. The collective corpus of bitterness and hopelessness currently emanating from the literary world—the feeling that something so momentously grave has occurred in the real world that even those who make their living in the fictional world are not immune to its consequences—makes the writer in Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost* who expresses her anger over the results of the 2004 election seem petty. (Roth, it merits mentioning, registered his dismal reaction in a Jan. 23 email to The New Yorker, limning our 45th president as a "humanly impoverished" man who is "ignorant of government, of history, of science, of philosophy, of art, incapable of expressing or recognizing subtlety or nuance, destitute of all decency, and wielding a vocabulary of seventy-seven words that is better called Jerkish than English.”) It seems to be that writers feel that for the first time in their lifetimes what they most value—a public sphere where the differences amongst us (and the diversity of perspectives that make for compelling characters and enriching fiction) are embraced, rather than denounced—is, or will come, under serious threat. Others, mistrustful of a president who has openly attacked what may currently be America’s most beloved work of literature-based art—the Broadway musical “Hamilton”—may be wary of potential cuts in federal and state arts and humanities endowments which significantly assist many fledgling writers in their attempts to learn how to make their prose soar; without such grants, some of the nation’s next great novels may never even get off the ground.

The Romanian novelist Claudiu Florian, according to Tim Parks’ report from a London bookshop event in the Dec. 18 issue, speculated that Brexit could very well have a positive effect on literature—after all, so many great works of literature, from *The Iliad*to *The Trial*to countless others in between, were either inspired by, or produced under, terrible turmoil. The inescapable question, then, that we are now inevitably led to ask is: “How will literature be affected by the election of Donald J. Trump?” If the aforementioned responses of prose fiction writers who have already addressed this question without even having been prompted to do so are any indication, regardless of whatever else happens in the world, we can only hope that the abyssal darkness that so many writers fear to be overtaking the country will inspire a literature of light that outshines even the gaudiest of the gold-gilded Trump residences with its scintillating artistry and its inextinguishable humanity.