

REAL NICE

I'VE BEEN LED TO BELIEVE there's a new phrase being sounded in the corporate boardrooms of the country, one designed to send tremors through executives and consumers alike: "*Have you done a reality check on that?*" I'm not sure whether it's the phrase itself or its implication that bothers me most — the blithe assumption that "reality" is controlled by statistical survey, or the suspicion that (in our age of memotalk and agency image) it actually is. "*Really,*" says the generation now in high school, meaning "*d'accord,*" meaning "*you're right, but isn't it obvious.*" But there's another phrase that this generation possesses — "*Get real*" — that just might be the best answer to *reality checks*. It means "*Get out of your cloister and look around you: the world is alive*" (though faced with this gloss on the phrase, that generation might well collectively respond: "*Get real*"). Resist evasiveness, in language and in life: that seems to be the message. It doesn't mean you don't market image, or don't live with masks on; but you can see the comedy of taking marketing strategy too seriously. And therefore use it, and see past it. Mr. Cleaver, meet Ms. Lauper.

These comments stem, I think, from a vague sense that we consider reality a stressful place only. The "real world," our language tells us, is the world of the street: the world of violence, illness, prejudice, money, food, foodbanks, and hate. And though no-one's ever been adequately able to tell us what "realism" is, it has something to do with not being "romantic." The happy ending gives way to the dour one, because "that's what life's like." Love is "escapism." Happiness is "luck." People in academia are deemed to be "cloistered"; and people cloistered in boardrooms are believed to have their pulse on the nation, running daily reality checks, selling ad agency romances about love and politics to a marketplace eager for escape from its grimy toil. To which one longs to say *Get real*: there's life in the real world yet. Yet there's enough truth to the scenario to give it plausibility if not accuracy. We need Voltaire again, to remind us to look past an image for its implications, to remind us to judge substance rather than accept sincerity as its reasonable facsimile, to remind us that *honest seeming* is more *seeming* than *honest*. If we buy the metaphor that *life is a game*, with *winners-and-losers*, then we've bought an image of the "heroics" of victory and the

“reality” of defeat. What we know, however, is that life doesn’t divide that way. Not absolutely. The realities of poverty and violence are not “play.” But “play” is real, and therefore within our reach. The point is to separate glib metaphor from actual fact. Sometimes doing so is the way to open up possibilities we thought were closed to us, because it’s a way of restoring to ourselves some control over language and over the kind of life that we can make that language name.

Some years ago, in her 1966 book *Don’t Never Forget*, Brigid Brophy declaimed eloquently against those forces in society that would deny such control — deny it by substituting for our individual (if largely shared) sense of public propriety or literary quality some arbitrary obeisance to verbal taboo. If all we do as readers is respond with horror to certain mechanical arrangements of letters, then we do not read wisely or well. We react mechanically, confusing visual signs for moral realities. (“People are never more horrified,” writes Jack Hodgins in *The Invention of the World*, “as when they see others doing what they’d like to do themselves.”) This does not mean that for the sake of individual liberty we must be *pleased* at what everyone says, does, or would like to say or do. We may have the verbal freedom to shout “FIRE” in a public place but we have the moral — and in this case legal — responsibility not to do so: every freedom comes with such responsibilities in tow. Every freedom asks us to be judicious about its use. *And every impulse to legislate behaviour must be weighed in terms of the liberties it would constrict.* In consequence, much literary work takes as its combined freedom and responsibility the need to use “real” language — in various configurations — in order to draw public attention to precisely this fact: that in contemporary life such links have often broken. Many intensely moral books, that is, use “taboo” language deliberately, in order to emphasize that the morality of modern life doesn’t exist in isolated systems and sounds of print, but in the actions of people — and that neither verbal propriety nor the simple *legality* of action guarantees the moral worth of personal or institutional behaviour. Such books are implicitly reformative in impulse, with an eye on human ideals, not intrinsically degrading because of the clarity of their observations. Those people who claim to be moral only because their public language does not transgress current social convention apparently cannot see that surfaces can lie. They’re no different, then, from those others who accept the appearance of sincerity as a substantive value more important than the issue a person is being sincere about. They use “manners” not to be kind, or to make others feel at ease, but because “knowing the code” gives them power; hence in reality they are pawns of the very conventions they pretend to rule. How “moral” is their language then?

Using a “taboo” language, of course, is sometimes deliberately offensive, sometimes accidentally so, sometimes merely rebellious. Sometimes it is itself a mask to hide uncertainty, and often it’s an impulsive response to codes that are per-

ceived to be empty. Sometimes, however, it's there deliberately to prick the conscience, and to reclaim a sense of what really matters. It's not a direct model — *Treasure Island*, as Brophy observes, is not an incitement to piracy — but an oblique one. But there's its problem. For if it is to be effective, a reader must actually be able to recognize what's going on, to distinguish between the verbal signs themselves and the social significance that readers give them.

Why is it that so many readers cannot make this distinction? Blaming the signs for what they signify is a way only of perpetuating our collective satisfaction with empty gestures. Why is it that so many book-watchers have no wit, no sensitivity to irony, no capacity for following intellectual enquiry *for its own sake* in order to see where it leads? Why do they have so little tolerance for anything but their own literal truths and absolutes? Why do they so readily become book-burners? Blaming this state of affairs all on television is as silly as blaming it all on instant coffee. But it has something to do with a lack of language — or a lack of interest in language, even a fear of language — or a deliberate effort to train people away from the joys of language — which perhaps erroneously suggests that we are becoming a nation that does not read and cannot hear. Paradoxically, such people declare their insecurity by asserting their authority over other people's language and lives. We are at most risk if we believe them. Here is Brophy again:

Although our libel laws are a step towards it [a phrase to be read ironically, not literally], we have not yet legislated against either clowns or wits. Occasionally we are given the chance, as we were with Wilde, to trap a wit and break his heart on other grounds, much as the Americans get their gangsters for tax evasion if they can't get them for gangsterism. Usually, we punish our wits by laughing at them and not taking them seriously. We never take their advice. Wilde's epigrams have not yet persuaded us to abolish social injustice. . . .

Nor perhaps, can language ever directly do so. Yet paradoxically, language misapplied — used irresponsibly — can hurt, malign, perpetuate injustice, create false paradigms of expectation, approximate the truth and gloss over flaws, reduce issues to false isms, and erect tissue-thin images of earnestness *with which we live*. Here is Alice Munro, asking "What is Real?"

People can accept any amount of ugliness if it is contained in a familiar formula . . . but when they come closer to their own place, their own lives, they are much offended by a lack of editing.

I have no argument with this mini-analysis of modern prejudice and modern passivity — a prejudice against difference, a passivity towards convention, even when the convention reiterates (and to some eyes therefore indirectly ratifies) behavioural "ugliness" — *except this*: that if ugliness comes to be accepted as the *norm* by which we live, then we have surrendered our claim to the power of invention but also to the kinds of reality that are ours to enjoy.

What then can we do to *get real*? Timothy Findley — in a recent interview with Bruce Meyer and Brian O’Riordan, who asked him: “What can we do to save ‘a dying civilization’?” — answered sharply:

Pay attention. Pay attention to real reality and real reality has as much to do with Lynn Seymour and Stravinsky as it does with streetcars and bumping people off at the corner. They’re both reality. We must return to the fact that we have been given the most extraordinary equipment alive, and we’re not doing anything marvellous with it, are we? The marvellous is what you want.

The question is, do we want it enough?

Do we want it enough to pay for it: there’s reality in the pocketbook. Do we want it enough to champion funding for the arts — and to insist publicly on an “arm’s length” policy that will keep governments from directing what art shall be about? Do we want to keep art available — and therefore free from the kinds of private interest pressure that would close libraries, black out words, malign writers, and distort the truth? These are not academic questions about theoretical freedom; they’re real questions about public attitude and public policy, which affect us all.

In a speech reported in the *New Zealand Listener* (2 February 1985), the current New Zealand Minister for the Arts outlined his government’s declared policy, with these intentions:

- (1) to invest more money in the arts, and encourage communities to promote them;
- (2) to develop tax incentives to encourage business “to build arts-support programmes as part of their community responsibilities”;
- (3) to stabilize funding for film and recording industries and improve the sales position of the crafts industries;
- (4) to strengthen regional arts development;
- (5) to strengthen and support the arts programmes in the education system, affecting both curriculum and performance; and
- (6) to reinforce the public broadcasting system’s ability to develop local programming and reflect the nation’s cultural life.

The eye is clearly on economics as well as on artistic enterprise. (The *Listener*’s editor says the government doesn’t go far enough.) But they are public statements which suggest that art is not fearsome, which is a refreshing sign. Governments that are afraid of the arts are afraid of the truth. The main point is that such policies, by encouraging art to happen in all parts and all sections of the society, encourage people to recognize what art can do. It can help them to see past surface images (which is why the insecure and the manipulative try to check it): it can uncover the ugly. It can also disclose wonders, and make them real.

W.N.