PORT HURON CONFERENCE STATEMENT

There's a general assumption on the part of American critics and academics that anyone who writes fiction or poetry that is politically conscious must be kind of dense—that by its nature that work is cruder than work that simply embodies currently held notions; that leftist or feminist work is more naive, simpler, less profound than right-wing work. What is considered deep is writing that deals with man's fate (always man's) in psychospiritual terms, with our heart of darkness, somehow always darker when somebody is thinking that maybe things could be changed. Deep work deals with angst-filled alienation. Literature is perceived, as Hans Haacke said about art, "as a mythical entity above mundane interests and ideological conflict."

I've never been able to understand the assumption that being ignorant of science is good for poets, or that being ignorant of economics and social organization is good for novelists. I've always imagined that the more curious you are about the world around you, the more you'll have to bring to your characters and to the worlds that you spin around them. I've speculated that one reason too many American novelists haven't developed but, rather, have atrophied, producing their best work out of the concerns

of late adolescence and early adulthood, is that since they do not care to grapple with or even to identify powerful forces in our society, they can't understand more than a few stories.

Writing that is politically conscious involves freeing the imagination, which is one reason why magic realism was so energizing to Latin American fiction. If we view the world as static, if we think ahistorically, we lack perspective on the lives we are creating. The more variables we can link and switch in the mind, the more we can examine the unconscious premises of our fiction and our poetry. We must be able to feel ourselves active in time and history. We choose from the infinitely complex past certain stories, certain epochs, certain struggles and battles, certain heroines and heroes that lead to us. We draw strength from them as we create our genealogy, both literarily and personally. Deciding who we are is intimately associated with who we believe our ancestors, our progenitors, our precursors are. That's one of the reasons I've written historical novels about the French revolution when modern feminism began, and about the tumultuous periods right after the American Civil War and throughout World War II. And because I want to explore possible futures and extrapolate from trends and activities pushing on us or originating from progressive movements, I write science fiction. And because I want to explore the lives of people in the here and now, I write contemporary novels.

In the arts, particularly, we need our own sense of lineage and our own tradition to work in or to rebel against. Often we must work in a contrapuntal way to a given genre or tradition, taking it apart, slicing it against the grain, making explicit its assumptions. Think of Margaret Atwood's use of the Gothic novel tradition.

A sense of false belonging destroys our ability to think and to feel. A seamless identification with a culture that excludes us

as fully human or that impoverishes our options limits us. This is especially true in America, where official history is Disney World. Most of us are the grandchildren or children of immigrants, whether they came willingly or not, with parents who refused to speak whatever language was theirs as a birthright or were forbidden to use it, and who considered all the history and wisdom and stories of their families as so much peasant trash to be dumped and forgotten. Some of us had our lineage and even our names stolen from us. Often we have lost not only the names of the villages where our ancestors lived but any knowledge of what they did for a living, what they believed, why they left and came here or were forcibly brought. We have lost the history of labor and religious struggles they may have bled for. This ignorance makes us shallower than we may want to be. That's why when someone like Thai Jones writes about the anarchists in New York City in the decade before World War I, it's important. We can learn as much from the mistakes others made as we can from their successes.

Reviewers don't perceive books as having a political dimension when the ideas expressed in those works are congruent with the reviewers' own attitudes or with those they're used to hearing discussed over supper or at parties. When reviewers read fiction or poetry whose attitudes offend them or clash with their own ideas, they perceive those works as political and polemical, and they attack them. This can also happen on the Left, when a particular work doesn't satisfy the ideology of the reviewer. It's always far easier to fight someone with whom you share 85 percent of your politics than someone who shares 50 percent or less. Organizing inside a movement is easier too than actually organizing the uncommitted; but is, of course, far less useful.

Furthermore, the importance of imagination arises from the need to strive for something better than more of the same: please,

not bigger Big Macs, more powerful SUVs, wider and wider flat screen TVs, huger McMansions. Speculative fiction enables the reader to enter worlds in which important variables have changed or in which current trends are extrapolated and we can see the full danger and damage. Much science fiction wastes this opportunity by creating princes and princesses and worlds in which our prejudices are written large. But at its best, science fiction can shake our assumptions or spell them out for us so that we can more easily, more fully examine them.

In a stratified society all literature is engaged politically and morally, whether it's so perceived by the author or not. It will be so perceived by the readers it validates and by the readers it affronts. This doesn't mean that I think a novel or a poem can be judged purely by utilitarian criteria. Literature is only partly rational. It acts on all the levels of our brain and influences us through sounds and silences, through identification and imagery, through rhythms and chemistry. Telling stories is an ancient human activity because it's partly how we make sense of the world, how we find patterns in our lives and the lives of those who came before us and we hope will come after us. It's how we construct a meaningful world. Stories make patterns where otherwise there would be chaos.

But as writers and readers, the literature we read makes us more or less sensitive to each other. Poems and novels tell us how we may expect to experience love and hatred, violence and peace, birth and death. They deeply influence what we expect to find as our love object, and what we expect to enjoy on the job or in bed, and what we think is okay for others to enjoy. They help us decide what war is like—a boring hell destroying other people's countries and lives as well as our own soldiers' lives; or a necessary masculine maturation experience in a peer group. They cause

us to expect that rape is a shattering experience of violence, like being struck by a hit-and-run truck, or a titillating escapade that all women secretly desire. They influence our daydreams and our fantasies and therefore what we believe other people offer us or are withholding from us.

Art doesn't progress the way physics progresses. In art we don't build better bombs. We don't know more about poetry than Sappho did, or tell a better story than Homer did. If a poem or story works, it's new. It's new always. It's made again. Like love. Like anger. We have to be true to our own experiences and those we can empathize with, whether they are experiences the society expects from us or whether they may end up labeled bizarre or deviant. One generation's outcasts may become another generation's heroes and heroines.

For me, writing fiction issues from the impulse to tell the stories of people who deserve to have their lives examined and their stories told to people who deserve to read good stories. I'm responsible to many people with buried lives, people who have been rendered as invisible in history as they are powerless in the society. For me the impulse to write poems comes from the desire to give permanent voice to something in the experience of a life. To speak memorably in a way that moves and enlightens and fixes the ephemeral in something at least quasi-permanent. To find ourselves spoken for in poetry gives dignity to our pain, our anger, our lust, our losses. We can hear what we hope for, and what we most fear, in the small release of cadenced utterances. We have few rituals that function as well for us in the ordinary chaos of our lives as art can. The pattern, imposed perhaps but nonetheless satisfying, emerges from the utterance, from the story.

I think of poetry as utterance that heals the psyche because of the way it uses verbal signs and images, sound and rhythm,

memory and dream images, blending all the different kinds of knowing, the analytical and the synthetic, the rational and the prerational and the gestalt grasping of the new or ancient configurations. For the moment of experiencing a poem, we may be healed to our diverse selves, connecting thinking, feeling, seeing, remembering, dreaming.

Fiction is as old a habit of our species as poetry. It goes back to telling a tale, the first perceptions of pattern, and fiction is still about pattern in human life. At core, it answers the question, what then? And then and then and then. I have tried to figure out, coming into postmodern poetry and fiction, exactly why people have carried out these activities, what they are supposed to do, why I engage in them and why others should pay attention to what I produce. Fiction is about time. First this, then that. Or this, then before it was that. Therefore this. From the perception of the seasons, of winter, spring, summer, fall, of the seasons of our lives, of the things that return and the things that do not return, of the drama of the search and finding of the fruit, the seed, the root that sustains life, the looking and the hunting and the kill, the arc of the sex act, the climax of giving birth: these are the sources of the fictional intelligence. If you make such a choice (being kind to an old woman on the road, marrying Bluebeard against all advice, apprenticing yourself to a witch), what follows?

It isn't a matter of a concrete agenda. In his analysis of the Occupy movement, Steven Duncombe talks about what the image of countless signs and myriad demands says about what a good, pluralistic, truly democratic society would look like. Freeing the imagination is one of the functions of literature, and one reason why academia and the givers of prizes reward poetry that speaks to and moves no one but people writing theses or

adding to their publishing resumes. Literature can be dangerous to the status quo, no matter in how minor a way. It is part of the conspiracy to remove meaning from art. When I was younger, we were always getting quoted at us the phrase by Archibald MacLeish: A poem should not mean, but be. Like a vase, I guess. Something to admire and walk on by. It can't impact you in any way. I'm not referencing the way teachers approach poetry as if a poem were some weird way of delivering a message, or a puzzle or that must be ferreted out and decoded, but because what poems mean emotionally, culturally and directly is part of what they are doing—only a part, but an important part.

Shelley called poets the unacknowledged legislators of the world, but that was nonsense. In the arts, we do not generally have much influence on public policy. Polemics can fire up the already persuaded, posters can make people aware of your opinion, much like bumper stickers. But what we do is change consciousness a tiny bit at a time. Through fiction, we enable people to walk in someone else's shoes, boots, moccasins for a few hours, which may persuade us that the Others as we define them are human too. Poetry readings can give us a sense, no matter how momentary, of community, as liturgy does. To claim that art has a use is not the same as claiming that art can be evaluated only in terms of that use. The meeting of the rational and the irrational, the healing that art can perform in the individual and the collective psyche, are not wholly explicable. Art, even in words, is not capable of being discussed entirely with words. Poetry can at once be called useful, and mysterious. What heals one person may not heal another.

As writers we are always asking in public through our work whether our experiences and those of other people with whom we empathize and from whom we create, are experiences common to

at least part of the population; or whether the experiences we are working with are crazy, singular, bizarre. There are inner censors that make shallow or imitative or tentative or coy the work of a writer, often through fear.

Voices speak in our heads that tell us that we are brazen to admit certain things, that we should be ashamed. We may fear to offend those with power over us or hurt those whom we wish to love us or those whom we wish to please. We may fear what those whose politics or religion we share and whose good opinion we rely on may say about work which deals with a contradiction in our mutual politics or religious values, and the contradictions between ideology or belief and action. Yet such contradictions are rich to writers. Writing that is politically conscious involves freeing the imagination, for if we view the world as static, if we think ahistorically, we lack perspective.

Societies differ in how they regard the artist, how integrated into the ordinary work of the community she is regarded or encouraged to regard herself as being. We may be artists, but we are also citizens with the same responsibility as every other citizen.

Poems are often produced in a person or a group's process of coming to consciousness of their identity and their oppression. Think of the outpouring of African-American poetry when Black Power and Black Pride were emerging. Think of the poetry that burst from the second wave of women's liberation. Good poetry can come out of prison.

But being political is only part of our personhood, along with our physical bodies and health or frailty, our group identifications, our family history and identity, our ethnicity, our race, our religion or spirituality, the friends and lovers we choose, the animals we live with and care for, our sense of our environment, the teams we care about, the food we choose or cannot choose

to eat, the music we listen to. Art relates to many of the rich and conscious or unconscious aspects of our lives and the Left should respect it more than it commonly does. Literature, if we bother to read and support it, has power and it can help us survive and win.