

JERUSALEM ADDRESS

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It is with some reluctance that a writer should step on to a public platform to deliver a speech, even on an occasion such as this, when one is prone to feel overwhelmed by gratitude. I am grateful to the jury that has awarded me the Jerusalem Prize, and also to my editors and to my Hebrew translator. A paradoxical measure of the success of a translation is invisibility, since it must sound and flow as an original: but it doesn't mean that we let it go unnoticed, even less unacknowledged. It is only thanks to the work of my translator that I have had the privilege to reach out to so many good readers in this country, each and every one of whom deserve as well their fair amount of gratitude.

But a writer's business is, well, writing, and he or she goes about it not in public but in solitude, and mostly in silence, trying to find a voice that will resonate in others, usually total strangers who most probably will never see him face-to-face nor actually listen to his words. Literature involves book publishing, and conferences, and lectures halls, and literary festivals, and book fairs, and even occasions like this one. But something we should never forget is that, at the end of the day, and stripped down to its bare bones, literature consists of someone who writes and someone else who reads, the two of them dwelling in parallel solitudes, and at the same time connected to many others in an invisible network that may well spread out beyond boundaries of space and time. A great Spanish poet of the XVII,

Francisco de Quevedo, wrote in a sonnet that thanks to the then still recent technology of the printing press, “*vivo en conversación con los difuntos/ y escucho con mis ojos a los muertos*”: “I am able to live in conversation with the deceased/ and listen with my eyes to the dead”. It always amazes me how matter- of -factly we take for granted this ability to connect with the voices of the long dead and the total strangers that lies at the heart of the experience of literature. To listen to a voice and make it our own; to suspend temporarily not only our disbelief but to a certain degree our personal identity by stepping into someone else’s shoes, into the otherwise impassable secret chamber of someone else’s consciousness.

In this kind of private conversation, there is no place for the usual fare of public speeches, lofty statements, loud proclamations amplified by powerful P.A. systems and addressed in bulk to a multitude of listeners, a so called “audience” that can be even counted up and measured. Good writing is accomplished in solitude and silence, and even though a distinct voice comes out of it, it is never a deafening or hectoring one. It speaks exactly in the same tone as the voice of a very close friend, or of a stranger who says something worth paying attention to. In its origins, before widespread literacy and print, when poems and stories were passed around orally, a single listener or a small group of them would sit down to pay attention to the voice of the storyteller, the one who knew the work by heart or who could read. Attention was not drawn by the volume of the speaking voice but by the interest it managed to awake and sustain throughout the telling of the story or the reciting or singing of the poem.

Literature, like flamenco singing and jazz music, gets lost in the kind of large venues meant for pop stars and crowd-loving politicians. That is why I have always thought, or at least suspected, that there are two kinds of writers, those who seem always to address a packed auditorium and those who speak in a low voice; those who roar at a microphone to make sure that their voices reach the furthest rows of a large theater and those who talk to every reader as if he or she were the only other presence in a room no larger than the studio where the writing and the reading usually take place.

Good writing speaks low and doesn't force its voice. It rather invites the reader to step a little closer and pay more careful attention. A father or a mother reads to a child in the dim light of the bedroom and the voice exerts a hypnotic grip on the child's imagination that little by little melts away into sleep. In the classroom, a teacher or a student reads aloud the book while the others follow in silence. The book is the same, but it changes slightly in every reading voice, and resonates differently in every attentive mind. A couple of friends or two lovers read in a room, each one lost in their own private world. One of them raises the head from the book or the paper or magazine and says to the other, "listen to this"; and at that moment the solitary act of reading turns into a gift because it is being shared. Not through huge marketing campaigns but by word of mouth good writing slowly finds its readers, one at a time, and keeps attracting them, sometimes across borders and generation and languages, sometimes against seemingly impossible odds.

I think of Vasili Grossman, writing *Life and Fate* in the darkness of the worst Stalinist years, alone in a room that at any moment might have been ravaged by the

henchmen of the secret police; writing and not knowing whether his manuscript, once finished, would have any chance to be published. I think of my beloved Emily Dickinson, hidden from visitors in the upper floor of the family house in Amherst, Massachussets, copying her poems and stitching them by hand into the little leaflets she sent a few acquaintances, mostly family and close friends. I think of Miguel de Cervantes, an old man and a failure by all accounts;a playwright who never had a comedy produced, a former soldier and who never achieved recognition for his wounds, his distinguished service or his years in captivity, a man of dubious converso background in a country obsessed with catholic orthodoxy and purity of blood: but it was this old failed man who went on to write the miracle of *Don Quijote*, a novel so inventive, so full of laughter, irony and compassion, that four centuries later it remains even more alive and youthful than when it was originally published. I think of professor Viktor Klemperer, writing a new entry every day in his journal throughout the nazi years, at once frightened to deeth and quietly courageous, well aware that, being a Jew married to an ‘Arian’ woman he might be arrested and sent to the camps, and then his journal would turn into an additional charge against him.

Last September, in Amsterdam, my wife and I went to Ann Frank’s house. We had already been in the city for quite a while, but I was somewhat reluctant to visit the house, not only for the permanent inconvenience of the long lines at the entrance, but also because I found something deeply disturbing in the fact that the place has become a tourist attraction, along with the canals, the coffee shops, the red light district, the tulip market. It was deeply disturbing, and deeply sad, to see a broad smiling tourist having his picture taken in front of the sign at the door. But in spite of

all that, when I went up to the tiny rooms where she and her family had lived in hiding, and especially when I saw the actual pages of her diary, written in that careful and no longer childish hand, I understood how much I would have missed if I had not visited that house. For that was an instance of writing as a means of sheer survival, as the ultimate fulfilling of the human visceral instinct to bear witness and keep the record no matter what and of the sheer hope to find a listener, to escape through words the prison of a brutal and merciless reality. As Joan Didion has said, we tell ourselves stories in order to stay alive.

And I always think of Michel de Montaigne, who at a certain point in his life made the decision to give up all his public engagements to devote himself to the pleasant job of reading and writing candidly about himself, warts and all, about anything that entered his mind, not relying on the authority of the Church or the self-appointed scholars but strictly on his own whims and reactions, on the free flow of his thoughts and his appetites. I like to imagine Montaigne as solitary, in his tower, surrounded by the circular shelves of his library, and as contented, as Emily Dickinson in her spare New England room. But it would be easy to forget that beyond the confines of Montaigne's tower there was a countryside ravaged by civil war, by the savage brutality of competing armed gangs of mercenaries and religious fanatics. Most of the ideas we now cherished about tolerance, disrespect for dogma and openness to novelty and change come down in a straight line from Montaigne, but we should not forget that he was writing them in a time of bloodshed, when people were being burned at the stake on charges of witchcraft or murdered in the name of Catholic or Protestant theological fantasies.

The writer, at least the type I love best, is the odd man out, the mad woman in the attic, the loner, the ugly duckling; also the black sheep, the prodigal son, even the scapegoat. The one who says, with a subdued yet unmovable stubbornness, like Melville's Bartleby, or like the very real Rosa Parks, "I would prefer not to". At once solitary and dangerously visible, seldom a natural joiner or a cheerleader, a writer sometimes stands for those who don't fit well, who stick out, who march out of step, who don't go to church or attend a different or inconvenient church, who stay in bed on a national holiday, who refuse to behave according to the proper rules of their faith, their gender, their origin, their fatherland, their race. Last September, in Amsterdam, I had a chance to see from up close another handwritten document, the decree of expulsion of Baruch Spinoza from the Synagogue, and therefore from the Jewish community. It was written in Portuguese, and it made a chilling read. Those who had been expelled were in their turn punishing one of their own for the sin of heresy, for his advocacy of free thought. Later on, in The Hague, all by himself, a stranger now among Christians as among the Jews, Baruch Spinoza joins the ghostly fraternity of those solitaires who write and read in a room, the same room of one's own that centuries later Virginia Woolf would rightfully claim as the necessary prerequisite for a woman to become a writer.

We read some of Emily Dickinson's dry ironies about religion and may not bear in mind the atmosphere of frenzied evangelical Christianity that was pervasive not only in her small town but within her own family. But she quietly opted out, so fragile in her physical presence and yet so courageous when standing up for herself. I love these two lines at the beginning of one of her poems: "*Some keep the Sabbath*

going to church-/ I keep it staying at home". She never published a book and never had more than a dozen readers in her life, and yet she sounds so self-possessed as if she had no doubt about her own worth, about a future when little by little her poems would find the readership they deserved.

But we should not yield to the bland comforts of posthumous celebrity to reassure ourselves that in the long run there is some kind of inevitable literary justice. Ominous visitors may knock on the door of the room where the writing and the reading is taking place. The Soviet system collapsed almost overnight, and Vasili Grossman has been accorded the place he deserves among the very best writers of the last century, but he died a sick and embittered man, convinced that his great novel, the manuscript and even the ribbon of his typewriter snatched by the KGB, had been lost without a trace. Ann Frank died at Auschwitz and the afterlife of her diary did not alleviate or shorten a second of her torment.

Millions of people, a little number of writers among them, are murdered everyday, and suffer from injustice, poverty, political oppression, military occupation, religious fanaticism. Writing is at once a craft and a gift, but it takes more than inspiration and hard work to finish a book, and that cherished room of one's own where the two parallel solitudes of writer and reader overlap, where strangers meet and voices from the dead are distinctly heard, the very existence of this room implies a privilege that is sadly out of reach, even unthinkable, for most of those who might enjoy its sanctuary, its many pleasures of knowledge, introspection, self-assurance, pure joy. Both Montaigne and Dickinson were children of privilege, and the number of their readers was severely limited by the simple fact that the vast majority of their

contemporaries would never had a chance to set foot in a school. Literature is people who write and people who read, but it is also parents and teachers who pass on to children the skills to learn and write and the love for the spoken and the written word, public schools for those who cannot afford a private education, public libraries open to all. Literature cannot develop the full potentials of its promise without a public atmosphere of free speech and respect for differences of religion and opinion, without a measure of social justice and peace.

I am standing today on a public platform, not sitting in the secluded room where I belong, where writing and reading take place, and therefore I must be careful not to indulge in the prestigious platitudes about literature that these occasions seem sometimes to require. A writer is not a prophet, nor a channel for the hidden voices of the community, nor a priest, not even a spokesperson. Sometimes, almost always not out his own free will, a writer may become a symbol, even a symptom: a canary in the mineshaft unwillingly warning others of some upcoming or already ongoing poisonous social or political disease.

In a modern liberal democracy, a writer is a citizen like any other, but then there aren't that many liberal democracies, and we are never free of the dangers of intolerance or barbarism, and much less of becoming intolerant or barbaric ourselves if we develop the conviction that absolute reason lies on our side or that some people don't deserve the same rights we are entitled to, among them sometimes even the simple right to live. I have been a citizen of a democracy for most of my adult life, but in my childhood and my teenage years I was the subject of a dictatorship, and therefore I was granted a first hand experience of the ugly face of voluntary mass

submission to a leader, of police brutality and forced religious orthodoxy. Because I was forced at school an intolerant variety of Catholicism, I developed an extremely early revulsion against the power of self-appointed religious zealots over the lives of others. Their teachings were not lost on me: they precociously turned me into a lifelong secularist. Because four hundred years after the expulsion of the Jews and the Muslims the spirit of the Inquisition and the idiotic pride in the purity of our Spanish blood was still very much in place, I grew suspicious of any claim to uncontaminated collective identities: national, religious, ideological, cultural, whatever. Every time I notice as an approaching rumble the danger of mob rule or the frightening temptation of collective rage or mass enthusiasm, my reaction is to step aside and run for shelter and I am reminded that quite often the most decent option available is to find oneself, as Cyril Connolly said, in a minority of one.

I wouldn't love literature as much as I do if I didn't see in it the embodiment of some of the very specific values I have learned to cherish as a citizen. Literature teaches me that no life is completely like any other, and that each one deserves respect and is worth telling; in literature, Flannery O'Connor said, the universal is shown through the particular, which can work as a healthy antidote for the too tempting -and blinding- glare of abstractions. Tons of money are spent in the rather easy job of persuading people that they are different to their neighbors and better than them. From literature I have learned what is further confirmed by biology: that all of us, though each unique, are at the same time so very much alike that we can see ourselves like in a mirror in the pages of a story told by a stranger who might have been long dead and who wrote it in a language as remote from our own as Spanish is

from Hebrew. No wonder we resemble so much: it seems, according to geneticists, that we all descend from a few thousand Homo sapiens who survived a population bottleneck around sixty thousand years ago. Ideologies and religions set up fixed identities and divide people along straight unpassable lines: Christian, Muslim, Jew, Spaniard, black, white, saved, doomed, orthodox, heretic, ours, theirs, friend, foe. Both fanatic true believers and political opportunists love to feed -and to feed on - what David Grossman has called “the prejudices, mythological anxieties and crude generalizations with which we trap ourselves and snare our enemies”. What good writing encourages is exactly the opposite. Reading literature I have learned to grow suspicious of all certainties and to appreciate nuances and ambiguities, minor yet telling differences, hidden affinities, the very similar that lies under the surface of the strange, the mysterious behind the familiar, . The best writers are natural born smugglers, stealthily trespassing the always well policed borders of the established and the respectable, undermining righteousness with irony and collective conformity with scorn.

But mostly, what a writer does is, well, write. Word by word and a sentence at a time. In solitude and silence, in the manner of a craftsman, sitting down for hours at a desk and hoping that the work on hand will be completed, that it will get published and find some readers who carry it along for a while and let it temporarily blend with their memories and their imagination. Something perfectly ordinary. You see it happen everyday on the bus, in a subway train, on the beach. Someone completely lost for a few minutes in a book, in a magazine article, sometimes absently smiling, in a short leave of absence from the outside world. That’s all what literature is about. I

am glad this is the job I do for a living. And it's been for the best of reasons that I have left my desk and my room for a few days and even dared to stand up here on a public platform : to say thank you for this prize you have honored me with, thank you to the readers who may have found something about themselves in my books, even though they have been written by a total stranger in a faraway country and in a language not their own.