

*Ismail Kadare - Speech in Jerusalem*

When a writer or an artist is awarded a prestigious prize, he almost invariably begins his speech, if he makes one, with a few words about his first reaction upon learning of the award.

I do not think there is any special reason for this. It is simply easier as a way of starting the speech. In this way the prizewinner begins by talking about the surprise and ends with frequently superfluous modesty. I have a feeling that one writer can feel surprised that he wins a prize and another is surprised that he does not win one.

Anyway, while not trying to lay claim to originality, I admit frankly that when I was informed of the the Jerusalem Prize award, the first thing that I felt after satisfaction was surprise. Surprise as regards the idea of freedom, which was a condition and even the main reason for awarding of the prize. Did the members of the jury really know that the winning writer, or more exactly his work, had a problem with freedom?

I must admit that the question sounds extremely naïve. They were dealing with a writer, or in other words a monk of literature, for whom it is natural to have a positive, harmonious relationship with freedom. The problem was quite simply of a tangible, basic nature: I was receiving a price motivated by freedom in literature, while half my work had not been written in a situation of freedom, but in a state of non-freedom.

After the fall of Communism, for us, writers who had lived under Communism and were now entering another period, the dramatic questions frequently sounded naïve, and vice versa, the naïve questions became dramatic.

For instance, there was the question of knowing what the literature of the totalitarian period would be called henceforth. Would people continue to call it Socialist Realist literature, as we had become accustomed to doing, or would another name be found? And most importantly, how would it be appraised? As something that had fallen with the dictatorship? As something that is redundant, a sort of sub-literature, that will be remembered as a curiosity?

Similarly, like questions would be asked about us, writers who had written literature in difficult times. I do not think that there is a single writer who, under the totalitarian regime, did not at least once try to imagine how he would write if he were living in a free regime. The scenarios were legion. There were those who were convinced that if they were free, they would write masterpieces, while the majority, without going as far as masterpieces, believed that whatever they would write would in any case be better.

We did not believe that Communism would fall in our lifetime.

The miracle happened. Communism fell. And then we found ourselves in another slice of time. A specific race of writers, strange, not very reassuring, probably redundant.

The first idea that comes to mind in such situations is to withdraw from the scene.

When a dictatorship falls, there are many who pretend to be surprised and rush to explain why and how this terrifying dictatorship could have been established and who is to blame.

Albanian writers had to face a storm of reproaches: rather than writing, you would have done better to remain silent or go to prison! Or even worse: death would have been preferable!

It is useless to try and explain that novels and poems can neither establish nor overturn a dictatorship. That it is not a sin to write literature. That it is not a sin, in whatever country. And in whatever period, however perverse.

The Western world, which to varying degrees kept an eye on events in Albania, especially after its grotesque secession from the Socialist camp, clearly indicated that Albanian literature and arts, although very sparse, were practically the only more or less normal and positive Albanian product. However, the support of what was known as the "free world" was far from what it should have been in Albania. The idea that the Albanian literature of the Communist era should be buried and forgotten by history predominated. But along with that was a prevailing hope that now, thanks to freedom, a literature without precedent would rise up spontaneously. Strangely, the expectation of this miracle did not spare even the writers themselves.

However, the miracle did not seem to be forthcoming.

Until the day when a great discovery was made. The miracle was occurring before our eyes, but we could not see it.

The fact that the awaited miracle did not occur was already miraculous.

That literature continued to obey its own rules. That it was indifferent to the times.

That servitude did not have the power to destroy it. And even that freedom, the most sublime thing in this world, had the power to improve everything except literature.

In short, that literature was *independent*. It could be judged only by its own rules. According to these rules, the responsibility for the fate of literature lies only with the actual writers. They could not justify having written poor literature because times were difficult. They have no alibi.

At this stage, whether one wishes or not, the discourse is at a higher level.

In recalling that the origin of this disconnect between the laws of human society and those governing art goes back to the beginning of antiquity, more precisely to the ancient Greek theater, I am not saying anything new.

A rather simplified, evocative presentation divides ancient man's year into three periods: firstly, the time of vital activity, of construction. Secondly, the time of war. Thirdly, the theatrical season. To summarize: after having constructed and destroyed as much as they could, the people then felt the need to go to the theater, to see what was being acted there.

The question of knowing what the public wished to see at the theater is related to the essence of art and its *raison d'être*. To discover the answer, we must first remember that ancient towns were very small and the theaters very big. Consequently, all of the spectators constituted a large part of the population. They were citizens and soldiers and magistrates and voters, they were public opinion. They knew the faces of life as well as they knew those of war. However, on the stage, they wished to see something different: the invisible part of the world, what was happening not in the hubbub of the public space, but in the depths of the human soul.

It is not by chance that tragedy very quickly acquired a privileged status, becoming the queen of the ancient arts. It was the first to discover what seemed unfathomable: the examination and torments of the conscience.

This is precisely when civilization came into existence.

Soul-searching is today as dramatic and topical as it was in Greek theater 2500 years ago. Since the crimes of Nazism and Communism, it even takes the form of publication of secret files, a subject that has become daunting for countries that have still to do so – including, unfortunately, my country, Albania.

It is not without reason that when we visit Yad Vashem, here in Jerusalem, we try to comprehend the extent of a horror that human language, recognizing its limits, rightly calls "unspeakable."

Literature, as has been noted, began as an apology for an enormous crime of the period: genocide. Thus, in its first lines, it shouted out to stop this horror.

Unfortunately, this is to no avail. The calls for extermination of peoples continue, and who more than you realize the terror of this? Yet we must not lose hope. Even though we live in a hard world, we cannot deny that in the midst of this fog there have also been cases of great accord. Such is the pact of peoples that, while being quick to anger where territories, oil or a lost island are concerned, never argue over spiritual values, literature and the arts. Unlike everything else, each people create its values for itself and at the same time for others. No state, however powerful, sets its army in motion or launches its fleet because it is being

dispossessed of its Shakespeare or its Mozart. This began with Virgil, in Rome, and continues to this day in Russia, which is fighting Ukraine for borders, without being concerned, however, that its Tolstoy has long been taken from it, and is still being taken from it.

These disconcerting usages show that, while mankind is capable of misunderstandings, accord is also within its reach.

Allow me to take as an example the Balkan Peninsula, to which I belong. This region of Europe has always been characterized by disputes and tensions. The Albanians, like all the other peoples, have also been at the center of rivalries and misunderstandings about everything.

However, a new sort of rivalry has been present for some time now in the Balkans, concerning the Jews. More precisely, concerning protection of the Jews during World War II.

The Albanians have long insisted that it is a proven fact that at the end of the war, when the number of Jews throughout Europe had been drastically reduced as a result of the genocide, in Albania the Jewish population had actually increased considerably. The reason is simple: in Albania, from the first to the last day of the war, Jews were protected.

Other peoples of the Balkans also claim that they protected the Jews. The idea of profiting from my presence in this room to become part of this so-called rivalry is totally alien to me. I wish merely to affirm, in full moral responsibility, that the consistent Albanian claim is perfectly founded. Yet this in no way means that I don't have any reservations about the claims of others.

Furthermore, knowing the difficult nature of the Balkan peoples, the young generations that get on the merry-go-round of life in the Peninsula quite naturally dream of bringing a new spirit of change and of reconciliation..

In this sense, whenever a comparison is made of the acts of our peoples, their faults and their merits, this inevitably creates tension where jealousy and rivalry have the upper hand.

It would be wonderful if the defense of the Jews, to which I referred just now, could serve as a trigger for a new positive vision bringing peoples closer.

The world needs such visions. Peoples always needs protection. When they protect others, they protect themselves.

It is with this wish that I should like to conclude this speech on freedom, here, in Jerusalem.

Ismail Kadare