

Literature as a Way of Seeing

In 2005 I wrote to a friend of mine, a South African, and told him I had just visited his country. I had been to Cape Town and I commented in particular on how breathtakingly beautiful the view of the ocean was from the Table Mountains. At the time my friend was in exile from his country, he had left because he couldn't bear the apartheid system. In his reply he said that growing up he used to swim in that very ocean in the mornings before going to school, but when he grew up he saw that a majority of people in the country couldn't swim freely like him because they were black, and he could swim only because he was white, so he left.

Art, and indeed life itself, is a way of seeing. There is looking at a thing, and then there is seeing a thing, the two are totally different. We look with our eyes, but it takes more than eyes to really see. This is a subject I find myself coming back to over and over again in my writing and in my thinking, and I find that, as a metaphor, it can be extended to most everyday situations. Oppression and poverty have always been with us, but how many among us can claim to have really seen the poor and the powerless, not just look at them, but truly see them? One of the ways we avoid seeing is by pretending that what we are looking at is not really what it is. We look at the poor and we pretend that they are actually not so unfortunate; that they may be lucky not to have our burdens: no mortgages to think about, no car payments to worry about. In fact, we begin to convince ourselves their tears are actually tears of joy, not sadness, and we might even begin to feel sorry for ourselves. And yet, not one of us will change places with them.

History is replete with examples of such moments of willful blindness. During slavery, the slave buyers pretended that they were not doing it for economic motives, they were actually doing these benighted Africans a favour by taking them away from their savage homeland to Europe and America and the Caribbean, and converting them to Christianity. The same thing happened with colonialism. The colonizer, blinded by greed and self-righteous power, convinced himself that to colonize - which really means to subjugate and dispossess - was a burden he reluctantly had to bear for humanity's sake. Seeing is an acquired skill, something that we have to learn, it doesn't just come to us naturally.

My friend's story reminds me of another story. It is a short story – a parable really, by the American writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, titled, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. In this beautiful story we are presented with a happy and flourishing city, a magical utopia drenched in sunshine and the sound of music. We are told that its citizens are filled with "A boundless and generous

contentment, a magnanimous triumph felt not against some outer enemy but in communion with the finest and fairest in the souls of all men everywhere and the splendor of the world's summer." But then suddenly, this sun-filled, summery story takes a darker turn, we are led away from the happy streets to a dungeon where a boy of about ten years old is imprisoned, tortured, casually starved. The fact of this child's situation, we are told, is no secret to the people of Omelas, "They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas... they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery." This scapegoat mythology has appeared in many guises in different cultures. It is in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*; Le Guin herself attributes her inspiration to William James' *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life*. In my country, Wole Soyinka has dealt with it in his play, *The Strong Breed*. But Le Guin has captured it most vividly with the directness and force that only the short story can muster.

Imagine yourself a citizen of Omelas, living under this terrible knowledge, what would you do? Most of the burghers are heart-broken, but they come to accept it, they even begin to rationalize it, to justify it. After all, due to prolonged ill treatment, the child is already feeble minded and incapable of living any meaningful existence even if it were to be taken out of the dungeon. But not all of them think that way. Some of them decide they can't live in Omelas anymore. Like my South African friend, they leave. We are told, "They keep walking, and walk straight out of the city of Omelas, through the beautiful gates. ... Each alone... they walk ahead into the darkness, and they do not come back. The place they go towards is a place even less imaginable to most of us than the city of happiness... It is possible that it does not exist. But they seem to know where they are going, the ones who walk away from Omelas."

I particularly like the inclusion of that phrase, "Each alone." You may descend into that dungeon as part of a group, as part of society, but whatever decision you make, to stay or to leave, you are going to make as an individual.

Commendable as it is to just walk away from that city of shame, I like to think that sometimes to just walk away is not enough. Once you have entered that dungeon, and raised your lamp, and seen the injustice residing in there, nothing can ever be the same again.

No matter how far away you run, that image, that knowledge will be with you. And this is the difference between the true writer and the non-writer: The true writer cannot forget. The true writer in us will be haunted by that image until he or she writes about it. It will keep him awake at night, it will visit his waking hours. The writer is fascinated by evil, not mesmerized or attracted by it, but he is fascinated by it, by the fact of its existence, and by its sheer banality. It is a slippery slope, and we all stand on its edge. The writer is like that dragon slayer of legend who tirelessly seeks after dragons, from town to town, village to village, tormented by his passion; he knows that once he stops to rest, or to reflect on how perilous his vocation is, he will be overtaken by the very evil he seeks to exterminate.

How can literature act to increase our vision, to enlarge our sympathies? And this is where I want to make a link between literature and truth: truth as a concept has always existed side by side with fiction, way back to the earliest days of fiction. Before the advent of the novel, the English novel in particular, the dominant form of narrative was life writing, that is, biography and autobiography, or “histories” as they were then called. The earliest writers of the novel, in order to be taken seriously, pretended that their tales did actually happen (although in this deceit I like to imagine more the hand of printers and marketers than that of the authors themselves). Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* was supposed to be an account of a real shipwreck and survival, written by Robinson Crusoe himself. Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* was actually titled *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. *Moll Flanders*, again by Defoe, has the full title, *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, etc. Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu’d Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich, liv’d Honest, and died a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums*.

I find it interesting that people actually believed those novels to be true stories. But then, people in any age will believe the most unexpected things, just look at Big Brother. Such is the power of the narrative to transport, to convince, to evoke sympathy. That is why we still find it convincing when a character called Michel Houellebecq, writer, appears as one of the central characters in the new novel, *The Map and the Territory*, by Michel Houellebecq, or J.M. Coetzee, writer, in the novel *Summertime*, by J.M. Coetzee, or Martin Amis in *Money* by Martin Amis. I can go on and on, but the point I am making is that this self-referencing goes beyond post-modernist playfulness or mere self-aggrandizement by the authors; it is a continuation of one of the fundamental functions of the novel: the attempt to

grapple with the truth, to seek to convince – to shorten the distance, as it were, between truth and fiction.

Because of this connection between the novel and truth, the late Chilean writer, Roberto Bolaño, likens writing to detective work. He says in a poem: “I dreamed I was an old sick detective, and I had been looking for lost people for a long time. Sometimes I happened to look in the mirror and I recognized Roberto Bolaño.” As writers, all we are doing is trying to see past the red herrings and the false leads to the heart of the mystery we call the human condition. We are asking not just “whodunit?”, but also “why”.

The writer enlarges our sympathies by making us see ourselves better, but first he must see himself better in his own work. For regardless of how extraverted and socially oriented we may be in our writing, we write first and foremost for ourselves; we write to answer the most niggling questions bothering us, and so, in a way we are raising that lamp not just to see the poor boy in that dungeon, we are raising it to a mirror, to see ourselves.

Writing as a quest, as detective work, has always been an important aspect of my writing, perhaps because I started my career as a journalist. My very first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*, has as its main character a journalist; in my third novel, *Oil on Water*, I again find myself returning to the theme of journalism and the quest for truth. Here a British woman visiting the Nigerian Delta has been kidnapped and two journalists are sent into the jungle to find her, and through their eyes we are shown a world devastated by violence and oil pollution. The writer, like the detective, like the dragon slayer, is the ultimate loner and outsider. “Each alone”. He can only exemplify the truth he sees by bucking against trend, against tradition and accepted ways of thinking. That is why in some countries where freedom of speech is seen as a threat, writers are imprisoned, or sent into exile, or even killed. In fact, exile – both real and metaphoric - has been described by Edward Said and many others as the natural state of most thinkers and intellectuals, to whose ranks the writer surely belongs. In order not to compromise himself he must reject all notions of belonging, he must make his home only in his writing, he must adopt an attitude of transcendental homelessness because, to quote Theodor Adorno, “It is part of morality not to be at home in one’s home”.

For me, no writer has exemplified and lived that truth better than the eccentric Zimbabwean writer, Dambudzo Marechera, who famously said, “If you are a writer for a specific nation or race, then fuck you.” Of course he was sent into exile – first by the white minority government of Ian Smith, and nine years later

when he came back from external exile in England he still remained a pariah, an internal exile in his now independent country, and in 1987 he died, still an exile. Most nationalisms have no place for the individual voice, everything is subsumed under the story of the nation, and that is why the writer, unless he writes in praise of the nation, will always be viewed with suspicion, even hostility. And that is why the writer, the artist, will always be at war with society.

Where the novelist cannot be tamed, his novel is often re-interpreted and co-opted to serve the national cause. Perhaps the most obvious example of this would be Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* – I have watched over the years how this important book has gradually come to assume an almost oracular sanctity. The author, in countless interviews and essays, has mentioned that he wrote the book for two main reasons: first, to point out to us Africans where the rain began to beat us – that is where we went wrong and therefore made it possible for alien culture to overcome us - and second, as a comment against colonialism. Today, our critics and intellectuals have conveniently forgotten the first reason.

That is how dictatorships are formed, in the name of the nation, of the collective, in the unquestioning belief that tradition is always right, that the new is alien and contaminating. When Marechera was asked what inspired him as an African writer, of course they wanted him to say, "African history", or "African culture", but instead he referred to the suffering of the people, the helpless who are daily denied justice by the very leaders who had promised them so much. Who is more important: the nation or the individual, the one single child or the community? This question isn't as counter-intuitive as it might appear. This is a debate that has been going on since the beginning of human history. But as a writer I must cast my lot with the individual, for how can I help or change the nation if I cannot even see my fellow man? As a writer I work with character, one at a time, and I always begin with the simple question: what does my character want? If I can answer that, the rest is easy.

In my second novel, *Measuring Time*, my protagonist

decides to write a history – or what he prefers to call a "biography" - of his hometown, and the method he adopts is to write about the ordinary individuals, not the chiefs, or the generals, or the pastors, or the imams, but about the labourer and the housewife, and the schoolchild. He believes that if he can talk to these individuals and paint in words their hopes and desires, then in aggregate, he will be capturing the dreams and hopes of his entire hometown. I wrote this book in 2007, long before the popular revolution we call the Arab spring, but I now see that my character's intention is in so many ways similar to that of the Arab spring revolutionaries. They are both dreamers, dreaming of a new dawn when the individual's story will be as important as that of the president's, when both will be seen to be truly equal before the law and before history.

In front of our eyes the Robert Mugabes and Yoweri Musevenis and Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Ghaddafi who all came to power in the name of the people, some under the glorious banner of anticolonial struggle, have turned into enemies of the people. But as long as the nation continues to fail the individual, to deny him even the most basic of civil rights and freedoms, so long will the writer continue to walk away from the nation, to focus his attention on the individual, that single child in the dungeon. Gradually we are witnessing a new kind of literature emerging in African, a literature I like to call "post-nationalist". In our globalized world, the writer now prefers to write about the individual who, tired of not being seen or heard or respected, simply packs his bag and crosses into the next country where he can live more freely. We are discovering what writers like Marechera knew long ago, that before you can be a writer for a group or a nation, you first have to be a writer for the individual.

In conclusion, I want to point out how apt it is that the Arab spring, if the myth is correct, began on facebook, one of the most truly democratic spaces, where everyone has the power to accept or reject a friendship request. Where everyone, as long they have access to the internet, can put up their picture and be seen the way they want to be seen, the way they see themselves.

About the author

Helon Habila was born in Nigeria. He worked as a lecturer and journalist in Nigeria before he moved to England to become the African Writing Fellow at the University of East Anglia. In 2002 he published his first novel, *Waiting for an Angel*. His writing has won many prizes including the Caine Prize, 2001, and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2003. In 2005/2006 he became the Chinua Achebe Fellow at Bard College, New York. In 2006 he co-edited the British Council's anthology, *New Writing 14*. His second novel, *Measuring Time*, was published in 2007, it won the Virginia Library Foundation Fiction Award, 2008. His third novel, *Oil on Water*, was published in the US in 2011. His anthology, *The Granta Book of the African Short Story*, came out in September, 2011. Habila teaches Creative Writing at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, where he lives with his wife and three children.

About the Winternachten lecture

Since 2007 Writers Unlimited Winternachten Festival The Hague opens with a lecture. With it the festival provides a platform for a prominent foreign author speaking out on current developments in literature and society. Writers Unlimited particularly aims at giving room to writers from outside the western world. Indian writer Pankaj Mishra opened the series with *The Globalization of Literature*. In 2008 Turkish writer Elif Shafak sketched an image of *The Writer as Commuter*. In 2009 Nurudin Farah (Somalia) spoke about *A Sense of Belonging - A Contemporary Story of Migration*. In 2010 *(Universal) Declaration of Interconnectedness or (Universal) Suggestions for Tolerance* was the title of the Winternachten lecture by Antjie Krog (South Africa). The role of the writer in a globalising world was the topic of the lecture by Tim Parks: *The Nobel Individual*. With his lecture *Literature as a Way of Seeing* Helon Habila, the 2012 keynote speaker, links up with a discourse started in 2007 by Pankaj Mishra, which had a surprising sequel in the 2011 lecture by Tim Parks.