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Essays

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THE TASK AND RESPONSIBILITY OF THE AUTHOR

To say something in short and comprised about the task and the significance of literature as a whole work of art is very difficult, as one runs the risk of emitting here again apparent half truths, stereotype dogma-slogans, of exchanging the postured claim of literature and art with the actual reality. Thus I'd like to restrict myself to one thought and its formulation.

Considering that the world and mankind again and again, as recently in the Gulf war, stands before apparently inonceivable monstrosities and the connected with it madness of power as a means of discussion and that they accept war as "continuation of politics by other means", considering also the imminent total ecological disaster and the unscrupulous exploitation of the third world and the with it united accompaniment of starvation and the degrading lifes of millions of people one finds, at least I find it hard to go on believing in that fulfillable basic concept of art, that even the art and the literature are able to contribute to the humanizing of man, the society, the world.

We know only one thing: that we must believe furthermore in this object in view and must stand up for it, if we don't want to give up an essential "principle hope" (Ernst Bloch) and sink into total resignation. Yet maybe in view of this consciousness of the fundamental disappointment and the status of its impotence in the historical process of mankind literature has to think over its task, its ideas of meaning and effect and define them new.

Of course literature contributes, the literary creating contributes to the authors sensibility by his dealing with esthetic categories of order and worth. This sensitiveness yet must not restrict itself ghetto-like to these fields of art and esthetics, but more than that has to seize also other spheres of life, society

and reality, has to overlap them. It must achieve a different, a bigger dimension: a political one, one that is generally essential in the sense of human rights. The writer has to intercede for the interests of man in the sense of inviolability of basic human rights for life, for truth, justice, freedom and dignity. His work must not untie from these ethnic basic demands, he must stand up for the protection of these basic rights, as artist and as a member of the human community. Anywhere, where these rights are restricted, denied, trampled upon, he has to raise the voice of his conscience, he has to intercede for that, also under taking reprisals and persecution into the bargain.

It is not the dogmas of ideology, the interests of the state and its executives, that may prescribe and lay down man his sphere of freedom and life, but the sphere of freedom and life in the sense of self realization and self attainment of life results from the acceptance of these basic rights.

Lie, domination and authority are based on the disregard of these basic rights. The unrestricted might and application of power by powers and organizations determining the society – such as churches, parties, ideologies and the state – base on the fact that here the interests of these power-blocks and the in it developed structures are placed above the basic rights of man. But with the restriction of the individual freedom, of the freedom of speech and writing and creating of the individual begins also always a process of enslavement for the whole people. The author has to be a seismograph for such developments of the imminent or already setting in process of deprivation of liberty. And then he has to rise to speak and offer resistance with his poetic work or simply also as a citizen. In this sense responsibility falls to his share. The observation of this responsibility is also in the interest of the writer, as it is not his function to be an instrument of propaganda for any ideology or party, to sink to that or let himself be descended to that. The writer shall not be a partisan but shall always take that distanced attitude of critical opposition. Only so he can really intercede for the superior principles of basic human rights and rights for freedom. The writer must not become a partisan, a fellow traveller. Those writers, who pretend to fight with a group for their objectives, their opinion was and often is nothing else but the veiling of their personal attitude of opportunism, of utilitarianism.

Actually the writer should remain an outsider, which does not mean he may and does not have to be in solidarity. His place yet is not at the side of the mighty, the supreme power, but at the side of the oppressed and the persecuted people.

Peter Paul Wiplinger, Vienna, 22.2.1991 (Translated by Susanne Nowak)

LITERATURE FOR PEACE

Literature, the written word, writers and poets are as incapable of starting or conducting a war – other than a war of words – as they are of bringing a war to an end. What they can do, and indeed have done over and over again throughout history, is to serve the interests of those who, by preaching intolerance, nationalism and hatred, pave the way for war and the use of force and allow the dams of culture and reason to burst as hate-driven violence gains the upper hand. The result is the outbreak of war, the transformation of individuals into perpetrators and victims, and the destruction of entire countries along with civilized norms. Writers have played an unsavory role under the Nazi terror, Stalinism and all other ideologically based undemocratic regimes, and avowedly popular movements such as Mao's Cultural Revolution in China which, despite its name, was bent on smashing cultural values and, naturally, countless lives as well. Further evidence is provided by what happened on the territory of former Yugoslavia, namely the war and the genocide, euphemistically called ethnic cleansing, that was perpetrated here in Bosnia and later in Kosovo.

Perhaps it is not literature, not poetry, nor words themselves that are involved in the machinations of power, in the cranking out and dissemination of nationalist propaganda and therefore responsible for it, but rather individual writers and journalists who embrace an ideology, submit to its dictates and become the willing tools of state propaganda. Both ideology and the power structure depend on propaganda for their effectiveness and even survival. There will always be stooges and opportunists among us. Just as there will always be those who speak out in the name of reason, tolerance and human rights, and who often have to pay a high price for their criticism. It's the same under every regime: Freedom of expression is curtailed, or at best the critical voices are ignored. Those in power will always seek to suppress criticism, to silence the critics. The means used range from intervention to repression, and even murder. The writer or independent journalist is usually branded unpatriotic, a traitor, by the authorities and their demagogues, is unable to protect himself with words. He or she is at the mercy of the authorities, of the abuse of power, of violence – though not defenseless. The perpetrator knows it, and the potential victim knows it.

Challenging authority, defending oneself or something, invariably leads to confrontation, to a face-off between power and reason. As a rule the power of the authorities is solidly entrenched and well-organized. Their opponent is all too often a mere individual or a minority with no access to the instruments of power. It is easy to ban a private radio station, a newspaper or a political

grouping, to eliminate it practically and politically. All it takes is a decree and their right to free expression is revoked. The only means of resistance is to go underground. There the free word prevails. But it is up against the official media, the all-encompassing propaganda and the manipulation of public opinion. The lines are clearly drawn between those in power and the powerless.

One person wants war, the other peace; one is for victory, the other for compromise; one for "ethnic cleansing," i.e., expulsion of populations, the other for a mix of people and cultures; one is in thrall to a burning idea and ideology, the other champions reason, enlightenment and human rights; one is for organized power and the use of force, the other for reliance on critical reason and argument.

Because we are against the abuse of power, repression and the use of force, and for freedom of action and expression, for political and social codetermination, for citizens' rights and democracy, for a state and a state apparatus subject to control, we have to ask ourselves what our task is – how we can contribute to a democracy and its institutions, how we can introduce democratic principles into all areas of life and society and anchor them and make them work. Of course, every citizen should participate in the shaping of political life and society. But what, specifically, is the writer's role? That is the question we need to think about and find a solution to.

For many, the sole obligation of writers and poets is to language and literature. I daresay it is obvious that the writer is beholden to language, but I do think that the duty and responsibility of the writer go beyond language and literature. By now that too should be obvious. Writers should not be locked into their domain of language and literature. Above all they themselves should not do so. A writer may write in isolation, but he becomes a public person by virtue of publishing his work. From the writer one expects the right word, at the right time; justifiably so. For who else should reflect on the world and humanity, and perhaps even understand them to a certain extent, than someone who writes about the world and about being human?

Therefore, when peace and freedom, truth and justice are at stake, these key conditions humaines, the writer cannot and should not stand on the sidelines, refusing to enter the debate and avoiding responsibility. He or she can and must get involved. How the writer chooses to do it, for example through his work or by taking part in the public debate, is up to him. That he has an obligation and a responsibility seems to me undeniable. The struggle for freedom and peace is at the same time a struggle for the free and peaceful word.

In my experience, one thing is sure: Writers must organize themselves better, must create organizational units also in order to better defend themselves and freedom of expression whenever they come under threat. And also, in some cases, in order to have a voice at all. Individual struggles may be a noble thing but they are usually ineffective. It's important for us to support one another, also in the interests of peace and peaceful debate, including at the international level, which has become increasingly important.

Peace is always irrevocably linked to freedom and justice, without which it cannot exist. Peace at any price is beneath human dignity and in the long run unsustainable. It leads to conflict, to violence, to war. Peace is not granted as a gift nor is it guaranteed forever. Peace requires peaceful, peace-loving human beings. Peace also requires tolerance and fairness, and above all respect for the rights and interests of others, particularly minorities, whether these be ethnic, cultural, religious or social groups.

This is the field in which writers, in which literature and culture in general must be active by making a committed effort to the achievement of peaceful coexistence based on what unites us rather than what divides us.

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