



40º. ENCONTRO DE ESCRITORES PARA A PAZ

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Abolish conflicts? Don't we need them for the sake of a stable peace?

About such issues as trying to develop an ethical attitude to history as a source of peace, as trying not to forget tragic events, as doing everything in order to prevent deformation or even repression of painful facts, we cannot prevent feeling a deep contradiction. For some of us, who did not live our whole life under the banner of freedom, it seems that our highest aim should be, now that we enjoy the freedom of expressing our thoughts, which is also warranted by law, never to rest before the “whole truth” is discovered, that means, both shown through images and written down. It could seem most probable that we feel a strong need to disclose the hidden aspects of a past of dictatorship, censorship, war, and civil war. But why is it not always so? Putting it in other terms, why does for instance literature reach farther than history, sociology, statistics, psychology, and can accomplish a broader understanding of complex situations, in spite of the fact that it cannot work without the support of all those forms of knowledge above-mentioned?

We know that literature universalizes insights without losing the appearance of tracing a direct line to our individual soul. However, this individual soul is also part of a system, this being a complex mixture of feeling and understanding, trying to reach a balance of emotion and critical reason. Here I hesitate about which term I should mention first, and decided to put on the first place what displays itself more immediately, that is, the emotion, which in a certain way also provides a considerable part of the energy that is necessary to move the mechanisms of judgement.

With the help of these precise mechanisms, we can disclose another ambiguity. We cannot but show occasionally certain nostalgia for those times of dictatorship and raw violence. And why does this happen? Because those times also allowed developing radical qualities, which were themselves, most ambivalent: heroism mixed with criminal energy, courage mixed with ferocity, but also fear, hope and disappointment:



therefore the capacity to give the best and the worst of us. Here we already begin to see how literature may work more effectively than social sciences. While sociologists like Karl Mannheim were able to *mention* complexity as the “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous”, writers like Malcolm Lowry *described and dissected* the reasons why modern individuals feel torn when facing past and present.

We realize that the present commitment of cultivating historical memories, which we notice for instance at the universities through the creation of such specialized branches as “Memory Studies” or “Memory research”, is not only proportional to civic conscience but it also appears as a political conquest against the tyranny of pragmatism and functionalism, against the primacy of strict economic criteria which are often imposed by global rules. For the twentieth century, “memory” is often a synonym of “Holocaust”, and I do not see any reason not to agree with that if we see it in a broad perspective, which grasps all the victims of the totalitarian Nazi hallucination about eliminating all the persons who did not fit into the fable of a 1000 Year Reich supported by pure Aryan people.

Let us say that we carry with us our phylogenetic memories, whether we like it or not: we carry with us the former hunter and collector that have been a more considerable part of the humankind than the shepherd and the farmer or, closer to us, the courtesan and the citizen. Both our phylogenesis and our ontogenesis are crossed with memories of violence and the process of its taming. This process is everything but linear, but we generally may say that the biggest civilization conquest has been the evolution from direct physical violence to a more performative one, either under the form of satire, irony, drama, story-telling, debate, or any kind of discourse. Here we can clearly see two sorts of reasons: first, why literature plays a capital role in changing societies and interfacing times; secondly, why we can never take any peaceful situation for granted, either between two or just a few people or among a group or a nation. As Norbert Elias, the Jewish sociologist whose parents died at Auschwitz put it, as he had to answer to the accusations of seeing his civilization process – that is, the evolution from the warrior to the courtesan – in a linear way, which did not fit to reality: We can never say, “once civilized, forever civilized”. Even the philosopher may turn into a cannibal under particular circumstances, wrote the young Friedrich Schiller in the 18th century.



Our ethical commitment to History means, as I see it, a close relationship with our phylogenetic past as well with our ontogenetic biography, because we know, at latest since Freud, that we were born neither as wolves, nor as lambs. In other words, we need the close experience of conflicts precisely in order to develop the capacity of conflict. The danger of ignoring the possibility of becoming aggressive, and this sooner than we think, creates a problematic gap or a blind zone where fear, hope, love and hatred may establish the most fantastic projections which sudden appear as a “material idea” (Schiller) where ideology takes direct possession of any kind of object.

I do not want by any means to adopt Goethe’s words when he told Eckermann that he did not know any crime, which he would not be able to carry out. Let us hope never to come into a situation when we are forced to kill. Let us reject with Hannah Arendt the assertion that there is always an Eichmann inside us. H. Arendt did it vehemently during a debate in the sequence of the not very peaceful reception of her Eichmann report in the early sixties – we may do it more softly and sceptically on the present days. But we need the insight into History, and this implies reading it as Walter Benjamin did, as a History of injustice and repression, which claims to be rescued, as a text with images which we draw retrospectively because the past put these images into the text, like negatives, which claim to be developed.

Since Aristophanes, we know that wars may break the stagnation and even decadence of long peace periods. Nevertheless, if we look closer at that kind of “peace”, we notice that it already contains the germs of violence in it, and this not just because violence is inherent to life as a sort of primary energy, which needs to be “processed”, sublimated, civilized, cultivated, canalized. Furthermore, if we look at the real life, which occurs in those times of “peace”, we probably notice that it may be a “hot peace” (in a way a pendant to “cold war”, or the other side of the same coin). It is usually the time where material plenty is not favourable to the cultivation of citizenship virtues, of civil courage and discipline without giving up generosity and solidarity. Those qualities are generally supposed not to grow on that soil, on the contrary, we often see them be satirized, may be because they are felt as unbearable to the way of feeling and living of the mainstream. The step from that to the tyranny of the market, to conjuncture pressures by majorities, is a small one, as we know.

How can we draw our path lines in the most complex web of our globalized realities, among a plenty of sense offers, of historical narratives? Perhaps we should



simply go back to our human condition, which we never really have abandoned, and remember the sentence that René Char wrote during his years of the Résistance: “Notre heritage n’est précédé d’aucun testament” (“Our inheritance was left to us by no testament”) (*Feuillets d’Hypnos*, 1943-44). In the words of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado: “Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar” (Wanderer, there is no way, the way is made by walking). For that, we are not undefended, because we have our capacity of collecting information (including, or even first of all, our perceptions) and submit them to our faculty of judgement.

Hannah Arendt quoted that sentence by René Char (in her book *Between Past and Future*) in order to remember us how problematic it is to forget the link to the years of the Résistance or to idealize that period, which a whole generation of European intellectuals have done, having in this way contributed to the building of the European identity, as the inheritance of both critical and practical reason. We come back to the problem that I already have mentioned in my paper last year, namely the problem of the transition from a situation where everything is missing and danger lingers to another one where we cease to measure each step, where every deed and word loses weight among the noise of the doxa. I therefore will not insist over this problem, but just remind how crucial it is to interpose our critical judgement between our heroic nostalgias and our living, daily praxis. This praxis should be precisely a constant research for peace. This reaches from a present, where we have at every moment to take options, which are often painful, to an active way of dealing with the past. It is still Hannah Arendt who compares René Char’s lack of testament with Tocqueville’s assertion about the obscurity in which a man would wander when his past has ceased to throw its light upon the future.

How can we reach that peace with the world in which men seem to be engaged in many kinds of warfare? Here I do not agree with Hannah Arendt when she says that we seem to be determined by things that are no longer and by things that are not yet. The ethical claim of describing and narrating the past, of setting it as a problem by opposing true and distorted facts, by comparing different historical perspectives and, at the same times, by trying to analyze the reasons of all kinds of censorship, should always be more than a simple rescue of stories, of names, of voices, of situations. It has to be a challenge for taking ethical attitudes at the very present. For this challenge, there is no rule, no book, just the faculty of judging within an unavoidable



situation of contingency. But it was still René Char who wrote in those above-mentioned Résistance papers: “L’ homme est capable de faire ce qu’il est incapable d’imaginer” (*Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard 1983, p. 230). Even if we know that History is not suitable for being told, we may always try to tell a version, which we at the same breath admit that it is our version, our contribution and proposal to peace.

Teresa Salema (Portuguese P.E.N. Centre)