

THE LANCASTER INTERNATIONAL FICTION
LECTURE, 2023

What Fiction (Including in Translation) Can Do in Times Like Ours

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First published in Great Britain in 2023 by

Litfest

The Storey

Meeting House Lane

Lancaster LA1 1TH

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The Lancaster International Fiction Lecture is a joint venture between Litfest (Lancaster and District Festival Ltd) and the Departments of Languages & Cultures and English Literature & Creative Writing at Lancaster University.

Nothing. That would be the shortest, punchiest and most pessimistic answer to this question. But if we were actually (and not for the sake of a rhetorical flourish) to answer it like this, we should immediately nix this text, close down the festivals, toss the books out of the libraries, give up on creating literature, and sit meekly waiting for the end of the world. Because if we stop telling stories about the world, the end is indeed near.

Literature, storytelling, and fiction in particular can actually perform simple miracles. My first experience of this came when I was six or seven years old, so I'll start with a personal story. I had a nightmare, which not only was terrible, but it also recurred every night. One morning I got up the courage to tell it to my grandmother (at the time I was living with her in the village). But as soon as I started, she stopped me, pressing a finger to her lips. Scary dreams should not be retold, because it makes them come true. Actually, she put it much more beautifully: they fill with blood and come to life. So I was left alone with my nightmare, unable to tell it to anyone, yet also lacking the strength to hold it in. Then I came up with the, to my mind, brilliant idea – we can only be brilliant at six or seven – of writing down my dream. I secretly tore a page out of my grandpa's notebook and using the freshly learned letters of the alphabet, in a rather ugly scrawl, I wrote out my dream. And... I got my miracle. I never had that nightmare again. But I also never forgot it. That was

the price. (I still remember it today, forty-nine years later, I may decide to tell it at the end of the lecture.)

There are two things I want to pull from the thread of this memory today. Writing saves us from our fears. The second thing is that writing produces memory. We tell stories so as to remember. Sometimes the inverse is true – we remember so as to have a story to tell. Yes, writing produces memory, even if that memory is of frightening things. But the memory of frightening things is not always a frightening memory. On the contrary, once told, once cozily set in the rooms of memory, frightening things begin to lose their frightfulness. Through storytelling, we tame, little by little, the beasts of fear.

Why do we tell children stories at night before they fall asleep? For the same reason that myths exist. We tell stories to tame the world, which was primordially wild in its inception, and which is now growing feral or savage at its end. We tell stories to explain a chaotic and inexplicable world of thunderstorms, fire and floods outside of us, as well as a world of the same elements within us. As we tell stories, we create the illusion that this world is even narratable (that it can be shoehorned into words and shared) and orderable (that it can be organised) at all. Secretly, I suspect there is no order and only our stories create it. But that makes our narrative all the more important.

As the author of a novel called *The Physics of Sorrow*, allow me to digress for a moment into quantum physics. According to Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, formulated in the 1920s, the mere observation of a process and the role

of the observer can change the parameters of that process. In other words, something unfolds one way or another in quantum physics depending on whether it is being observed or not. By analogy, if no one observed and narrated this world, who knows what would have happened to it; wouldn't it have fallen apart long ago? So now we arrive at yet another obligation and responsibility for the already overwhelmed figure of the writer, as well as at one more reason for telling stories. We narrate so as to preserve the wholeness of the world. And to bring meaning to what happens to it and to us (in the face of the secret suspicion that there is no meaning). For the same reason, we read books and especially fiction.

Many people mistakenly believe that fiction is imaginary, untrue, non-factual literature, and thus they divide literature into fictional and documentary (i.e. close to the truth). I find this a profound misunderstanding. Fiction creates a myth and gives meaning to reality, it invents a legend of the visible, shapes it into narrative, and explains it to us. 'Myth is the nothing that is everything,' says Pessoa.

Fiction can generate real memories. I will never forget how, after reading *War and Peace*, I lay on the Austerlitz battlefield and watched the clouds above me as if for the first time. *How could I have never noticed them before?* I tell myself in my own voice, not that of the wounded Prince Bolkonsky. After *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I have a clear memory of an afternoon when my father took me to the Gypsies to see real ice for the first time. I also remember a blizzard and the candle flickering in the room à la Pasternak.

In addition to the past and memories, literature often devises the future of the world and creates utopian structures; in other words, it hints and offers suggestions to fate, society and the universe about possible next steps. Often these utopias turn into dystopias, while the dystopian novels we write sometimes turn out to be quite realistic. As Orwell himself protested after *1984*: he hadn't intended to write a manual, but rather a warning of what *not* to do. To a certain extent, I experienced something similar with my novel *Time Shelter*, but more on that another time.

And so, what other specific things can literature and fiction do besides create memory and tame fears?

They can do other simple things, like saving a life, for example.

Literature tells stories, and thus postpones the end. We know this best from Scheherazade. With every story she tells, she wins another day of life. Inside her stories, the most frequent bargaining chip for a life is again stories. Do the stories change Shahryar, that serial killer of women, do they awaken his empathy for this world? Who knows. But they infuse him with the drug of a new curiosity about the world with all its wonders, twists and turns, loves and deceptions. When the victim tells a story, she temporarily dwells in another, protected zone. The woman or man telling the story and their listeners (or readers) are now inside the labyrinth of the story itself, in another space. In other words, they reside in two places at once: the real and the fictional. And in two times simultaneously. This brings us back to elementary particles in quantum physics, which can also exist in two

places at once. Literature and quantum physics are much more similar than we might suspect. What's more, to our benefit (the benefit of writers and readers, that is), literature knew these things centuries before science discovered them. And so, as long as the story lasts, Scheherazade's life is assured. Guaranteed by the telling itself. And the story, like the labyrinth, is endless.

This is what I would like us to remember from the great story of Scheherazade: the power of the weak to tell stories. The special guarantee that literature provides. As a child, I subconsciously sensed this, because I always chose to read books narrated in the first person singular. I knew their main characters would never die at the end of the book. As long as I'm telling stories, I exist. As long as I'm telling stories, I keep myself and the world around me whole. I narrate, therefore I am.

What else can storytelling and literature do, especially in turbulent times like ours? No matter what we do, today we find ourselves in the context of war on the edge of Europe: the new one looming in the Middle East, and the war against Ukraine being fought already for 20 months. These are real wars, with tanks, drones, dead soldiers and civilians, fleeing families, destroyed cities and landscapes. All of these happen today, in a Europe that thought it had freed itself from the horrors of war for good. But Putin's invasion of Ukraine did not begin with the first shots fired and the advance of Russian tanks. It began long before that with propaganda and fake news. The battle of words and stories, the artillery of propaganda, continues in parallel with the battles at the front.

The aim is to weaken the position of the human, to break resistance in advance. Propaganda and conspiracy theories, racist outbursts and aggression, post-truth – all these are meant to dehumanise the human being, to deprive the Other of their human traits and turn them into cannon fodder, into an enemy: the enemy is not a member of the human race. The enemy is devoid of their own history. If this succeeds, the battle is won before it even begins.

Precisely here is the point where fiction and literature should step in. What, broadly speaking, can fiction do? Defend the human. Refuse to allow this regressive metamorphosis of dehumanisation. Literature acts as a natural antidote to the poison of propaganda. Propaganda tries to explain the world to us two-dimensionally in three minutes: this is good, this is evil. Literature not only gives us a deeper, more complex and fuller picture, but it also teaches us something very important. For fiction, the individuals are central, with their fears, hopes, fragility, dreams and sorrows. Propaganda is also interested in fears and desires, but only as tools for collective manipulation. Fiction and propaganda meet in the same field – the field of the human and the humane.

You might argue, well, aren't propaganda and fiction the same thing, they both use stories and offer various versions of the world. No. Let's try to see the difference. The subtle poison of propaganda and conspiracy theories lies in the fact that they replace basic concepts within amassed human knowledge, they reduce centuries of culture and civilisation, they burn down and overturn the entire archive of the human.

Whereas real literature, fiction and storytelling, build on this archive, constructing its versions of the world using coordinate systems of good and evil, lies and truth, the humane and the inhumane, the permissible and the impermissible. Whether we realise it or not, today we are present at – no, we are actually participating in – a grand and at times invisible battle not just to save human life, but to save the very essence of the human and of life itself.

What's more, things have come to the point where we can no longer save people unless we save life, living beings and nature itself. An egocentric or anthropocentric escape from this situation is impossible. Hearing the voices and stories of others—not just people, but all living creatures—through fiction saves life itself. This is the great battle in the stories of the world and humanity. And literature, too, plays a role in it. Especially in times of war that draws the threat of climate apocalypse even closer.

As for hearing the voices and stories of others – not just people, but all life – through fiction saves life itself. In this sense, literature in translation, it gives us the full picture, the whole range of voices and stories. We live in a world where there is no longer a centre and a periphery. When we have a pandemic, war or catastrophe, the centre of pain is everywhere. Or the centre of the world is movable, it follows the pain. Today, Europe is bleeding in the East, and so the stories of people from that part of the world can tell us more about that. The world today has multiple pulsating points of pain and upheaval, thus the translation of voices and stories from those places is vital for us, I would even say it is

lifesaving. Because what hurts there already hurts everywhere. The world has long since become one body and one web. And you can't be happy or at peace at one end of the web while someone is crying for help at the other.

Even on a purely personal level, if I'm despairing, scared, lonely and abandoned, and I'm reading a book about someone else who is despairing, scared, lonely and abandoned, it comforts me to know that I'm not alone, I'm not so different, I'm not crazy, that after all, loneliness is clearly part of my human essence.

I wrote part of my novel *Time Shelter* in a library that I'll call the 'library of the world'. Every library is a time shelter. I remember going upstairs to the Rose Main Reading Room (yes, it's the New York Public Library) when I was feeling particularly anxious and running my eyes over the uniform cherry red or black spines of the books, sometimes touching them with my hand. Nothing is as comforting as those identical rows of volumes, their titles really can be used as a mantra against evil spirits and times, as the narrator says in the novel.

He goes on:

And again back to the shelves of books, to convince myself that the world is bound and ordered. Here is WWI, wrapped up in twelve identical red volumes of some encyclopedia. Here is the Cold War, forever buried between the covers of these three big volumes, gray. Neither the Spanish Civil War (sleeping on the top shelf) nor the Second World War, with its two whole bookcases, are frightening anymore. Everything sooner or later ends up in a book, as Mallarmé

put it in that quote so beloved by Borges. Which, when you think about it, is not such a bad result.

The people I rely on in times of crisis are on the side of literature and uncertainty, of hesitation and torment. And they are the real experts on crises. Their names are Pessoa, Kafka, Eliot, Woolf, Borges, to mention just a few. We are slowly coming to realise that the world cannot be explained through political and economic relations alone. Because we are not only made of economics and politics. We are also made of sadness and hesitation, of such fragile and inexplicable things. And therein is the place of literature, of its expertise, to use that language.

What else can literature do? Create taste. This should not be underestimated in the least, it is not just a question of aesthetics. A person with taste is less susceptible to flimsy propaganda. They can see all the political kitsch that underlies nationalism, for example. And that is already a political act. Joseph Brodsky says that his resistance to Soviet authority may be less political than aesthetic. Before reason has grasped evil, our senses – if they are attuned enough – have already smelled its foul breath, have already recoiled in disgust. Literature, too, works to produce such a fine sensibility.

A person tells a story when there is an ear ready to hear. I think it's important to point this out, because we are praising storytelling. Storytelling is important, but it's nothing without the feeling that somewhere there is an ear ready to hear. There is no Storytelling without Storyhearing.

If we were to depict the writer with only one body part, it would not be a writing hand or a mouth uttering precious words. Most often I see the writer as an ear, one big ear listening to the stories of the world. An ear and a heart. An ear attuned to everything that hurts.

Today, we have a strong need for empathy, which is crucial both personally and politically.

Totalitarian or total ideology and fundamentalism are incapable of empathy. For them, the other, the enemy, is removed from human nature. Because the human distracts, it diverts, it is a source of weakness and hesitation. No person, no problem, Stalin used to say cynically. No humanity, no problem, populism and propaganda think today. And that is surely the most frightening thing. This is why we need storytelling and empathy. The hidden power of our personal stories lies in the fact that they deal directly with the human, which by its nature precedes ideologies, precedes the state.

I don't want to get into some strict scientific definition of empathy. Because I think everyone knows about this 'stepping into the shoes of the other', and also because we have started to overuse this concept. Yet I argue that we must use it more broadly. Empathy is not just innate, it is acquired, learned and developed through daily exercise, including through reading fiction. Empathy is the bare minimum without which neither storytelling, nor reading and listening, nor living are possible. How can you read a novel without empathy? How can you live among others without empathy?

But who is the Other today? Normally, when we talk about empathy, we stay, consciously or not, within the bounds of the human species. Isn't it time to move towards a broader environmental empathy? Actually, if we remember fairytales and our own childhood, we will see that literature and children have known about and been practising this for a long time. There, talking to a snail, a dog or a rose and empathising with their stories is a perfectly natural thing to do.

Man needs to shut up for a while and in the ensuing pause to hear the voice of some other storyteller – a fish, dragonfly, weasel or bamboo, cat, orchid or pebble... The narrator in my previous novel, *The Physics of Sorrow*, insisted upon this.

Incidentally, the most recent studies by environmental scientists wondering how to motivate people to protect the natural world once again lead us to empathy. The happy conclusion is that 'at least when it comes to climate change, people seem more motivated by empathy for non-human others than their own self-interest... One possible reason for this is that it taps into our basic tendency toward compassion.'¹

(Let's go on a brief evolutionary tangent here. The widespread belief is that sympathy and helping those who are weaker is not a priority of natural selection. Nature and evolution would not tolerate anything like empathy for the other, ergo selfishness will always trump altruism. Yet here's

¹ *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 2015.

an interesting opinion from the evolutionary biologist David Wilson, a follower of Darwin, who notes that in evolutionary terms, ‘selfishness beats altruism within groups, but altruistic groups beat selfish ones.’²)

Now, if we shift to a historical perspective, we would see that altruistic societies have been more developed and sensitive and have performed better in politics, economy, culture and human happiness than dictatorships. This can be verified.

Perhaps the time is coming to tell new stories about the future, to populate its empty rooms with the stories we want to inhabit. But before that, let’s hear the stories and voices of the present, the stories of others, of migrants, of refugees, of those fleeing war, of those who have survived in the bomb shelters of Ukraine today. Let’s tell and hear these stories again and again until we create a memory strong enough to prevent these nightmares from recurring, at least not so soon.

Finally, in closing, let me tell you that nightmare from forty-nine years ago, which I never had again after I wrote it down, but which I never forgot, either. The dream was simple and scary. At the bottom of our village well is my entire family: my mother, father and brother. The well is deep and dark, I can just see their silhouettes looking up, unable to get out. I am the only one outside. Saved, but alone. The fear is twofold – first, for them, and second, for me: I am separated from them, I am not with them, even if at the bottom of the

² (David Wilson, in conversation with Tom Stoppard, *Guardian*, 23 May 2015).

well, I am abandoned. This double fear – for others and for myself – this feeling of abandonment, probably made me a writer, or at least gave rise to that first story of mine scrawled in ugly, crooked letters. And writing it down helped. My reasons for continuing to write today probably haven't changed much from that boy's reasons for writing down his nightmare. I write because I don't want the nightmares to come true.

Georgi Gospodinov is one of Europe's most acclaimed writers. Originally from Bulgaria, his novels, *The Physics of Sorrow* and *Time Shelter*, have won his country's most prestigious literary prize twice and more than a dozen international prizes – including the Premio Strega Europeo, Central European Angelus Award and the Jan Michalski Prize. In 2023 Georgi Gospodinov and his translator Angela Rodel were awarded the International Booker Prize.

Angela Rodel is currently the Executive Director of the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission and a professional literary translator based in Bulgaria. She is a two-time Fulbright Scholar, who first went to Bulgaria in 1996 to study language and folk music at Sofia University. Her studies gave her a solid grasp of Bulgarian language and culture, an experience which deeply informed her graduate studies in linguistics and ethnomusicology in the US.