

Nobel Lecture by Olga Tokarczuk

Nobel Laureate in Literature 2018



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The Tender Narrator

1.

The first photograph I ever experienced consciously is a picture of my mother from before she gave birth to me. Unfortunately, it's a black-and-white photograph, which means that many of the details have been lost, turning into nothing but gray shapes. The light is soft, and rainy, likely a springtime light, and definitely the kind of light that seeps in through a window, holding the room in a barely perceptible glow. My mom is sitting beside our old radio, and it's the kind with a green eye and two dials—one to regulate the volume, the other for finding a station. This radio later became my great childhood companion; from it I learned of the existence of the cosmos. Turning an ebony knob shifted the delicate feelers of the antennae, and into their purview fell all kinds of different stations—Warsaw, London, Luxembourg and Paris. Sometimes, however, the sound would falter, as though between Prague and New York, or Moscow and Madrid, the antennae's feelers stumbled onto black holes. Whenever that happened, it sent shivers down my spine. I believed that through this radio different solar systems and galaxies were speaking to me, crackling and warbling and sending me important information, and yet I was unable to decipher it.

When as a little girl I would look at that picture, I would feel sure that my mom had been looking for me when she turned the dial on our radio. Like a sensitive radar, she penetrated the infinite realms of the cosmos, trying to find out when I would arrive, and from where. Her haircut and outfit (a big boat neck) indicate when this picture was taken, namely, in the early sixties. Gazing off somewhere outside of the frame, the somewhat

hunched-over woman sees something that isn't available to a person looking at the photo later. As a child, I imagined that what was happening was that she was gazing into time. There's nothing really happening in the picture—it's a photograph of a state, not a process. The woman is sad, seemingly lost in thought—seemingly lost.

When I later asked her about that sadness—which I did on numerous occasions, always prompting the same response—my mother would say that she was sad because I hadn't been born yet, yet she already missed me.

"How can you miss me when I'm not there yet?" I would ask.

I knew that you miss someone you've lost, that longing is an effect of loss.

"But it can also work the other way around," she answered. "Missing a person means they're there."

This brief exchange, someplace in the countryside in western Poland in the late sixties, an exchange between my mother and me, her small child, has always remained in my memory and given me a store of strength that has lasted me my whole life. For it elevated my existence beyond the ordinary materiality of the world, beyond chance, beyond cause and effect and the laws of probability. She placed my existence out of time, in the sweet vicinity of eternity. In my child's mind, I understood then that there was more to me than I had ever imagined before. And that even if I were to say, "I'm lost," then I'd still be starting out with the words "I am"—the most important and the strangest set of words in the world.

And so a young woman who was never religious—my mother—gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world's greatest *tender narrator*.

2.

The world is a fabric we weave daily on the great looms of information, discussions, films, books, gossip, little anecdotes. Today the purview of these looms is enormous—thanks to the internet, almost everyone can take place in the process, taking responsibility and not, lovingly and hatefully, for better and for worse. When this story changes, so does the world. In this sense, the world is made of words.

How we think about the world and—perhaps even more importantly—how we narrate it have a massive significance, therefore. A thing that happens and is not told ceases to exist and perishes. This is a fact well known to not only historians, but also (and perhaps above all) to every stripe of politician and tyrant. He who has and weaves the story is in charge.

Today our problem lies—it seems—in the fact that we do not yet have ready narratives not only for the future, but even for a concrete now, for the ultra-rapid transformations of today's world. We lack the language, we lack the points of view, the metaphors, the myths and new fables. Yet we do see frequent attempts to harness rusty, anachronistic narratives that cannot fit the future to imaginaries of the future, no doubt on the assumption that an old something is better than a new nothing, or trying in this way to deal with the limitations of our own horizons. In a word, we lack new ways of telling the story of the world.

We live in a reality of polyphonic **first-person narratives**, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise. What I mean by first-person is the kind of tale that narrowly orbits the self of a teller who more or less directly just writes about herself and through herself. We have determined that this type of individualized point of view, this voice from the self, is the most

natural, human and honest, even if it does abstain from a broader perspective. Narrating in the first person, so conceived, is weaving an absolutely unique pattern, the only one of its kind; it is having a sense of autonomy as an individual, being aware of yourself and your fate. Yet it also means building an opposition between the self and the world, and that opposition can be alienating at times.

I think that first-person narration is very characteristic of contemporary optics, in which the individual performs the role of subjective center of the world. Western civilization is to a great extent founded and reliant upon that very discovery of the self, which makes up one of our most important measures of reality. Here man is the lead actor, and his judgment—although it is one among many—is always taken seriously. Stories woven in first person appear to be among the greatest discoveries of human civilization; they are read with reverence, bestowed full confidence. This type of story, when we see the world through the eyes of some self that is unlike any other, builds a special bond with the narrator, who asks his listener to put himself in his unique position.

What first-person narratives have done for literature and in general for human civilization cannot be overestimated—they have completely reworked the story of the world, so that it is no longer a place for the operations of heroes and deities upon whom we can have no influence, but rather a place for people just like us, with individual histories. It is easy to identify with people who are just like us, which generates between the story's narrator and its reader or listener a new variety of emotional understanding based on empathy. And this, by its very nature, brings together and eliminates borders; it is very easy to lose track in a novel of the borders between the narrator's self and the reader's self, and a so-called

“absorbing novel” actually counts on that border being blurred—on the reader, through empathy, becoming the narrator for a while. Thus literature has become a field for the exchange of experiences, an agora where everyone can tell of their own fate, or give voice to their alter ego. It is therefore a democratic space—anyone may speak up, everyone can create a speaking voice for herself. Never in the history of humanity have so many people been writers and storytellers. We have only to look at the statistics to see that this is true.

Whenever I go to book fairs, I see how many of the books being published in the world today have to do with precisely this—the authorial self. The expression instinct may be just as strong as other instincts that protect our lives—and it is most fully manifested in art. We want to be noticed, we want to feel exceptional. Narratives of the “I’m going to tell you my story” variety, or “I’m going to tell you the story of my family,” or even simply, “I’m going to tell you where I’ve been,” comprise today’s most popular literary genre. This is a large-scale phenomenon also because nowadays we are universally able to access writing, and many people attain the ability, once reserved for the few, of expressing themselves in words and stories. Paradoxically, however, this situation is akin to a choir made up of soloists only, voices competing for attention, all traveling similar routes, drowning one another out. We know everything there is to know about them, we are able to identify with them and experience their lives as if they were our own. And yet, remarkably often, the readerly experience is incomplete and disappointing, as it turns out that expressing an authorial “self” hardly guarantees universality. What we are missing—it would seem—is the dimension of the story that is the parable. For the hero of the parable is at once himself, a person living under specific historical and geographical conditions, yet at the same time he also goes well beyond those concrete

particulars, becoming a kind of Everywhere Everyman. When a reader follows along with someone's story written in a novel, he can identify with the fate of the character described and consider their situation as if it were his own, while in a parable, he must surrender completely his distinctness and become the Everyman. In this demanding psychological operation, the parable universalizes our experience, finding for very different fates a common denominator. That we have largely lost the parable from view is a testament to our current helplessness.

Perhaps in order not to drown in the multiplicity of titles and last names we began to divide literature's leviathan body **into genres**, which we treat like the various different categories of sports, with writers as their specially trained players.

The general commercialization of the literary market has led to a division into branches—now there are fairs and festivals of this or that type of literature, completely separate, creating a clientele of readers eager to hole up with a crime novel, some fantasy or science fiction. A notable characteristic of this situation is that what was only supposed to help booksellers and librarians organize on their shelves the massive quantity of published books, and readers to orient themselves in the vastness of the offering, became instead abstract categories not only into which existing works are placed, but also according to which writers themselves have started writing. Increasingly, genre work is like a kind of cake mold that produces very similar results, their predictability considered a virtue, their banality an achievement. The reader knows what to expect and gets exactly what he wanted.

I have always intuitively opposed such orders, since they lead to the limiting of authorial freedom, to a reluctance toward the experimentation

and transgression that is in fact the essential quality of creation in general. And they completely exclude from the creative process any of the eccentricity without which art would be lost. A good book does not need to champion its generic affiliation. The division into genres is the result of the commercialization of literature as a whole and an effect of treating it as a product for sale with the whole philosophy of branding and targeting and other, similar inventions of contemporary capitalism.

Today we can have the great satisfaction of seeing the emergence of a wholly new way of telling the world's story that is purveyed by the **on-screen series**, the hidden task of which is to induce in us a trance. Of course this mode of storytelling has long existed in the myths and Homeric tales, and Heracles, Achilles or Odysseus are without doubt the first heroes of series. But never before has this mode taken up so much space or exerted such a powerful influence on the collective imagination. The first two decades of the twenty-first century are the unquestionable property of the series. Their influence on the modes of telling the story of the world (and therefore on our way of understanding that story, too) is revolutionary.

In today's version, the series has not only extended our participation in the narrative in the temporal sphere, generating its various tempos, offshoots and aspects, but also introduced its own new orders. Since in many cases its task is to hold the viewer's attention for as long as possible—the series narrative multiplies the threads, interweaving them in the most improbable manner so much so that when at a loss it even harks back to the old narrative technique, once compromised by classical opera, of the *Deus ex machina*. The creation of new episodes often entails the total, ad-hoc overhaul of the psychology of the characters, so that they will be better

suited to the developing events of the plot. A character who begins as gentle and reserved winds up vindictive and violent, a supporting character turns protagonist, while the main character, to whom we have already grown attached, loses significance or actually completely disappears, much to our dismay.

The potential materialization of another season creates the necessity of open endings in which there is no way that mysterious things called catharsis can occur or resound fully—catharsis, formerly the experience of the internal transformation, the fulfillment and satisfaction of having participated in the action of the tale. Such complication, rather than conclusion—the constant postponement of the reward that is catharsis—renders the viewer dependent, hypnotizes her. The *fabula interrupta*, created long ago, and well known from the stories of Scheherazade, has now made its bold return in series, altering our subjectivity and having bizarre psychological effects, tearing us out of our own lives and hypnotizing us like a stimulant. At the same time, the series inscribes itself into the new, drawn-out and disordered rhythm of the world, into its chaotic communication, its instability and fluidity. This story-telling form is probably the one most creatively searching for a new formula today. In that sense, there is serious work in the series on the narratives of the future, on reformatting the story so that it suits our new reality.

But above all, we live in a world of too many contradictory, mutually exclusive facts, all battling one another tooth and nail.

Our ancestors believed that access to knowledge would not only bring people happiness, well-being, health and wealth, but would also create an equal and just society. What was missing in the world, to their minds, was the ubiquitous wisdom that would naturally arise from information.

John Amos Comenius, the great seventeenth-century pedagogue, coined the term “pansophism,” by which he meant the idea of potential omniscience, universal knowledge that would contain within it all possible cognition. This was also, and above all, a dream of information available to everyone. Would not access to facts about the world transform an illiterate peasant into a reflective individual conscious of himself and the world? Will not knowledge within easy reach mean that people will become sensible, that they will direct the progress of their lives with equanimity and wisdom? When the Internet first came about, it seemed that this notion would finally be realized in a total way. Wikipedia, which I admire and support, might have seemed to Comenius, like many like-minded philosophers, the fulfillment of the dream of humanity—now we can create and receive an enormous store of facts being ceaselessly supplemented and updated that is democratically accessible to just about every place on Earth.

A dream fulfilled is often disappointing. It has turned out that we are not capable of bearing this enormity of information, which instead of uniting, generalizing and freeing, has differentiated, divided, enclosed in individual little bubbles, creating a multitude of stories that are incompatible with one another or even openly hostile toward each other, mutually antagonizing.

Furthermore, the Internet, completely and unreflectively subject to market processes and dedicated to monopolists, controls gigantic quantities of data used not at all pansophically, for the broader access to information, but on the contrary, serving above all to program the behavior of users, as we learned after the Cambridge Analytica affair. Instead of hearing the harmony of the world, we have heard a cacophony of sounds, an unbearable static in which we try, in despair, to pick up on some quieter melody, even the weakest beat. The famous Shakespeare quote has never

been a better fit than it is for this cacophonous new reality: more and more often, the Internet is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury.

Research by political scientists unfortunately also contradicts John Amos Comenius' intuitions, which were based on the conviction that the more universally available was information about the world, the more politicians would avail themselves of reason and make considered decisions. But it would appear that the matter is not at all so simple as that. Information can be overwhelming, and its complexity and ambiguity give rise to all sorts of defense mechanisms—from denial to repression, even to escape into the simple principles of simplifying, ideological, party-line thinking.

The category of fake news raises new questions about what fiction is. Readers who have been repeatedly deceived, misinformed or misled have begun to slowly acquire a specific neurotic idiosyncrasy. The reaction to such exhaustion with fiction could be the enormous success of non-fiction, which in this great informational chaos screams over our heads: "I will tell you the truth, nothing but the truth," and "My story is based on facts!"

Fiction has lost the readers' trust since lying has become a dangerous weapon of mass destruction, even if it is still a primitive tool. I am often asked this incredulous question: "Is this thing you wrote really true?" And every time I feel this question bodes the end of literature.

This question, innocent from the reader's point of view, sounds to the writer's ear truly apocalyptic. What am I supposed to say? How am I to explain the ontological status of Hans Castorp, Anna Karenina or Winnie the Pooh?

I consider this type of readerly curiosity a regression of civilization. It is a major impairment of our multidimensional ability (concrete, historical, but

also symbolic, mythic) to participate in the chain of events called our lives. Life is created by events, but it is only when we are able to interpret them, try to understand them and lend them meaning that they are transformed into experience. Events are facts, but experience is something inexpressibly different. It is experience, and not any event, that makes up the material of our lives. Experience is a fact that has been interpreted and situated in memory. It also refers to a certain foundation we have in our minds, to a deep structure of significations upon which we can unfurl our own lives and examine them fully and carefully. I believe that myth performs the function of that structure. Everyone knows that myths never really happened but are always going on. Now they go on not only through the adventures of ancient heroes, but rather also make their way into the ubiquitous and most popular stories of contemporary film, games and literature. The lives of the inhabitants of Mount Olympus have been transferred to *Dynasty*, and the heroic acts of the heroes are attended to by Lara Croft.

In this ardent division into truth and falsehood, the tales of our experience that literature creates have their own dimension.

I have never been particularly excited about any straight distinction between fiction and non-fiction, unless we understand such a distinction to be declarative and discretionary. In a sea of many definitions of fiction, the one I like the best is also the oldest, and it comes from Aristotle. **Fiction is always a kind of truth.**

I am also convinced by the distinction between true story and plot made by the writer and essayist E.M. Forster. He said that when we say, “The king died and then the queen died,” it’s a story. But when we say, “The king died, and then the queen died of grief,” that is a plot. Every fictionalization

involves a transition from the question “What happened next?” to an attempt at understanding it based on our human experience: “Why did it happen that way?”

Literature begins with that “why,” even if we were to answer that question over and over with an ordinary “I don’t know.”

Thus literature poses questions that cannot be answered with the help of Wikipedia, since it goes beyond just information and events, referring directly to our experience.

But it is possible that the novel and literature in general are becoming before our very eyes something actually quite marginal in comparison with other forms of narration. That the weight of the image and of new forms of directly transmitting experience—film, photography, virtual reality—will constitute a viable alternative to traditional reading. Reading is quite a complicated psychological and perceptual process. To put it simply: first the most elusive content is conceptualized and verbalized, transforming into signs and symbols, and then it is “decoded” back from language into experience. That requires a certain intellectual competence. And above all it demands attention and focus, abilities ever rarer in today’s extremely distracting world.

Humanity has come a long way in its ways of communicating and sharing personal experience, from orality, relying on the living word and human memory, through the Gutenberg Revolution, when stories began to be widely mediated by writing and in this way fixed and codified as well as possible to reproduce without alteration. The major attainment of this change was that we came to identify thinking with language, with writing.

Today we are facing a revolution on a similar scale, when experience can be transmitted directly, without recourse to the printed word.

There is no longer any need to keep a travel diary when you can simply take pictures and send those pictures via social networking sites straight into the world, at once and to all. There is no need to write letters, since it is easier to call. Why write fat novels, when you can just get into a television series instead? Instead of going out on the town with friends, it would be better to play a game. Reach for an autobiography? There's no point, since I am following the lives of celebrities on Instagram and know everything about them.

It is not even the image that is the greatest opponent of text today, as we thought back in the twentieth century, worrying about the influence of television and film. It is instead a completely different dimension of the world—acting directly on our senses.

3.

I don't want to sketch an overall vision of crisis in telling stories about the world. But I'm often troubled by the feeling that there is something missing in the world—that by experiencing it through glass screens, and through apps, somehow it becomes unreal, distant, two-dimensional, and strangely non-descript, even though finding any particular piece of information is astoundingly easy. These days the worrying words “someone,” “something,” “somewhere,” “some time” can seem riskier than very specific, definite ideas uttered with complete certainty—such as that “the earth is flat,” “vaccinations kill,” “climate change is nonsense,” or “democracy is not under threat anywhere in the world.” “Somewhere” some people are drowning as they try to cross the sea. “Somewhere,” for “some” time,

“some sort of” a war has been going on. In the deluge of information individual messages lose their contours, dissipate in our memory, become unreal and vanish.

The flood of stupidity, cruelty, hate speech and images of violence are desperately counterbalanced by all sorts of “good news,” but it hasn’t the capacity to rein in the painful impression, which I find hard to verbalize, that **there is something wrong with the world**. Nowadays this feeling, once the sole preserve of neurotic poets, is like an epidemic of lack of definition, a form of anxiety oozing from all directions.

Literature is one of the few spheres that try to keep us close to the hard facts of the world, because by its very nature it is always psychological, because it focuses on the internal reasoning and motives of the characters, reveals their otherwise inaccessible experience to another person, or simply provokes the reader into a psychological interpretation of their conduct. Only literature is capable of letting us go deep into the life of another being, understand their reasons, share their emotions and experience their fate.

A story always turns circles around meaning. Even if it doesn’t express it directly, even when it deliberately refuses to seek meaning, and focuses on form, on experiment, when it stages a formal rebellion, looking for new means of expression. As we read even the most behavioristically, sparingly written story, we cannot help asking the questions: “Why is this happening?,” “What does it mean?,” “What is the point?,” “Where is this leading?” Quite possibly our minds have evolved toward the story as a process of giving meaning to millions of stimuli that surround us, and that even when we’re asleep keep on relentlessly devising their narratives. So the story is a way of organizing an infinite amount of information within

time, establishing its relationship to the past, the present and the future, revealing its recurrence, and arranging it in categories of cause and effect. Both the mind and the emotions take part in this effort.

No wonder one of the earliest discoveries made by stories was Fate, which apart from always appearing to people as something terrifying and inhuman, did in fact introduce order and immutability into everyday reality.

4.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

A few years later, the woman in the photograph, my mother, who missed me although I hadn't yet been born, was reading me fairy tales.

In one of them, by Hans Christian Andersen, a teapot that had been thrown on the trash heap complained about how cruelly it had been treated by people—as soon as its handle broke off, they had disposed of it. But if they weren't such demanding perfectionists it could still have been of use to them. Other broken objects picked up his tune, and told truly epic stories of their modest little lives as objects.

As a child, I listened to these fairy tales with flushed cheeks and tears in my eyes, because I believed deeply that objects have their own problems and emotions, as well as a sort of social life, entirely comparable to our human one. The plates in the dresser could talk to each other, and the spoons, knives and forks in the drawer formed a sort of a family. Similarly, animals were mysterious, wise, self-aware creatures with whom we had always been connected by a spiritual bond and a deep-seated similarity. But rivers, forests and roads had their existence too—they were living beings that mapped our space and built a sense of belonging, an enigmatic

Raumgeist. The landscape surrounding us was alive too, and so were the Sun and the Moon, and all the celestial bodies—the entire visible and invisible world.

When did I start to have doubts? I'm trying to find the moment in my life when at the flick of a switch everything became different, less nuanced, simpler. The world's whisper fell silent, to be replaced by the din of the city, the murmur of computers, the thunder of airplanes flying past overhead, and the exhausting white noise of oceans of information.

At some point in our lives we start to see the world in pieces, everything separately, in little bits that are galaxies apart from one another, and the reality in which we live keeps affirming it: doctors treat us by specialty, taxes have no connection with snow-plowing the road we drive to work along, our lunch has nothing to do with an enormous stock farm, or my new top with a shabby factory somewhere in Asia. Everything is separate from everything else, everything lives apart, without any connection.

To make it easier for us to cope with this we are given numbers, name tags, cards, crude plastic identities that try to reduce us to using one small part of the whole that we have already ceased to perceive.

The world is dying, and we are failing to notice. We fail to see that the world is becoming a collection of things and incidents, a lifeless expanse in which we move around lost and lonely, tossed here and there by somebody else's decisions, constrained by an incomprehensible fate, a sense of being the plaything of the major forces of history or chance. Our spirituality is either vanishing or becoming superficial and ritualistic. Or else we are just becoming the followers of simple forces—physical, social, and

economic—that move us around as if we were zombies. And in such a world we really are zombies.

This is why I long for that other world, the world of the teapot.

5.

All my life I've been fascinated by the systems of mutual connections and influences of which we are generally unaware, but which we discover by chance, as surprising coincidences or convergences of fate, all those bridges, nuts, bolts, welded joints and connectors that I followed in *Flights*. I'm fascinated by associating facts, and by searching for order. At base—as I am convinced—the writer's mind is a synthetic mind that doggedly gathers up all the tiny pieces in an attempt to stick them together again to create a universal whole.

How are we to write, how are we to structure our story to make it capable of raising this great, constellation form of the world?

Naturally, I realize that it is impossible to return to the sort of story about the world that we know from myths, fables and legends, which, communicated orally, kept the world in existence. Nowadays the story would have to be far more multidimensional and complicated; after all, we really do know much more, we're aware of the incredible connections between things that seem to be far apart.

Let us take a close look at a particular moment in the history of the world.

It is August 3, 1492, the day on which a small caravel named Santa Maria is to set sail from a quay at the port of Palos in Spain. The ship is commanded by Christopher Columbus. The sun is shining, there are sailors

going to and fro on the quay, and there are stevedores loading the last crates of provisions on board. It is hot, but a light breeze from the west saves the families who have come to say farewell from fainting. Seagulls strut grandly up and down the loading ramp, closely observing the human activities.

The moment that we can now see across time led to the death of 56 million of the almost 60 million native Americans. At the time, they represented about 10 percent of the world's entire population. The Europeans unwittingly brought them some lethal gifts—diseases and bacteria to which the indigenous inhabitants of America had no resistance. On top of that came ruthless oppression and killing. The extermination continued for years, and changed the nature of the land. Where beans, corn, potatoes and tomatoes had once grown in cultivated fields that were irrigated in a sophisticated way, wild vegetation returned. In just a few years, almost 150 million acres of arable land changed into jungle.

As it regenerated, the vegetation consumed vast quantities of carbon dioxide, thus weakening the greenhouse effect, and that in turn lowered the global temperature of the Earth.

This is one of many scientific hypotheses to explain the onset of the minor ice age that in the late sixteenth century brought a long-term cooling of the climate in Europe.

The minor ice age changed the economy of Europe. Over the decades that followed, the long, frozen winters, cool summers and intense precipitation reduced the yield of traditional forms of farming. In Western Europe, small family farms producing food for their own needs proved inefficient. Waves of famine ensued, and the need to specialize production. England and

Holland were worst affected by the colder climate; as their economies could no longer rely on farming, they began to develop trade and industry. The threat of storms prompted the Dutch to dry out the polders and to convert marshy areas and shallow marine zones into land. The southward shift of the range where cod occur, though catastrophic for Scandinavia, proved advantageous for England and Holland—it allowed these countries to start developing into naval and commercial powers. The significant cooling was particularly acutely felt in the Scandinavian countries. Contact with Greenland and Iceland broke off, the severe winters reduced the harvests, and years of famine and shortages set in. So Sweden turned its greedy gaze southward, embarking on war against Poland (especially as the Baltic Sea had frozen, making it easy to march an army across it) and getting involved in the Thirty Years' War in Europe.

The efforts of scientists, trying to establish a better understanding of our reality, show it to be a mutually coherent, densely connected system of influences. This is no longer just the famous “butterfly effect,” which as we know involves the way that minimal changes at the start of a process can lead in the future to tremendous, unpredictable results, but here we have an infinite number of butterflies and their wings, in constant motion—a powerful wave of life that travels through time.

In my view, the discovery of “the butterfly effect” marks the end of the era of unswerving faith in our own capacity to be effective, our ability to control, and by the same token our sense of supremacy in the world. This does not take away from mankind our power to be a builder, a conqueror and an inventor, yet it illustrates that reality is more complicated than mankind might ever have supposed. And that we are nothing but a tiny part of these processes.

We have more and more proof of the existence of some spectacular, sometimes highly surprising dependencies on a worldwide scale.

We are all—people, plants, animals, and objects—immersed in a single space, which is ruled by the laws of physics. This common space has its shape, and within it the laws of physics sculpt an infinite number of forms that are incessantly linked to one another. Our cardiovascular system is like the system of a river basin, the structure of a leaf is like a human transport system, the motion of the galaxies is like the whirl of water flowing down our washbasins. Societies develop in a similar way to colonies of bacteria. The micro and macro scale show an endless system of similarities. Our speech, thinking and creativity are not something abstract, removed from the world, but a continuation on another level of its endless processes of transformation.

6.

I keep wondering if these days it's possible to find the foundations of a new story that's universal, comprehensive, all-inclusive, rooted in nature, full of contexts and at the same time understandable.

Could there be a story that would go beyond the uncommunicative prison of one's own self, revealing a greater range of reality and showing the mutual connections? That would be able to keep its distance from the well-trodden, obvious and unoriginal center point of commonly shared opinions, and manage to look at things *ex-centrally*, away from the center?

I am pleased that literature has miraculously preserved its right to all sorts of eccentricities, phantasmagoria, provocation, parody and lunacy. I dream of high viewing points and wide perspectives, where the context goes far

beyond what we might have expected. I dream of a language that is capable of expressing the vaguest intuition, I dream of a metaphor that surpasses cultural differences, and finally of a genre that is capacious and transgressive, but that at the same time the readers will love.

I also dream of a new kind of narrator—a “fourth-person” one, who is not merely a grammatical construct of course, but who manages to encompass the perspective of each of the characters, as well as having the capacity to step beyond the horizon of each of them, who sees more and has a wider view, and who is able to ignore time. Oh yes, I think this narrator’s existence is possible.

Have you ever wondered who the marvelous storyteller is in the Bible who calls out in a loud voice: “In the beginning was the word”? Who is the narrator who describes the creation of the world, its first day, when chaos was separated from order, who follows the serial about the origin of the universe, who knows the thoughts of God, is aware of his doubts, and with a steady hand sets down on paper the incredible sentence: “And God saw that it was good”? Who is this, who knows what God thought?

Leaving aside all theological doubts, we can regard this figure of a mysterious, tender narrator as miraculous and significant. This is a point of view, a perspective from where everything can be seen. Seeing everything means recognizing the ultimate fact that all things that exist are mutually connected into a single whole, even if the connections between them are not yet known to us. Seeing everything also means a completely different kind of responsibility for the world, because it becomes obvious that every gesture “here” is connected to a gesture “there,” that a decision taken in one part of the world will have an effect in another part of it, and that differentiating between “mine” and “yours” starts to be debatable.

So it could be best to tell stories honestly in a way that activates a sense of the whole in the reader's mind, that sets off the reader's capacity to unite fragments into a single design, and to discover entire constellations in the small particles of events. To tell a story that makes it clear that everyone and everything is steeped in one common notion, which we painstakingly produce in our minds with every turn of the planet.

Literature has the power to do this. We should drop the simplistic categories of highbrow and lowbrow literature, popular and niche, and take the division into genres very lightly. We should drop the definition of "national literatures," knowing as we do that the universe of literature is a single thing, like the idea of *unus mundus*, a common psychological reality in which our human experience is united. The Author and the Reader perform equivalent roles, the former by dint of creating, the latter by making a constant interpretation.

Perhaps we should trust fragments, as it is fragments that create constellations capable of describing more, and in a more complex way, multi-dimensionally. Our stories could refer to one another in an infinite way, and their central characters could enter into relationships with each other.

I think we have a redefinition ahead of us of what we understand nowadays by the concept of realism, and a search for a new one that would allow us to go beyond the limits of our ego and penetrate the glass screen through which we see the world. Because these days the need for reality is served by the media, social networking sites, and indirect relationships on the internet. Perhaps what inevitably lies ahead of us is a sort of neo-surrealism, some rearranged points of view that won't be afraid to stand up

to a paradox, and will go against the grain when it comes to the simple order of cause-and-effect. Indeed, our reality has already become surreal. I am also sure that many stories require rewriting in our new intellectual contexts, taking their inspiration from new scientific theories. But I find it equally important to make constant reference to myth and to the entire human imaginarium. Returning to the compact structures of mythology could bring a sense of stability within the lack of specificity in which we are living nowadays. I believe that myths are the building material for our psyche, and we cannot possibly ignore them (at most we might be unaware of their influence).

No doubt a genius will soon appear, capable of constructing an entirely different, as yet unimaginable narrative in which everything essential will be accommodated. This method of storytelling is sure to change us; we will drop our old, constricting perspectives and we will open up to new ones that have in fact always existed somewhere here, but we have been blind to them.

In *Doctor Faustus* Thomas Mann wrote about a composer who devised a new form of absolute music capable of changing human thinking. But Mann did not describe what this music would depend on, he merely created the imaginary idea of how it might sound. Perhaps that is what the role of an artist relies on—giving a foretaste of something that could exist, and thus causing it to become imaginable. And being imagined is the first stage of existence.

7.

I write fiction, but it is never pure fabrication. When I write, I have to feel everything inside myself. I have to let all the living beings and objects that

appear in the book go through me, everything that is human and beyond human, everything that is living and not endowed with life. I have to take a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personify them inside myself, personalize them.

That is what tenderness serves me for—because tenderness is the art of personifying, of sharing feelings, and thus endlessly discovering similarities. Creating stories means constantly bringing things to life, giving an existence to all the tiny pieces of the world that are represented by human experiences, the situations people have endured and their memories. Tenderness personalizes everything to which it relates, making it possible to give it a voice, to give it the space and the time to come into existence, and to be expressed. It is thanks to tenderness that the teapot starts to talk.

Tenderness is the most modest form of love. It is the kind of love that does not appear in the scriptures or the gospels, no one swears by it, no one cites it. It has no special emblems or symbols, nor does it lead to crime, or prompt envy.

It appears wherever we take a close and careful look at another being, at something that is not our “self”.

Tenderness is spontaneous and disinterested; it goes far beyond empathetic fellow feeling. Instead it is the conscious, though perhaps slightly melancholy, common sharing of fate.

Tenderness is deep emotional concern about another being, its fragility, its unique nature, and its lack of immunity to suffering and the effects of time. Tenderness perceives the bonds that connect us, the similarities and sameness between us. It is a way of looking that shows the world as being alive, living, interconnected, cooperating with, and codependent on itself.

Literature is built on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves. It is the basic psychological mechanism of the novel. Thanks to this miraculous tool, the most sophisticated means of human communication, our experience can travel through time, reaching those who have not yet been born, but who will one day turn to what we have written, the stories we told about ourselves and our world.

I have no idea what their life will be like, or who they will be. I often think about them with a sense of guilt and shame.

The climate emergency and the political crisis in which we are now trying to find our way, and which we are anxious to oppose by saving the world have not come out of nowhere. We often forget that they are not just the result of a twist of fate or destiny, but of some very specific moves and decisions—economic, social, and to do with world outlook (including religious ones). Greed, failure to respect nature, selfishness, lack of imagination, endless rivalry and lack of responsibility have reduced the world to the status of an object that can be cut into pieces, used up and destroyed.

That is why I believe I must tell stories as if the world were a living, single entity, constantly forming before our eyes, and as if we were a small and at the same time powerful part of it.

Translated by Jennifer Croft and Antonia Lloyd-Jones



The premises of the Swedish Academy are in the Exchange (Börshuset), in Stortorget in the Old Town in Stockholm. The building was erected between 1767 and 1778. The ground floor was intended for the Stockholm Stock Exchange and the upper floor for the burgesses of Stockholm. From the 1860s the Grand Hall served as the council chamber for the City aldermen.

It is in the Grand Hall that the Academy has always held its Annual Grand Ceremony, but finding premises for the daily work and the weekly meetings has at times caused problems. Not until 1914 was a solution found. A donation made it possible for the Academy to acquire the right to use the upper floor of the Exchange (including the Grand Hall) and its attic in perpetuity. It did not finally move in, however, until 1921, when Stockholm's new Town Hall had been completed.