

What can literature do? The case of the Arab Spring by Tahar ben Jelloun

Honoré de Balzac writes in *Petty troubles of married life*: “A man must have explored every sphere of social life to become a genuine novelist, inasmuch as the novel is the private history of nations.” In recent times writers have been absorbed in global turbulences, and in the hopes shattered by the pain of the world. No more digging in the caves of a given society’s memories. There is no need. Everything has been brought to the surface. We just have to listen, to watch, and then to write. These turbulences have taken possession of my imagination, which was called upon to accompany, with a pen in my hand, what was somewhat prematurely been called “the Arab Spring”. Journalists, for lack of slogans, have labelled it the “Jasmine Revolution”, since this beautiful flower is a symbol of hospitality in Tunisia. Alas, the word revolution here is abusive and inappropriate, in my opinion. But I will come back to this concept later.

When a whole nation rises, the writer must not remain indifferent, unless he thinks that the world only revolves around him, and, thus, does not realize that a fire is smouldering beside him – a fire that aims to drive dictators, whose illegitimacy is only eclipsed by their impunity and longevity, out of the country.

There are writers who only listen to their ego. If you are Marcel Proust, this might result in masterpieces. But rare are those who, by considering themselves the main figures in their own novels, manage to thrill us or have us marvel. With so much suffering in the world, the private misery of the writer becomes indecent. It is but a drop of water in the immensity of tragedies humankind is capable of producing. We are entitled to write about ourselves, to confess, to compose what is called “auto-fiction”, and to turn away from a bristling world that lives and dies. This type of literature has its place on the shelves of bookstores, but it is not the literature I appreciate or write, even if I know that everything departs from my self, involving others along the way. A bit of modesty is needed and even useful when it comes to literary ambition.

Other writers listen to their peoples. Alas, the word “people” is used less than it used to be. Today it is referred to as the population, or the community. However, in the countries of the South the concept of the people still matters, and resonates powerfully within us. To listen to one’s people means to be willing to report the words and translate the silence of all those who hope and wait for someone to appear out of obscurity and tell the world of their suffering and to portray their future.

One day the great Algerian poet Kateb Yacine (1929-1989), upon returning to his native village after several years of exile, went to a café. One of the old regulars recognized him and said: “You claim to be a writer? Then sit down and listen to me.” Writing is, first of all, listening. The writer is the translator of the invisible, the mystery of souls that sometimes only the poet, the creative composer can grasp or capture. And yes: he may be mistaken or exaggerate!

A writer is a witness, a vigilant and sometimes active witness. He does not regard the world, but he observes, sometimes with scrutiny, in order to follow his intuitions, penetrate the depths of his imagination, and write. To write about the world is to attempt to understand it better. We know that intelligence is first and foremost the lack of comprehension of the world. As Henri Bergson said: “Intelligence is characterized by a natural incomprehension of life.” We must believe in mystery, and fear reason. We also have to be careful, when someone says he has understood everything, and is eager to deliver customized explanations. These are the fanatics, the dogmatists, because for them there is only certainty. He who doubts not is a danger for a healthy society. And also for literature, because writing also means to doubt, permanent insecurity, and we

must be aware that the truth is spherical escapes us or pushes us towards illusion. The truth often appears as a shadow looming above our heads and when it comes to light, it's brightness overwhelms us. Herman Melville once wrote: "Truth uncompromisingly told will always have its jagged edges." Obviously, compromise and the truth mutually exclude one another. But often compromise reigns with more power and is more present in the everyday dealings of human beings with one another than the truth. We see every single day how many lies, and how much fraud, corruption and crime there are. Thus, democracy, in terms of a system of co-existence, is not only a thing of the past but has been betrayed, masked and misappropriated. The writer never ceases to explore this social and political pathology. He discovers that literature has its limits, and that a book, even an excellent one, is a light weight in view of the Mafia, and the great misery of politics. Therefore the truth, spoken by children and poets, makes us happy, but it does not hinder the business of robbery and decadence.

Doubt is therefore a path toward reality. Doubt and imagine. Doubt and invent. The novel is nothing but a process of invention: people are born and die in the novelist's process of writing. The inherent credibility of the novel, thus, differs from true (credible) reality.

I cannot subscribe to Paul Celan totally, when he says: "I have never written a line that did not have something to do with my existence". But I believe that we write out of the darkness that controls us, and I am convinced that the dawn sometimes hides a tragedy beyond description. Writing, thus, becomes an adventure, which forces us to choose between grief and the void. Like William Faulkner I choose grief because, in spite of all reservations we rightly have with respect to humankind, I am certain that man will prevail. I deliberately choose to be optimistic, without having any illusions concerning man and what he is capable of doing, especially in view of his capacity to destroy the planet and kill his neighbour.

We must write and speak on the basis of what is beyond what we see, what Faulkner called "the womb of time", which he described in *As I Lay Dying*: "The agony and despair of spreading bones, the hard girdle in which lie the outraged entrails of events."

Man is first and foremost a rat towards his own kind. However, the victim does not really lose, because no matter what happens to him, as Montaigne said, "each man bears the whole stamp of the human condition". Achieving our freedom is one of the goals pursued by writing. Neither do we write without consequence, nor to while away the time, nor to please the mighty ones, the princes and the presidents.

The novel, when it is written with sincerity and talent, is the carrier of a human plan. It is testimony, emotion, and memory. Each book is, in its own way, a brick in building the memory of the world. Of course, I refer to the great novels, which help us live and grow, like *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by Cervantes, and like the *Arabian Nights*, a book written by anonymous authors, and covering various centuries and continents. I refer to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust, Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, Jean Genet's *The Thief's Journal*, or *The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann. Let us add to this pantheon of great poets those who have enlightened humankind, whose mediocrity and cruelty is often so flagrant that we do not know what to do or think.

Our need for justice is inconsolable.

I come back to the spring, to the jasmine, and its revolutionary links. A writer must make sure that he gets his facts and figures right. Accuracy is his obligation. He must not call a revolt a revolution.

What occurred in Tunisia and Egypt at the end of 2010 and in early 2011 was a revolt, not a revolution. Revolt means anger, exasperation, and the radical refusal to live without dignity. There are journalists who do not care whether the words they apply are

fitting. They love slogans, and expressions that are easy to remember. Thus, with respect to Tunisia, one speaks of the Jasmine Revolution. Jasmine is a beautiful flower. Yet, a revolution is something different altogether. It is neither a picnic on a sunny day nor is it a romantic lunch in the garden. Of course, I do not want to play down the historical importance of the events in Tunisia or Egypt. But rage is not an ideology. It is a physical reaction, a manifestation of the intolerable. Those millions of demonstrators were neither backed by a political party, nor a leader or a programme. They did not have any other choice.

Nietzsche wrote a sentence that could be one of the Ten Commandments, and which Islam would not deny, although it might seem strange to associate the philosopher with religious texts. These are the philosopher's words I love to quote: "What is the most human? To save man from shame." (*The Gay Science*, Book 3, 274). The sad fact is that there are leaders who cannot rule without humiliating their people. To humiliate means to make the weak ones feel disgrace, to crush them by contempt, by not considering them as citizens but as mere subjects one may dispose of at will. When Ben Ali, under the pretence of combating Islamist terrorism, instructed the police to arrest all opponents, to torture them, and even have them disappear - and his counterpart Mubarak did the same, and was not punished either -, this was not only an outrage, but an act of crime. When crime becomes ubiquitous, and humiliation forces the poor to their knees, we find ourselves in a state of barbarism. It took some time before the people reacted, but when they were in the streets, the anger they had contained for so long became the engine and the dynamics of the revolt. Islamism defines itself as a verbatim interpretation of the Koran, and yet in reality negates its spirit. The supporters of a radical and fanatic Islam are usually ignorant to the extent that, in their eyes, only religious texts deserve to be read. This also entails an exclusion of all other writings, and therefore all literature, because in their eyes literary creativity is a manifestation of "corrupt tendencies" and depraved weaknesses within society. We might claim that Islamism is a blockade of the spirit, and a regression that inflicts humanity like a disease, and renders any other discourse null and void. Fortunately, the revolts in the Arab world were neither initiated nor accompanied by the Islamists, who realized that their ideological software is outdated, and that they no longer convince young people.

How can we write about a current revolt?

Do we wait, or do we participate in the events by writing, describing, demystifying and explaining them? To write about life implies the risk of erring, yet I would not want to sit back and take things easy. In the beginning, I was touched by the determination of the demonstrators in Tunisia. Like many others I was moved by Mohamed Bouazizi's gesture of sacrifice. I started writing articles. Then I took a step back and decided to narrate. I took Bouazizi's story, and I composed a literary text, a short and plain one, without any adjectives. I wanted it to be sober and direct, like a testimonial. I had the unforgettable images from Vittorio de Sica's film *Bicycle thieves* in mind, a masterpiece of the Italian neo-realism of universal value.

In *Par le feu* (tr: By the fire), I imagined the weeks and days before Bouazizi died through self-immolation on 17 December 2010. I was interested in what had triggered this highly symbolic and tragic act. How does a man come to the decision to kill himself in a country where suicide by immolation does not have a tradition? In particular, since Islam, like the other monotheist religions, bans suicide.

Writing becomes the lesser of two evils. You write, because you cannot influence reality. You transfigure it. You copy, and in doing so, you hope to get closer to what it transports. The most fertile and beautiful phase of French poetry in the 20th century was the era of the Resistance against the occupation. In those dark nights and days René Char, Paul

Eluard, Louis Aragon, Pierre Emmanuel and others wrote the finest lines of contemporary French poetry.

Faced with the tragedy of war and revolts, during hundreds perished, the words flowed tumultuously and full of passion out of these poets' minds, offering companionship to those departing, and to those left behind with their grief and sorrow.

The wind of the Arab revolts has changed and reached other shores, while it has weakened elsewhere. In Libya and Syria, as in Yemen and Bahrain, the demonstrators were met by a hail of bullets. Thousands were killed and the world was helpless. Even more evident was the helplessness of literature. In view of monsters like Gaddhafi or Bashar el Assad, whose father Hafez el Assad became notorious for the massacre of the inhabitants of the village of Hama in 1982 (20,000 dead, and the whole planet silent). These monsters crush everything that crosses their path. They kill, and they know that if they do not kill, they will be killed.

They are prosecuted because of their crimes against humanity, but they will most probably manage to escape international jurisdiction. But they cannot escape their peoples, who sooner or later will bring them to court. Today, however, we all remain witness to expected massacres, and we are helpless. What can literature do? Not much. Silence and resignation are not appropriate. We may take the risk of crying in the wilderness, and refuse to remain silent. Maybe our words cannot ease the pain. Maybe the written memory will eventually hurt. Yet, we must write, imagine, denounce, cry; ambitiously and relentlessly, because this is about men and women who were murdered, about mourning, and shattered families. This is about the infinite suffering that embraces their souls.

André Malraux, quoted by Jorge Semprun, once wrote: "I try to find the crucial region of the soul, where absolute Evil opposes fraternity." I believe that the absolute Evil does not need a soul. It is absolute precisely because it does not have a soul. Literature feeds off this idea. Let me finally refer to Jean Genet, who said that you do not become an artist without a major accident having been involved. Literature does not want to repair or cure. Literature is there in order to be there, in order to make us believe that we are the masters of our destiny, which is nothing but an illusion, and anyway rather improbable.

As I've said before: the writer is a witness of his time. Yet depending on the era he lives in, the writer must do more than bear witness. His role transcends the mere testimony, at least as far as I am concerned. He must go beyond and bravely translate what others do not see. The poet is the one who perceives the truth, while others try to hide it behind the noise, the fog, and appearances. Maybe poetry is best equipped to explain the world to us. But how many poets live in one century? This is the problem. What happens to philosophy these days, also happens to poetry. Every day our society offers "philosophic" spectacles. And there are those who claim to be the "new philosophers", as if reflection and the invention of a methodology (a methodological discourse) depended on a fashion or an allegedly "new wave". This is not serious at all.

From what I know, Heidegger was the last great philosopher. Those who followed were nothing but apprentices, whose importance, of course, cannot be denied. I am thinking of Habermas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.

The same applies for philosophy as for poetry: uncompromising thought, no concessions, thinking beyond the day, and a new explanation of the world after Aristotle and Plato. When history begins to make quick progress, when it surprises us, throws us back to our modest horizon, imagination enters stage. We need the novel, not only to explain the world to us, but also to accompany our historical times.

Write. Some write in order to not go mad. Others, because they are weak. Or because they are, like Beckett, "only good at" writing. Faulkner was moved by the "equivocal and

derisive darkness of the world". Some write, because writing means consolation, and because they get lost in the reservoir of words. Others believe that they can change mankind. Yet Spinoza warned us a long time ago: "Every individual strives to persevere in its being." And our friend Thomas Bernhard repeatedly reminded us before he left us: "No writer has ever changed society. All writers failed. There are only failed writers." Knowing this makes us stronger. The worst writer is the one who pretends otherwise. Nevertheless, we must not stop writing. On the contrary: we must write more than ever. We must write, and try hard to write beautifully, powerfully, even if humankind increasingly wallows in a pseudo-reality, in mediocrity, and in ugliness. And yet, sometimes humankind astonishes and moves us. This is what happened in the Arab Spring, that lives on having paid the price of the blood of innocent people shed on a daily basis by the Libyan and Syrian armies, while the rest of the world watched helplessly. Literary creation focuses on the human condition. We must, therefore, keep close to its heels, follow its tremors, discover the traces of hope and write. It so happens that today the crimes being committed against humanity must enter into our literature. There have always been mass murderers, and many of them die in their beds. Yet, for the novelist this does not matter. He writes, because he has to write, and if possible, with a maximum of sincerity, because it is his duty to do so.

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