

Mario Vargas Llosa's speech for the opening of the 20th international literature festival berlin.

Translated by Charlotte Coombe

Madam Minister of Culture, Madam Director of the Philharmonic, dear Ulrich Schreiber, dear Michi Strausfeld, my old friend, for this very generous description you gave of me, exaggerating just like a Latin American.

I've been asked to talk about literature and I am delighted to do so, first of all congratulating Ulrich Schreiber —and, I understand, the Instituto Cervantes for the support it has given him— for putting on this festival despite the difficult times we are going through.

Literature is made for difficult times, and I believe that it is good, in these unexpected and dangerous times for us all, to talk about literature. In free countries, in democratic countries, one sometimes feels that literature is merely a distraction, one fleeting amusement among so many others. As writers, we have all at some point come across a man asking us to sign a book for his wife because, he tells us, she's a big reader. Whenever this happens to me, I immediately ask, "What about you, aren't you a big reader?" He'll say, "No, I... I work, I have more important things to worry about than literature." And I say to him, "Well, that's too bad for you, because you don't know what you're missing, and your wife is definitely going to be better prepared to deal with the difficult situations life always throws at us."

Interestingly, it is in countries that are freer where literature is not as highly regarded, or is regarded as something it is not: as simple entertainment. But as soon as freedom is restricted or taken away in this society, literature becomes a weapon, a way of combating the intransigence of the powers that be — powers that tend to be wary of literature and instantly establish systems of censorship to control it. Yet in spite of this, literature always finds a way to manifest and, in every case, it always shows itself to be manifestly against oppressive regimes and in favour of freedom. This is where we truly see the importance of literature, and how fundamental it is to the preservation of that very freedom.

The question of how literature was arose has always fascinated me. It is something we don't know, and can only guess at by going back hundreds, even thousands of years. To those ancestors who would

have lived in world so different to ours, a world that was fraught with danger. There was the rain, there was the thunder, there was the terrifying lightening that seemed it would destroy us, there were the ferocious animals lurking in the forest all around us, there were, above all, those invisible animals that brought us plagues, which sometimes put an end to life in our settlements. And, faced with all this, what did we have? We had nights round the fires in the caves where our ancestors dwelled, and there, we told stories. Stories we invented, stories that soothed us, made us forget the fear in which we lived permanently. And we managed, thanks to these stories, to attain a peace, a stillness, a tranquillity which was completely lacking in our lives.

The stories we invented expressed dissatisfaction more than anything; the dream of a reality different to the one our ancestors faced every day, a society without danger and without fear, a society in which we felt protected and at the same time, free. What happened with those distant ancestors is what is still happening, now that, thanks to writing, those stories we invented have a certain permanence and realness. We still invent things that express our fear and insecurity when faced with a world we cannot control, and which, above all, we find hard to accept.

Literature has always, since the most ancient times, been a means of protesting against life's inadequacies, and there will always be inadequacies for someone to protest against, even if it is just one person. But it is never just one, rather many groups of people who are not content with reality the way it is. Nothing expresses our dissatisfaction with the world, our dismay, better than literature.

Literature is an expression of protest, of discontentment, of contempt for the way reality is, and a profound desire for a different reality. A reality which, through our actions and innovations, gradually comes into existence by way of the progress that underpins human life. Unlike animal life, which stays the same over time, human life changes, and to a large extent, it changes thanks to literature. Thanks to this constant storytelling that somehow presents us with what is to come: the future, that thing which, through our efforts, we are gradually reaching and turning into reality. Does this not make us happy? Does this not satisfy us? New forms of dissatisfaction arise, and these forms of dissatisfaction are expressed, fundamentally, through literature. Particularly in those countries that have ceased to be free or that have never been free, countries that have been subjected via various ideologies to some form of

dictatorship. These dictatorships always have a deep distrust of literature; they know that literature poses a danger to them, and they are right. There is no regime in history that has restricted freedom without finding a way to control literature, in other words, a way of implementing systems of censorship to limit it, and above all to prevent it from expressing the discontentment that is part of its very nature.

For example, for 300 years in Latin America, novels were banned. Why were novels banned? Who banned them? Governments, the Inquisition ... This is something unclear, which historians have failed to explain. But what is certain is that for 300 years —the 300 years of colonization—, Latin America did not produce, did not publish any novels. Admittedly there was an intensive smuggling trade in books of fiction. They say, for example, that the first copies of Don Quixote arrived in Peru hidden in wine barrels. This intensive level of smuggling enabled Latinos to read novels. But the ban on the publication of novels was strictly adhered to, and the first novel did not appear until 1816, in Mexico. A novel called *El Periquillo Sarniento*, later translated into English as *The Mangy Parrot: The Life and Times of Periquillo Sarniento Written by himself for his Children*, which was a return to the style of the Picaresque novel, 200 years after those written in Spain: novels depicting bold men who thumb their noses at authority, mock traditions and live a roguish life.

In my opinion, the result of banning novels in Latin America was that, because the genre used for expressing imagination could not exist, fiction seeped into everything else. So in Latin America, we have never been able to differentiate very well between fiction and reality, between fiction and history, in some sense, because of those 300 years of narrative silence.

Novels are not just entertainment, although they do all aspire to be entertaining. Novels also create a rebellious attitude in us; an attitude that defies reality the way it is, because it strives for a different reality. The reasons why humans express their discontentment with reality are just as diverse, just as varied as human beings themselves, and no other form of expression has more genuinely expressed the extraordinary diversity of these reasons for discontentment as literature or, more precisely, the novel has.

What does this all mean? It means that, if we want citizens who are not just zombies, who do not obey without protest all the decisions that come from the authority of the powers that be, we need to fill our societies with literature. For nothing expresses as well as literature does the infinite dissatisfaction that even the most advanced, least imperfect reality expresses. If we want citizens who can think for themselves, who call out lies, who are not easily manipulated by the powers that be, then we need literature.

Literature brings us pleasure, without a doubt, and of course the great literary works enrich our awareness, our inventiveness, our imagination, but there is something more important from a historical and social point of view: they generate dissatisfaction in us. They create a dissidence in us towards the reality we live in, a reality that never resembles the realities we are capable of inventing, of dreaming up, and transforming, through words, into literature.

That is why literature matters. That is why literature is much more than entertainment; it is a way to glimpse the future. If we want citizens who are seriously and deeply motivated, we need good literature and we need good books to be read and made available. And that is why it is important from a social and political standpoint that we have freedom of expression, and for literature to express the extraordinary diversity that every society without exceptions represents, and ultimately is.

On the other hand, if we want resigned, run-of-the-mill citizens who submissively accept the world as it is, then let us censor literature, let literature become mere entertainment, just one diversion among the many diversions we are surrounded by. But I am sure that no one would seriously want literature to become mere entertainment. We need literature to show us when something is wrong in those societies where the powers that be want to make us believe that everything is fine. That everything is on track, that everything, in some way, expresses our needs and our dreams. Literature shows us this is not always true, that it is never true, that a society can run smoothly but there will always be reasons for someone to be discontented.

Think of the past, think of all the terrible repression experienced by our ancestors —our parents, our grandparents, our great-grandparents— and think of how far we've come since then. We have made great strides forward, but have we reached perfection yet? No, and we never will; in every society, at any

given time, there will always be those who express their discontentment and their anxiety at living confined within a certain activity, which means that this society is not free, that this society is still constrained by enormous prejudices. This is the major role of literature. Aside, of course, from greatly enhancing our vocabulary, our awareness, stimulating our inventiveness and imagination, making us desire the impossible, and by desiring the impossible, reaching new heights of human progress, the extraordinary progress that has brought us to where we are now, brought us so far, in fact, that we were even arrogant enough to believe we had managed to gain complete control over nature. The pandemic the whole world is experiencing right now reminds us that this is not the case, that it is not true, that we have not yet managed to control nature, and that nature can present us with incredibly difficult challenges or, quite simply, ones we are not properly equipped to deal with. We will surely come out of this pandemic less arrogant, more willing to invest in scientific research, in technological research, willing to invest in healthcare systems that protect us, that defend us better than the current systems have done. But, at the same time, it would also be worth remembering that the best way to deal with this reality is by changing it and improving it, and for that, literature is absolutely fundamental. Essential.

I am going to finish up by recalling a great philosopher, a German-speaking philosopher by the name of Karl Popper. The last time he was in Spain, a few months before he died, he attended a press conference where journalists kept asking him about all sorts of negative things. They said to him, “but a war is breaking out, there’s a war there, in a corner of Europe, and there are huge problems in Africa, in Latin America...” And he agreed: “Yes, yes, it’s true, the situation is very difficult, very bad in parts of the world,” he said, “but when you are assailed by this insecurity, this fear about what is happening around us, please remember one thing. Think about how, not once in history, in the long history of mankind, have we been better. We have never been better than we are now. So, everything that’s going wrong, yes, we must tackle it, but above all let’s remember what we’ve been through, and everything we’ve left behind that was wrong with our society. And everything we’ve left behind is so vast that it should act as an incentive, giving us the motivation to deal with all the problems that exist today.”

I truly believe that the best way to combat our current problems is by putting books out into the world, and making people dream. Making people dream of a better world, a different world, a world in which there are fewer reasons to be discontented.

Thank you very much.

Berlin, 9th September 2020