

The Time of the Author

seven authors reflect on time, the novel and the news

A summer-like sun warms seven pairs of shoulders clad for late winter, shrugging. A thatched roof and gabled windows can just be gleamed at the end of a beech-lined drive. It seems we have arrived in a writers' paradise where the sun is always shining and time stands still. Here, "The Time of the Author" begins.

A report by Jack McMartin

Ezra Pound wrote somewhat famously – and somewhat abstrusely – that "literature is news that stays news". If ever there were a group of literary minds to tease out what he meant, here it is.

Seven writers, accomplished novelists all. They come from Europe, the Middle East, Latin America. Among them are a former journalist, several columnists and essayists, a philosopher. Passa Porta, Brussels' international house of literature, has called them here to idyllic Villa Hellebosch, a writers' retreat in the picturesque village of Vollezele, to share three days of head space and living space together. It's being called a writers' seminar, the first of its kind in Belgium, or anywhere else for that matter. Their task is not to write but to reflect on the seminar's theme, "The Time of the Author". From 10 to 12 March, the authors devote keynote speeches,

readings and discussions to big questions: how can the novel respond to the challenges of our time? How can literary language capture our experience of contemporary life? How does the writer relate to the news? The seminar culminates in a literary event at the Flagey Center for the Arts in Brussels, where the authors share their three-day experience with the public.

I.

Day One. The authors mingle on the sun-soaked patio with views of distant rapeseed fields: Céline Curiol, French writer, surrogate New Yorker and former journalist; Joke Hermsen, Dutch writer and philosopher interested in alternative conceptions of time; Iman Humaydan, Lebanese writer whose books tell of interior lives fragmented by her country's civil war; Jens Christian Grøndahl, Danish writer whose many novels explore love and modern relationships; Anne Provoost, Belgian writer whose provocative stories examine extremism through the eyes of young protagonists; Goce Smilevski, Macedonian writer whose novels reclaim lost voices from European history; and Juan Gabriel Vásquez, Columbian writer whose fiction probes the darkest periods in his country's history and whose newspaper columns ward off their return.

Moderator Ortwin De Graef (University of Leuven) eases us into the opening session. "I would like to start by asking everyone to give a preliminary reflection on what the theme of time means for them. We can do this clockwise, anti-clockwise..."

It does not take long to see that time has many faces. Juan Gabriel Vásquez calls out the tension between the role of the columnist, who writes of the present as someone who *knows* and tries to convince, and the role of the novelist, who writes of the past as someone who *does not* know. Jens Christian Grøndahl articulates the need to find a literary language for writing in the moment: "What does it mean to be here, right now, aesthetically and ethically, and how do we write that? How do we make people real to themselves with words?" Céline Curiol points out that the news is becoming more and more fictionalized while novels are becoming more and more 'realistic' – perhaps partly *because* of this preoccupation with documenting 'real life' in the ever-elusive present. There has been a blurring of the lines between reality and fiction, she says, and it is symptomatic of the "mediation" of our lives through news on the one hand and the contemporary obsession to write novels "based on real events" on the other. Joke Hermsen locates another symptom of our times: a growing discontent with the clock-punch, linear time of Chronos, whose time is to be measured, and thus is both ever-scarce and ever-accelerating. Her new book explores

the time of Kairos, whose time is to be *experienced*. His is the time of the opportune moment, creativity, radical change – the time of the author at work. Can Kairos ease our malaise for our times? Goce Smilevski also senses a timely shift. After decades of focusing on Foucauldian spatialities, novelists have begun to resurrect Kairos. “The time of time is coming again,” he says. He puts forward the concept of “all-timeness”; a perspective for understanding how literary works written in the past can be read as contemporary – a literary tense that transcends past, present and future. And if we were to assign this tense a mood, says Anne Provoost, it would be subjunctive: the hopeful expression of an unfulfilled future. “I write about the past in my novels, but my gaze is fixed on a utopic future. We all know that this utopia does not exist, but the path to it – that’s literature. Novels offer writers the opportunity to act as moral beacons. They contain in them the possibility of imagining the unimaginable.” But this can also entail recalling a past rendered unimaginable by the horrors of war. “I have a traumatic relationship with time,” says Iman Humaydan. “The milestones in my life have all been coupled with traumatic events and this manifests itself in my writing. I have a deeply felt distrust of time and reality. I am here to come nearer to a peaceful relationship with time.”

II.

Our time at the villa is divided into morning and afternoon sessions. Each author has prepared a keynote or selected an excerpt of his or her writing in response to a prompt. Each session opens with the reading of one of these texts, followed by a round-table group discussion. The authors are hearing one another’s keynotes and excerpts for the first time, so responses are, in that sense, spontaneous.

The novelty of the format is apparent from the beginning; it takes some time for everyone to find the right register. It is, after all, seldom that writers talk (and listen) to each other in this way, and in such suddenly intimate environs. But it does not take long for a first-name familiarity to set in. Between sessions, works-in-progress are discussed at length. Frustrations about translators, publishers and literature-starved school curricula are vented. Books are suggested, authors are talked about, pitfalls of writing a first novel in the I-form are recounted with varying measures of nostalgia. Jens Christian Grøndahl has just finished his twenty-third last week. Joke’s latest is coming out on Thursday, as is the Dutch translation of Goce’s bestseller.

This is also why the keynotes are not quite lectures, the excerpts are not quite readings and the discussions are far more meandering than any ‘meet the author’

Q&A. As Jens Christian Grøndahl puts it, the discursive space here “might actually give us the opportunity to contradict ourselves.”

Juan Gabriel Vásquez presents the first keynote: “Dealing with a news item in fiction is different because fiction tends to think for itself. Novels are more intelligent – smarter, more comprehensive – than their authors, who are irredeemably tied to prejudices, feebleness, ideology, and even faith.” The room fills with the silent buzz of thoughts and counter-thoughts, waiting to be voiced. Vásquez arrives at his final line, a fragment of the William Carlos Williams poem “Asphodel, That Greeny Flower”:

*It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.*

III.

As we work our way through the second and then the third day’s sessions, lines of thought begin to emerge, overlap and reverberate within the group. And I find myself always returning to William Carlos Williams. It seems to me that many of the group’s ideas are present in his lines. What follows is a sort of journalistic exegesis – a repurposing of main thoughts, keynote passages, excerpts and discussions shared over three days at our round table – focused through the prism of that fragment of poetry.

“It is difficult / to get the news from poems”

Our seven writers are many things, but none would call themselves poets. At least not in so many words. But this does not preclude them from speaking about the novel (and the news) in poetic terms. “Newspapers,” says Juan Gabriel Vásquez, “are soothing in the sense that they give answers; but fiction is unsettling, because all it does, as Anton Chekhov once wrote, is try to find the most interesting questions possible.” Goce Smilevski calls on Milan Kundera to articulate what those questions might be:

[Kundera] wrote in *The Art of the Novel* that the novel tries to answer the questions: “What is human existence, and wherein does its poetry lie?” I think this refers not only to the art of the novel, but also to the art of literature. And I think this is the solution to the

quandary of how to be contemporary without being contaminated and slowly destroyed by the negative sides of our time. We must face this quandary [...] in an effort to continue to draw the map of human existence with the written word.

By linking poetry and literature in this way, Smilevski opens the ‘poetry of human existence’ to all literary language, its vehicle *par excellence* the novel. In the same motion, he invests the novel with an aesthetic and ethical awareness that draws on the combined heritage of the novelistic tradition in all its variations, national and regional traditions, and epochs. And yet, for the novelist, there is no escaping the time in which he lives, says Smilevski. The novelist is contemporary whether he likes it or not, even if he positions himself against his time and even if he chooses escapism as a form of being. “We ourselves, as human beings, are a crossroads of space and time, and whatever the author writes will be marked by our contemporary world,” he says. “The main question is: will it be marked by the trivia and trivialization of our world, or it will it be something that comments on that trivialization without being contaminated by it?”

Taken together, Smilevski’s perspective of “all-timeness”, which implicates the novel *and* the novelist, makes it possible for a literary work to traffic across time and space – that “map of human existence” – in order to find new, ‘contemporary’ networks of meaning. Among his examples of novels that do this is *Alamut*, by the Slovenian author Vladimir Bartol. The book takes place in 11th-century Nizari Ismaili State, present day Northern Iran, and was read at the time of its publication in 1938 as a forewarning of Nazism. (It includes a sarcastic dedication to Mussolini.) The book was promptly forgotten after the war and remained so for a century until being rediscovered after a clear September sky in 2001 went black. It has since been translated into many languages all over the world – a novel written to warn of the horrors of Nazism now read as one to help us understand the mechanisms of terrorism. For Smilevski, to be a contemporary writer, as Bartol and others before and after him are, is to artfully possess this all-timely perspective on the page.

For Juan Gabriel Vásquez, poetry offers a bridge between the novel and the news. It is a word for the many ways novelists refashion news into narrative. News can, for instance, act as a trigger in the early stages of writing, as it did for Dostoyevsky, who would find the impetus for *Demons* in a 21 November 1869 newspaper article reporting on the icy murder of Ivan Ivanov by the Russian revolutionary and nihilist Sergei Nechaev. And as it also did for Vásquez, whose latest novel was hatched after discovering a magazine photo of Pablo Escobar’s murdered fugitive hippo that bared a striking resemblance to the iconic photo of the murdered

Escobar himself, bulging belly exposed, surrounded by smiling soldiers. Novelists have also begun experimenting with newspaper clippings, photographs, and found documents in their novels, notes Vásquez. He calls out W. G. Sebald's documentary fiction, which uses pieces of news as plot points, narrative devices and even symbols, often to jarring effect. These newsy manifestations lay bear narrative conventions, confront readers with the limits of their own ability to fashion and decode a coherent narrative, and puncture the 'total authority' of the author. In short, says Juan, they take the novel to places it has not yet been:

Our task as novelists is to look closely at these manifestations, understand how they work and take what profit – literary profit – we can from them. What is valuable in them, whether a piece of news works from outside or from within the novel, is the transformation of that material (as García Márquez used to say) through the redeeming power of poetry; or through the virtues of language, pattern and structure; or through that indefinable, magical shift of perspective that may have been in Nabokov's mind when he said the writer should be a storyteller and a teacher, but particularly an enchanter; or, finally, through that underappreciated weapon that is moral imagination, the ability to fill that newspaper clipping with people and actions larger and more complicated than the ones we know.

Smilevski's all-timeness and Vásquez' redeeming power of poetry resonate in Jens Christian Grøndahl's words on what makes good literature both enduring and present, universal and deeply personal:

You may hope to have readers after you've gone but you will only have left something behind you for others to read if you were driven by an urge, as an artist, to grasp and capture, to feel and find the adequate means to express what it was like to be present right there, right then. Not how authors before you would have said it but how it sounds today; not in order to make literature the way it was made before you were born but in order to re-ignite a spontaneous relationship between language and the world. In the words of the critic and essayist Logan Pearsall Smith: "The great art of writing is the art of making people real to themselves with words." That you cannot do once and for all; it must be done time and again, each generation awakening to the fact of their specific, shared experiences.

Making people real to themselves with words. The thought, Grøndahl points out, presupposes that without them, we are somehow unreal. And this, to return to W. C. Williams' poem, brings us closer to why it is difficult to get the news from poems: because news has its own poetics and in many ways this poetics is opposed and even

inverted to those Vásquez, Smilevski and Grøndahl describe, which are, each in their own way, the poetics of the novel. Where the novel is ‘all-timely’, news is ‘up-to-the-minute’. Where the novel, to paraphrase Carlos Fuentes, tells us how things could have happened, the news (evidently) tells us how things did happen. Where the novel’s subject is the inner lives of individuals, the news reduces people to tropes – ‘terrorist’, ‘expert’, ‘victim’, ‘suspect’. Where the novel is intimate, news is immediate. Where the novel makes us real to ourselves with words, news alienates us from our reality and ourselves by mediating it through the hyper-reality of others, a rendering of human experience, history and time that is even flatter than the screens upon which it is broadcast.

Céline Curiol reads an excerpt from her novel *Voice Over*:

She prepares herself a quick dish of pasta shells with grated Gruyère cheese and settles down with her meal in front of the television. A man in a suit and tie is being interviewed as part of a televised debate. His name is given at the bottom of the screen: Yves Métayer, Terrorism Expert and Professor at the Institute of Political Science. The man earnestly explains that we have to stop deluding ourselves, that in five or ten years we will witness an actual Third World War. Not a conflict between nation states but a full-blown religious war, Christians against Muslims! The journalist smiles into the camera. Aren’t you being a bit too pessimistic? That’s precisely the kind of blinkered judgment that will make this war impossible to contain, replies the professor, growing increasingly agitated. This conflict will be extremely bloody, you’ll see. The journalist thanks Yves Métayer and announces a commercial break. The pasta shells have slipped from her fork; she is left open-mouthed. She doesn’t watch the news very often; she hadn’t known there was already talk of a Third World War. She doesn’t really believe it, but if it were actually to come about, where would she be in five years’ time? Here. The first target in a war is always the capital. Would she leave? She swallows a few more mouthfuls of pasta, and when she’s finished, her mind is made up: she’ll stay.

“yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there”

And now Iman Humaydan reads from her novel *Other Lives*:

The war’s stopped and there are still piles of sandbags. I must accept this; I must stop trying to understand it. I’ll learn how, I tell myself. There’s no doubt that following the progression of events from an outside location, far away, as independent events with no

past – no relationship with what came before – is fraught with difficulty. But it's not impossible. It's inconsistent with the concept of history, but it's good to try it, even if only once in my whole life!

“We don't have choices here. We only have one thing, that's it, forgetting!” Wafaa says as I put out my last cigarette in the already full ashtray. But what about those people who fought the war...who killed and kidnapped and mutilated bodies...Where are they? And where are their victims?

Do they die for lack of what is found in novels? Can novels in some way save the living and the dead, the aggressors and the victims alike, by recounting their individual stories, by giving voice to voices silenced? Can novels redeem a life riddled by violence, loss, and trauma? Humaydan believes they can: “There was an explosion of novels in Lebanon after the war. Novels tend to bring out the details of the violence that took place – whether during World War II, the war in the Balkans, or the civil war in Lebanon. This they do through the memories of individual people who were subject to violence and loss; through their dreams, their individual time. The novel is more than the story of communities – communities that fight each other and hate each other. That is the important difference for me. I think the novel succeeded where sociology failed. If you really want to understand what is going on after the civil war, the novel is the best way to do that. The novel is the social document of Lebanon.”

“That is quite a statement,” interjects Joke Hermsen. “Would you really say that only the novel reveals the real story?” Ortwin de Graef points out that novels were used in 1930s Germany and Flanders to the exact opposite effect: to foment violence among different European communities. “Those novels were produced by the cultural apparatus of the time, so what makes the Lebanese novel different?” he asks.

“I think the novel in Lebanon, as the novel did in most of the world, adopted the anti-mainstream voice, and the anti-power voice,” answers Humaydan. Lebanese novelists were always trying to create a voice to represent the voiceless, the peripheral communities, women. These voices were not heard before the war.” Novels subverted the official narrative peddled on state-controlled TV, a narrative that valorized commerce and transit and laughed openly in the faces of farmers, craftsmen and marginalized groups. “The novel created another image of these people, a positive image, and in this sense it was revolutionary work. Until then, politicians had been the ones to dictate what was good and what was bad. The novel in Lebanon, just as in Latin American in the wake of *La Violencia (the Columbian*

civil war in the 1950s, eds.), said 'No!'. Novelists asserted the authority to tell the story of their times.”

Asserting this authority, says Anne Provoost, has everything to do with taking a firm stand as an author, both outside the text, as a public figure unafraid to state his cause, and inside the text, as a narrative voice that points readers to possible answers rather than endless questions. Provoost uses her keynote to challenge her fellow writers not to shy away from this task. “I am defending the novelist as a moral beacon,” she says. “I reject the false contrast between taking a position and being an artist. We all take a position one way or another. Why not make it transparent? Why not say, modestly and with an open mind, ‘This is my position; I invite you to contradict me?’” This is the best way to guard against the complacency of both the writer and the reader, says Anne. “I have a problem with novelists who say ‘I offer no answers, only questions’. Readers come to a text with questions; our job as authors is to offer potential answers.” This does not mean that there can only be one ‘right answer’, but rather that finding an answer is a matter of decoding messages using a cypher unique to each individual reader and her situation. “The author makes an appeal to the reader, asks her, demands of her that she decode. We must tell our readers that there are a thousand messages on each page and leave the decoding to them.”

My decoding ends here, which is to say that I could go on until the end of time, so many are our seven authors’ messages and so many are the questions their readers bring to them. Literature is news that stays news, after all.

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