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**Facing up to disaster with words**

(July 2023, translated by Marc Prior)

*The World of Yesterday: Memoires of a European*, written by the Austrian author Stefan Zweig between 1939 and 1941 in the final years of his exile in Brazil, and published in 1942, just one year after his death, describes numerous events, including Zweig's first encounter with "the enemy" during the First World War. The enemy: a group of Russian prisoners of war, whom he encountered somewhat by chance in the turmoil of the war. Zweig noticed that the Germans guarding the POWs did not carry out their duties particularly strictly. They sat about in a neighbourly fashion with their captives, although they were unable to understand each other's language. "They exchanged cigarettes and laughed at each other. A Tyrolese militia man was just taking some pictures of his wife and children out of a very old and dirty pocketbook and showing them to the "enemy," who passed them about amongst themselves asking the Austrian by means of their fingers if this child was three, or four," wrote Stefan Zweig.

It was as if the guards and their prisoners had only just met and were sitting together in a café, rather than having fought against each other on the front. It is the storytelling that brings the enemies closer together and opens their eyes to the fact that the war is a catastrophe in the face of which they are equally defenceless, irrespective of which side they are on. The stories they tell each other bring home to them that they share the same fate and that their storytelling is a struggle to preserve the truth that all people share a common humanity. Humanity is the opposite of war, which turns people into enemies before they have even seen each other.

Such is war: human beings become enemies. Some are conscripted and sent to the front; others volunteer to fight for a cause, and to win. They will kill each other for this, despite never having argued personally about this conflict up to that point. Who knows how things would have played out had they met in person before the war? Perhaps they would have sat down together, smoked a cigarette, talked, enjoyed a cup of coffee or tea or a beer, shown each other photographs of their loved ones, and told their stories. Instead, they endure the dirt, fear and loneliness of the trenches, facing death by bayonet, drone or some other means on a daily basis.

At the same time there are those who incite war, raising their voices in parliaments or the media and calling for open confrontation. They are not limited to the nationalists, fanatics and war profiteers. These people all know each other well and can turn any conflict, no matter how great or trivial, into an even greater conflict. Later, when much blood has been shed, when the remains of those killed lie by the thousand in graves on each side of every front, the usual suspects sit down at the negotiating tables and divide the spoils of war among themselves.

The division of a community begins softly. Later, no one will be able to say exactly when and where it started, and when and where exactly a difference of opinion turned into a dispute and then into an armed conflict. Because even if people knew each other beforehand, as is the case in a civil war, the usual suspects do everything in their power to fuel conflicts further until people no longer recognize themselves, until even the very clothes they wear become alien to them. One morning, people in Cyprus, Lebanon, Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Iraq, Somalia, Ethiopia, Yemen and elsewhere wake up and realize that they hate each other and that they have been living in a community riddled with enemies. Neighbours and workmates who until the day before sat together in a café, greeted each other in the street, perhaps even hugged and kissed each other on the cheek, suddenly give each other a wide berth. People who until the day before were part of the same family suddenly view each other as strangers, and it is only a matter of time before they take up arms against each other. Houses are set on fire, people are driven out of their homes, neighbourhoods and cities in which they have lived for generations, and suddenly our “world of today” has become a “world of yesterday”.

Literature has never tired of showing us such disasters, and never will. It sends out warning signals in the form of stories telling of hunger and distress, of death and expulsion, of dungeons, helplessness and despair and of all the horrors that war or any armed conflict brings with it. It is not uncommon for literature to discern that when a war breaks out, the poor are called up to defend their country; but when a war comes to an end, the rich convene to divide the spoils.

Stefan Zweig is not alone in observing this phenomenon: we can read the same in the works of Ivo Andrić, Nikos Kazantzakis, Erich Maria Remarque, André Malraux, Ernest Hemingway and many others.

In his essay *The artist's struggle for integrity*, the American James Baldwin wrote: “Poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don't. Statesmen don't. Priests don't.” And I believe he was right. The true writers, those who feel a social responsibility, don't necessarily stand for election to office. They don't absolve anyone, and we hope that they don't take up arms. Their task should be to describe the truth unerringly: what they see, what they can bear witness to. They should look for words that

may still be valid in a decade, indeed in the next century. If they feel that their novels, poems or texts are not sufficient to prevent or halt the catastrophe, they should choose a different medium, the “aesthetics of resistance”, to borrow a term from Peter Weiss. They should seek common ground with writers and artists on the other side of the conflict and endeavour to create a shared vision that serves peace and makes any war superfluous.

It was this hope that led the young Stefan Zweig to travel to Belgium to meet Romain Rolland, a well-known peace activist of his time, and with him to write a joint declaration against the impending First World War. The hostility and smears they both received for this from their fellow countrymen did not deter Zweig from meeting Rolland a second time. This time, however, in a hotel in Zurich that was full of informers.

Going there today would be comparable to a Russian artist travelling to Kiev or a Ukrainian artist to Moscow, an Arab poet to Tel Aviv or an Israeli poet to Damascus or Beirut. Anyone who ventures into “enemy territory” and openly speaks or writes about it is putting their life in danger.

Visiting enemy countries in times of war and calling for peace is playing with fire, and not only in the “world of yesterday”. I sensed this fire first-hand when I undertook a “journey to the heart of the enemy” in 2007. I visited Israel and wrote a book about the people I met there, knowing full well that for an Arab, travelling to Israel at any time is like playing with fire. Moreover, it never was or is permitted to portray the “enemy” as a human being who, just like oneself, fears violence and war.

But what alternative is there for those who are condemned to peace? Whose works, creativity and art are to be understood as a place, a meeting point where people come together in their diversity, with their differences and characteristics? What else can we do but look to those who went before us and who serve as our beacons, to all those artists who placed their lives and their work in the service of peace? The writing of manifestos seeking peace, the exchange of ideas on how to prevent war and militarism, the writing of anti-war novels: all these forms of literature are part of the aesthetics of resistance that, as a response to armament, may one day avert the catastrophe of war.

This is the background to the “literary peace talks” project, which is being held for the first time this year with the title “Westphalian Peace Talks” to mark the 375th anniversary of the “Peace of Westphalia”, and is to be continued with talks on the Northern Ireland conflict.

For years, I entertained the idea of writers, strangers to each other, from a pair of countries or regions in conflict, creating a vision for a dispute in a different form, in order to bring new impetus to a deadlocked political dialogue. Through their willingness to listen to and respond to each other, they would use available literary tools to examine the prevailing opinions,

views and prejudices in their respective civil societies, scrutinize them and discuss them, including in relation to official policy pronouncements. The argument for this is that poets – and I use the term here as it was used by James Baldwin – share a common ability to view and depict conflicts in their own way, i.e. through literature. They are not constrained by precepts or political strategies; they can adopt new positions and in doing so consider the parameters of the conflict – economic, political, geographical, religious and cultural – from a different perspective.

I know how difficult and sometimes impossible it is for people who have faced each other off from the trenches to sit down together, talk and look for ideas that bring them closer together. I say this from my own experience. It isn't because of the hostility you experience from your own countrymen, but because of the fear of yourself, of having been wrong in your observations, of your analyses having failed. It's a question of having trust, and courage. Of having patience and self-confidence. And the will for peace is crucial.

It was no different for our two authors, José Ovejero and Jordi Puntí, who rose to the challenge of the peace talks this year. It was their will that brought them closer together. Initially, the gulf between their positions was great. Jordi Puntí favours Catalan independence; José Ovejero, as he wrote in a letter to Puntí, rejects any form of nationalism, except in a colonial context. Although José distinguishes between independence and nationalism, he senses nationalism in the Catalan nationalist movements much more strongly than does Jordi, who feels constrained and oppressed by the Spanish state and believes that his language and culture are under siege by it. Without being a Spanish nationalist and without regarding the integrity of Spain as inviolable and non-negotiable, Ovejero admits that he finds it difficult at times to understand Puntí's points of view.

It took time, and will, for the two to gradually find the mutual trust to present their respective views and thoughts on the political conflict between Catalonia and Spain while at the same time listening to each other's arguments.

Less than six months later, having held many talks and exchanged more than ten letters, they were able to reach a general agreement on the path to be taken to resolve or defuse the conflict between Spain and Catalonia and formulate this path in a joint text.

In order to find this path, José Ovejero and Jordi Puntí confidently addressed each other and each other's positions without hatred and arrogance, without prejudice and without vanity. The result is a text that provides impetus and solutions for lasting peace and reconciliation. This joint text and the authors' letters of rapprochement concerning the current conflict, the hopes and fears of the people on both sides and the political positions of the parties, are to

be published in a book so that we can follow the thoughts of these great authors and their steps towards literary conflict resolution.

In a “world of yesterday”, almost 100 years ago, the Austrian Stefan Zweig and the Belgian Romain Rolland met to stand up for peace. The Spaniard José Ovejero and the Catalan Jordi Puntí have done this in the “world of today”.

It takes courage to try to understand the other side and to qualify one’s own point of view. With their literary peace negotiations on the Catalan-Spanish conflict, José Ovejero and Jordi Puntí have dared to break a taboo. The two authors have earned respect and recognition.

This year’s “Westphalian Peace Talks” are, it is hoped, just the beginning of a project lasting many years in which we invite writers to develop lasting solutions to conflicts in their countries or regions. Next, we would like to look at the conflict in Northern Ireland post-Brexit, and then at the ongoing tensions between Turkey and Greece, with a focus on Cyprus.

I know we cannot necessarily prevent the catastrophe of war with literary peace talks, but I also know that only in this way, only by using words to try to find solutions to conflicts without taking up arms, only through dialogue, only by listening, reason, patience and self-reflection, by this means only and no other, will we create a more peaceful and just world in which we can live together and share our natural diversity.

THANK YOU.