

1

So here we are, coming all from different countries in Europe, some of them struggling with authoritarian governments or with a cruel war on its territory or near its borders, all of them dealing or rather not knowing how to deal with a climate crisis, with an energy supply crisis, with massive or scattered immigration. Here we are all in Berlin, looking out towards the Brandenburger Tor, which after having been a symbol of division, became a symbol of freedom, of union. Here we are this evening, gathered in a rather privileged part of the world which had been once the very place from which tragedy was sent off all over Europe, all over the world. In this very place, die Akademie der Künste, in this city, Berlin, words as degenerate art were issued, exclusions were pronounced, in this very city we are all gathered today to speak about artistic freedom. This could be a symbol, a message for hope.

2

I come from a country, France, where there is no true censorship nor repression at this time, where freedom does exist – being even part

of the country's motto, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, but is a motto what really happens? That is another question. For my generation and the younger ones, the first real impact of a restricted freedom, the first real intrusion of State, of Law in our private lives, was felt about two years ago, during the Covid lockdown. We could go out each day just for one hour, with a sheet of paper where the reason why we should go out had to be marked : shopping, medical care, walking a dog, taking care of an elderly person. Of course there had been the attacks against *Charlie Hebdo*, the attacks at the Bataclan. The day after - a Saturday, I remember - the streets of Paris were empty, everyone was petrified and stayed at home, listening to the news. But by Sunday the city had already overcome fear and stupefaction. There have been other murders, other acts of terrorism since then but – how to put it – however terrifying, those facts can't be compared with a long enduring war, with a long enduring regime of oppression. What I mean is that I know where I am speaking from.

I remember in May 1990, I was going to Poland – the country where my family came from – for the first time, in Warsaw, Cracow, then further on to Budapest, to Bratislava and Prague. The Berlin Wall had just fallen and I was to ask writers, is there such a thing as a central European culture, does it exist no more, has it ever existed? I had read of course the writers I was to meet – Tadeusz Konwicki, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz (there was no Law and Justice party at the time) or Peter Esterhazy, Peter Nadas, György

Petri. I was looking for my way as a writer – I am still looking for it but differently – and I admired their manner of being political, of speaking about political events in a literary form, sometimes in a cryptic way in order to escape censorship. But then someone told me, at last we will now be able to write love stories as in your countries, the very love stories I despised in French literature because I thought French writers almost never deal with important subjects as collective memory, history – tragic events lasting upon the following generations. There and then, in eastern or central Europe (as you wish), I learned that the most important thing is to write about what you want to write, be it a love story or a political dystopia, and never let any kind of censorship– whether coming from outside or from inside - dictate its own text.

### 3

Zeitgeist is a beautiful word, one of those German words which are said to be impossible to translate into other languages. Spirit of the times in English, air du temps in French; both close and far from Zeitgeist... A beautiful word but a less beautiful thing. Zeitgeist is our Umwelt, our environment, the space and time we are living in. In this space and time, words are circulating, a certain amount of limited words, always the same, always with the same meaning. Zeitgeist is the realm of univocity. You know those words, we hear them all day long on radio, on tv, we read them every day in newspapers, in social medias. They are words as climate change,

earth warming, ecological crisis, gas, oil, war. Names as Zaporizhia, Kherson, Odessa. Words as torture, winter, bombs, mines. Those words we go on repeating while we are talking with friends, with colleagues, those words we help unwillingly to diffuse on a larger scale, making them more and more present. Words are not only words, they convey thoughts, they induce thoughts. Sitting at our table, trying to write something if we are writers, we are surrounded by the Zeitgeist voices and the words they pronounce. Literature is the only art which has to deal with a common material, language. In order to be able to write a literary text, we must get rid of the superficial layers of language to get access to more profound, more personal layers. It means to get rid of the servitude of the Zeitgeist in order to have access to our personal thoughts and feelings - enchained at our mast like Ulysses to resist the Siren's songs. Freedom in art can only happen when you are able to silence the everyday voices, the everyday words and thoughts and images, and out of their silence reach then a new perspective, a singular point of view. But this cannot be done while some overwhelming turmoil happens. When such an event happens, we can only act on autopilot because we have to react immediately, as a person, possibly as a citizen, sometimes it is about saving our lives and even when it is not so crucial, we are first petrified. Our mind is empty like the streets of Paris on the day after the attacks. During this moment - which can last for days or for weeks or for months - it is impossible to write about the very event and impossible to

concentrate upon something else, impossible to go on as if nothing happened, to rebuild a kind of continuity. Something has broken in our lives and in our works and we need courage to acknowledge our impossibility to write, to create anything of value and we need patience to stay silent and wait. The words of literature are not meant to fill the open spaces of the book to come with the automatic sentences our smartphones suggest in their automatic corrections. Our white sheets have to remain white as long as they need it in order to be filled, later, with new sentences, new ideas, with our own voice as writers, as artists, which could only be found far from the echoes and rumors of usefulness – of news and information.

Staying silent though does not mean remaining passive, it means taking notes which will perhaps build a basis for a future book, reading books written years or centuries ago by writers who felt and knew similar distresses, similar tragedies - in order to help us to get through and to land safely on the other side of the event.

#### 4

Art is about form, every artist is looking for new forms and form is not an empty shell but a complex connection between what is said and how it is said. As Hofmannsthal once wrote, "Form ist vom Inhalt der Sinn, Sinn das Wesen der Form." Form is the meaning of content, meaning, the essence of form." The search of a new form is a constant struggle to get free from traditions, from our own

limits, from our inner prison. A freedom difficult to obtain, the opposite of ready-made thought or art, a never-ending fight.

5

In Jafar Panahi's new movie, *No bears*, the film-maker, who is forbidden to travel and to shoot films, settles down in a village near the Turkish border to follow the shooting of his own movie on his computer and, as he can't be on the film set which is close but in another country, to feel nearer to it. He accepts one night to be driven to the border by his film operator. He could reach the other side – a smuggler has just sent a signal - to visit the city where they are shooting, the real city and not a simple image on his computer screen. Suddenly he asks: where is the border? Just here, under your feet, the film operator answers. In front of the filmmaker, the city lights twinkle around the dark shape of a lake. But the filmmaker turns back, goes back to the car, back to Iran. Why didn't he go further? Out of fear, we think, fear of what could happen to him, to his family, to the movie? But if we dig deeper and try to reach those profound layers which lie beyond the surface... The twinkling lights are seducing, seem to mean liberty. But couldn't they just be illusions ? Returning to the village, the film-maker chooses a difficult path, making a film without being there, his presence being only virtual, working with a media without immediacy, depending on bad internet connections and constant disruptions from the village - from the daily reality with its constant

pressures. But those bad conditions create the very conditions for his artistic freedom, giving birth to a new kind of cinema mixing fiction and documentary, thematizing the opposition between still image and moving image, making immobility a symbol for censorship. Dealing with all possible constraints, Jahar Panahi the author of the movie *No Bears* and Jahar Panahi the actor in the movie *No Bears* are both telling us that artistic freedom does not mean escaping for a time (it would have been just for one night) into an illusory free world – and is Turkey that free? - but to accept the confrontation with reality, whatever difficult and oppressive reality is. In other words, artistic freedom is acknowledging the here and now we are living in, is a constant compromise with exterior conditions as artistic freedom inhabits inside of us, in our ability to distance ourselves from the daily events and language and traditions - in order to find our own voice.

We all know that Jahar Panahi has just been sentenced to six years imprisonment. He probably felt it would happen while working on the film. But he could complete it and the film has been running or is now running in Venice, Paris, London or elsewhere. His film is free.

Finally, and most emphatically, words, like ourselves, in order to live at their ease, need privacy. Undoubtedly they like us to think,

and they like us to feel, before we use them; but they also like us to  
pause; to become unconscious. Our unconsciousness is their  
privacy; our darkness is their light. . .