

Writing and its Hinterland: A Talk

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When I was asked or invited to speak to you,¹ as always happens when you agree to do a lecture, people say what is going to be your subject. Very often, this is always a crisis moment because you probably have not already got a talk in mind but people want you to give it a title. So I was actually thinking and that is my title [“Writing and its Hinterland”]. So you have got a title and then you say what did I mean by that title? So how do I talk to that title? I think what I had in mind at the time was the way memory functions for a writer but I was not sure if I really wanted to talk about that. So I used that somewhat more open word, “hinterland,” to suggest something like what is it that lies behind the writer’s economy, if you like, speaking, of course, only of my experience. When I say economy, imagine that the writer is like a small city. The people who live in that city very often do not actually produce very much, at least not very much food anyway, and not very much of the primary things that go on to be manufactured into other things. These people are around us, the country, farmers, whoever the people who dig up clay, potters, that kind of thing. So that’s the hinterland I had in mind. What is it that happens behind the product that then becomes a piece of writing that is then given to us as readers? So that’s what I meant when I said I was thinking of memory – what function does that play in the way that a writer works. When I say writer, I really mean me because I cannot speak of other people’s experience so I am not trying to generalize my sense of how it plays. So read it like that. Read it like how writing works for me rather than perhaps speaking in a general way. I will probably do so as I go along but to begin with, let me think about memory.

So memory is deceptive. Well, you all know that. Sometimes, you are not sure if you are remembering things correctly. You often miss important details: how many times have you been speaking to somebody who perhaps shares the events that you are remembering and you say this is what happened or that is what happened but they say, “But don’t you remember also there is something you forgot?” And this other person reminds you of that. I have a brother who is more or less the same age as me, a year between us. We have always stayed in the same place, of course when we were younger, we have always shared a room, we went to the same school, we often took the same class, but we still find ourselves

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saying, “No, it didn’t happen like that, it happened like this,” correcting each other’s memory of what had happened. So it is a tricky thing what we think we remember. Now, imagine that if you are writing, especially if you are writing about kind of real incidents – it is fiction after all so it does not have to be exactly as it happened. But very often it is informed by something that did happen. And as you try to recall it – this is a beautiful thing about writing – the small details actually come back, things you had not thought of, things in an ordinary way you do not have time or reason to think about or to bring back to your present, as it were. What happens is you remember a little more detail and that detail connects with another detail, and before very long, as you get into the practice of doing it that, in fact, as time passes, you remember more and more rather than less and less. And strangely enough, you remember further back rather than closer to now. It seems to me rather an important resource for the writer. That might seem fine because you are remembering, you are writing, you are moving on. But there is a rather darker side to it – an unfortunate or nagging side to it – because you do not always want to remember, there are things you want to forget. But once you begin this process, they keep coming, these things that you had quietly put away, they come back. And so you have to live through all of these things. But it does not always have to do with remembering correctly. It is not always about remembering exactly as things happen. But what it does is gives you a sense of what it was like at certain times, what was it like to feel or grow up or to live or to have experience. So therefore when it comes to writing about something you are making up, a fictional person, you do have all these other dimensions, felt dimensions that you have remembered, and you can now give to somebody else as a way of authenticating whatever it is that you are presenting.

But also memory is important because there are so many attempts to erase that memory. People often say we live in times that are turbulent or confusing or difficult. Yes, we do but I do not really think we are exceptional. I mean I do not think our time is an exceptional time. Most people in their own epochs probably felt the same way – that we live in turbulent times – for different reasons perhaps. A few years ago, there was a threat of terror everywhere, suicide bombings, planes being hijacked, and that too seemed like a moment of crisis, and the whole world was being invaded, conflagrations here and there and so on, powerful nations going to bring peace apparently, but bombing everybody to death. So the idea of crisis is always with us, I think. And the other thing that happens in crisis is that those who rule, governments and so on, become more authoritarian because these are crisis times, which gives them the license to take unusual measures and also in the process to rewrite what had happened in order to make it more suitable. Governments are always doing this and also

biased powerful forces within nations are always doing this, wanting to reshape and rewrite and change the stories so that it fits whatever agenda it is they have in mind. I think this is where the writer and his little memory plays a part. He says, “No, no, this is not how it was, it was like this.” So all those remembered moments, those remembered apprehensions, understandings become a way of also resisting, shall we say, the revision of the story or the narrative of both our times and also of the times before us, of historical moments. Of course, you can also take the big moments in this respect.

You can take the way, for example, how European colonialism was narrated, how it was told. I am talking in particular about European colonialism of various African nations. Colonialism is not the same for everybody. It did not happen in the same way. Like it happened here in this subcontinent in quite a different way from the way it happened in, say, South Africa or North America or in our part of the world. But nonetheless there is a consistent underlying idea in the way that colonialism narrates itself which is, to a large degree, self-aggrandizing or, the very least, self-forgiving – we did this, we did that – and the ugly and cruel things that were done, the hubristic, the idea of superiority, those are not spoken about, they are not emphasized. On our part, on the part of someone like myself, I very much want to emphasize that what drove colonial cruelty was a belief in the superiority of one over the other. So those people are not quite as human as we are, etc. I only give that as an example. I am not really talking about colonialism in depth but saying this is one of the ways in which that idea of memory that is important. You remember not only for yourself, you remember not only the personal histories of things you went through but those also relate to the history of people and of larger societies.

But memory is also shared. So I do not just remember for myself, I also remember what people told me, what my parents told me, what elders told me when I was a child. I also remember what I hear now. So a writer then becomes a confluence of all these narrations, narratives, remembered fragments, and so on. And a writer, of course, has his own mind, his own intelligence and his own eyes and ears so he can see and make up his own mind. And all of this come together and produce a little book. And out of that, we, now I am turning myself around, now I am a reader, so we as readers when we receive a work of writing, of literature, what happens? Well, a variety of things. The first thing we look for, I think, is an imprecise kind of pleasure. We look to be pleased and delighted – not in the way if you saw something funny, not in the way you would if you saw young women and men dancing, but for something quieter than that because we usually read on our own, although sometimes we might be listening to a reader. We look for, I think, in the first place, is if this is engaging me. Is this pleasing me? I do not

mean pleasing in the simple sense, but in a profound sense, in the same way that music does, for example. So we do not listen to it and exclaim, although sometimes we might but when we listen to it, something works, engages, that keeps you listening or reading. Now it could also be as we read, we think yes I know that or this and I agree with this. So we read something and we recognize something we ourselves have already arrived at or it could be that we have not arrived at that and we read something and we think yes, that is really interesting, I had not thought of it like that. And so it illuminates our understanding. It increases our understanding of familiar things. But also when we read, we are struck by what we did not know at all. In other words, there is also news in the literature. All of these things may happen at once, even in the same moment, or within seconds of each other. I am thinking, – I do not know how many people here have read Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. If you have not, and you have time and a choice between reading this and that, and one of them is *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, then read *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. It will do all of these things I am describing here. It certainly did it for me. So although you think you know something about the Russian Gulag, what happens is that it makes you see in a seriously detailed way what it is like to be in the Russian Gulag. This is what I mean by news. It is not that it tells you something entirely alien and out of this world but it brings you news that you have no way of receiving. So that is what happens as a reader.

So then, to return to our title, if the writer's hinterland is memory, this is not a simple thing. This is not simply a matter of remembering, but it is also a matter of remembering in detail, possibly adding to that memory sometimes to check things – so this is what co-research is, as far as I can see, for a writer I mean. It is not that we invent a subject, but you begin with an idea and then you know what you know about it. You do not begin from nothing. And then perhaps you go read to either confirm certain things or to broaden your understanding. So the writer too learns as he – I told you I am talking about myself – probes and investigates and reflects. In my experience, it takes a long time to write. It is not that the writing process is lengthy but it might be if you have to rewrite several times. This is normal. This is not exceptional at all. Writers do not often talk about it but the process of it is you write one draft, and then another one. Then the editor looks at it and asks for more revisions and you think “Yes, but I'm not sure this is me. I'm not sure.” And then you revise a third time and so on it goes on. So you go through the various stages of this process of revising and then the thing is ready. A lot of people are involved, a lot of time is involved, a lot of thinking is involved. The greatest thinking is actually before, I think, I begin to write – the lengthiest period before I begin to write. It might take three or four

years sometimes before I begin to write. I think my novel *Paradise* was published in 1994. I think I wrote the first paragraph in 1984 – which actually, strangely enough, turned out to be the final paragraph of the novel. It was ten years. It does not mean I was doing nothing else in those ten years. But that is how long it takes for things to percolate and then the moment arrives when there is time now. I might also say that final paragraph, which was the original first paragraph, was of the recruiting drive of the German forces, or rather administration – it is about the First World War – which was recruiting mercenaries for their army and that is how *Paradise* ends. So for a long time, I was thinking, while other things were going on, what happens to this young man who becomes a mercenary and it took me until 2018 to actually get around to writing it, and it is the book *Afterlives*. So it takes a long time and during this time the other processes I have described occur – of remembering, of researching, of accumulating, and then beginning to write. Even then it is not over because as you write, then other things come up. So as you do that research as I mentioned before, you discover things you have not thought of and so it goes on. And then when you finish, you think, have I done it right? Or is this subject of the next one? So it goes on. So the writer's hinterland, as I have described, that is also something to do with the process itself and how the process itself produces a kind of dynamic that prepares a writer for their next project as well, the next thing to be done. It is never-ending, I tell you. I think perhaps that will be it. Thank you very much for having me here.