

Opening speech by Franz Hohler 2019

Sadness and Hope

The stories we tell

“How’s it going?” said Sadness to Hope.

“I’m a little sad,” said Hope.

“I hope so,” said Sadness.

I’d like to welcome everyone who’s come to read and to listen, to discuss, reflect and dream together these next few days.

Literature is like a vast house. It has more than one door and many different rooms. It has little nooks and expansive chambers. There’s a basement and an attic. And there are many windows through which, when they are open, snippets of the world can be seen. If a room’s shutters are closed, you will find that you’re alone with yourself; perhaps there is a lamp that invites you to read. But should the light all of a sudden go out, you will sit in the dark feeling the beat of your own heart.

There are rooms in which sadness is at home: sadness over the things in life that haven’t worked out, sadness over lost love and lost youth, over lost time and lost laughter, sadness over the death of our loved ones. Michael Krüger has written a short poem about it:

The Eleventh Commandment

Thou shalt not die.

When these rooms are hushed, for we must wipe away a tear at Larissa’s discovery of the dead Dr. Zhivago, laughter can be heard coming from other, nearby rooms. Those are the rooms in which satire is at home, the humor that turns pain on its head by making it ridiculous, by gazing up at the monument from a worm’s-eye view, or looking at the heroic deeds of the war through the eyes of the good soldier Švejk, who’s only wish is to survive. In laughing at the comedy, we realize that there is no getting past life’s tragedies. That’s why the laughter doesn’t disrupt the mourners, for humor is the work of mourning.

To that effect, I’d like to share one of my fairy tales with you:

The Chalk and the Sponge

Leisurely, a piece of chalk began to write a sentence on the blackboard:

“The most important thing in the world is...”

“Well?” said the sponge, dripping as he inched closer.

“...the sponge,” hurriedly wrote the chalk.

“That’s what I thought,” said the sponge as he sunk contentedly back down into his dish beneath the blackboard.

Yes, fairy tales are told in the House of Literature, old ones and new, because we need brave princes, third sons, and enchanted princesses, so we never stop believing that Sleeping Beauty will be kissed awake after a hundred years of sleep. We need a Fellowship of the Ring to see to it that justice is done and we need to know that in London’s Victoria Station there’s a platform 9¾ from whence a train will take us to a magical castle.

We need imagination.

It transports us to worlds in which we’ve never been. We need do nothing more than sit down inside the House of Literature before we’re chasing whales through the world’s oceans with Captain Ahab, are the Leopard’s guests in Sicily, or meet the Devil in Moscow.

In darker encounters, in the house’s basement, we may find ourselves in a concentration camp, a trench, or Kafka’s penal colony. For without mankind’s capacity for cruelty, the House of Literature would not be complete. Kafka himself commented on how this cruelty comes to be unleashed in a statement he made about the First World War:

“War is a monstrous failure of imagination.”

Imagination is the patron saint of the House of Literature. We who write call upon her when our minds have drawn a blank, and those who’ve grown close to her can accomplish incredible things. Karl May was never once in America, and yet we believe beyond the shadow of a doubt in Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. Indeed, every work of historical fiction is a piece of cheek, as none of us has ever been in the past.

The House of Literature is packed with guides to the past, and it offers the cheapest mode of travel. I was excited to make my first trip to Odesa, even though I was here a hundred years ago when Konstantin Paustovsky took me with him in his book *The Story of a Life*. I lived with him in a former mental institution on Chornomors’ka Street, we ate *firinka* together and went to steal wood for his stove at the *arkadiy*. In summer, I accompanied him to the Kowalewski Tower, where he set up camp in an empty summer house. A brief passage from that time has stayed with me:

“I needed only to stoop down, pick up a white stone from the road, and blow the dust from it to be able to say, without even looking at it, that it was a granular beach pebble warmed by the midday sun, and to feel sad at the impossibility of describing the life of this stone, which had seen many millennia.”

When I read that, I thought, “Konstantin, master of portraying life, why should you be unable to describe the life of a stone? Don’t be sad on that account; I’ll do it for you.” So I sat down and wrote a story called “The Stone,” which recounts the biography of a stone, from the creation of Earth to the moment it is thrown at a police officer during a demonstration and hits a girl instead. This story can be found in my collection *Der Präsident* (The president), which was translated into Russian by Vyacheslav Kupriyanov.

We are all competitors, eyeing each other with suspicion. How many people have written about refugees and migration, about artificial intelligence, about global warming? But we can also be generous. On a journey through Switzerland, Goethe delved intensively into the legend of William Tell, but then gave the material to Schiller when he realized it suited him better. And Paustovsky gave me his stone.

We encourage each other, we shake each other’s hands, even across centuries, we who work in the House of Literature. We shout poems to each other in all the languages of the world and give them to a courier, a translator, who carries it from one room to another so it can be understood there as well.

I was reminded of one such poem when, in his inaugural speech, the young president of this country expressed the delightful sentiment that everyone is the president of his own country.

It’s by Dora Koster, a Swiss writer who was forced to earn her living as a prostitute and who passed away two years ago.

I am my own president
my own worm
my own nothing
my own distance
which on its own can change everything
when necessary
I am my own amazement
at the many possibilities
my own sea
in which I search for corals

But dealing with the powers that be isn’t so easy for everyone, or else the PEN Club wouldn’t have to organize an annual day for writers in prison. Tomorrow at noon while this very festival is taking place, a reading will be held at the main post office to remember a writer who is currently in prison. In the words of Solzhenitsyn: “A great writer is, so to speak, a second government in his country. And for that reason no regime has ever loved great writers, only minor ones.”

I'd like to tell you another of my fables.

The Jackhammer and the Egg

A jackhammer and an egg were arguing about who was the stronger of the two.

"Naturally, it's me!" cried the jackhammer.

"Ha!" screeched the egg, "I'm much stronger than you."

The jackhammer shrugged. "If you say so. I'll smash you into a thousand pieces."

"And I'll break open your skull!" squeaked the egg.

"Silly egg," the jackhammer said and shook his head. "How do you possibly expect this to end?"

"You'll see," boasted the egg and pounded his chest.

"It'd take nothing more than a whisk of my little finger," laughed the jackhammer.

"I'll turn you to mush with my yolk," crowed the egg and hopped belligerently from one leg to the other.

That was just too much for the jackhammer, who, as he'd promised, smashed the egg into a thousand pieces.

That's it. What's wrong? Did you think the egg was going to win? How naïve! This is a story taken from life.

But back to the House of Literature.

In spite of everything I've just said: It's not entirely clear what this house is meant to do. What is clear is that it should be accessible to all who are curious, or, as the Austrian writer Ernst Jandl once said:

"There's a place at my desk for everyone."

Whenever it becomes difficult to access the House and the desks within it, when prohibitions are posted, whether for the books themselves or their import, we can be sure it's not a good sign. For the House of Literature is clearly a House of Freedom. Whatever we writers invent and dream up, whatever is born in our minds and transformed into language, whatever flits along our synapses and comes out as a poem, story, play, narrative, or novel should have room in this house.

In this house, no question is off limits, whether it is about the future, the present, or the past. Even more than a House of Answers, the House of Literature is a House of Questions. *One* answer, however, is always present, and that is the writing itself. What was it the Dadaists – who came together in Zurich during the First World War, flabbergasting and distressing audiences with their strident verses – said about their art? "It is our response to the thunder of

the batteries rumbling across Europe.” Every poem is an answer to reality, be it its filth or its beauty.

We don’t know exactly where the House of Literature is located; I imagine it on an incline at the edge of the world, a border station to an alternate reality. It’s often said that the alternate reality of literature has no effect on the world in which we live. When asked in interviews whether or not we believe we can change the world with our books, there is but one answer: “No, of course not!” And yet then there is a little “but.”

The novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe led to the abolishment of slavery in America. Unfortunately, it also required a civil war. When Abraham Lincoln received Ms. Stowe, he’s said to have greeted her with these words: “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war.” It was surely hardly the author’s intent to instigate a war; literature is the opposite of war.

The slim book *A Memory of Solferino*, in which Henry Dunant described the battlefield of Solferino, led to the founding of the Red Cross – an attempt to ease the sufferings of war.

More important than any such major consequence is the effect a book can have on the individual who reads it. The journey to another world helps us see our own with new eyes.

One of my favorite rooms in the House of Literature belongs to the children. Children don’t ask the questions adults do about the function and relevance of literature in society. For them, stories are staples of life, and their laughter when they hear a story they like is one of my favorite sounds. They are our confederates, because all children are poets.

Often, I receive poems and stories written by children who’ve read my poems and stories, and I’m impressed by their creativity and inventiveness. I’m going to read you two stories written by children. They are about sadness and hope, or rather, about war and peace.

Two Legs

There once were two legs. They went everywhere together. They were good friends who never wanted to part. They always went on walks together. But when they went walking, the right leg always led. The left leg wasn’t too happy about that, but he never said a word. One day, the left leg had had enough. He said: “It’s not right that you always get to lead.” And they argued for a very long time. Suddenly, the left leg said: “I’m not going to go walking with you anymore!” They parted ways and never went walking together again.

Imagine what it means for the left leg to separate from the right. What an approach to solving conflict!

And yet the solution could be so simple, as the next story shows.

The Cat and the Mouse

Once upon a time, there was a cat who lived in a house, but she had a lot of problems, because she couldn't catch any mice. Every day, she'd make a new plan, but none of her plans ever worked. The mouse was very intelligent. The cat would lay traps, but the mouse always noticed them and would make it so the cat would get caught in her own traps. One night, the cat decided she should just befriend the mouse. The next morning, she asked the mouse, and the mouse agreed. And they're living together happily still.

How many of us tell the tragic story of the two legs that separate, secretly hoping that in the telling, because tell it we must, we are helping the tragedy to keep itself from repeating? Every book that tells of war does so out of a desperate desire for peace, from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* to Andrei Kurkov's *Grey Bees*.

I hope that these next few days will be full of inspiration. I'd like to leave you with the second part of my fairy tale.

The Chalk

When it came time for the schoolhouse to be renovated, the blackboard, the sponge, and the chalk were all thrown together into the dumpster.

But the chalk rolled off the rim of the dumpster and broke in two on the ground.

With its front half, it slowly began to write on the pavement: "The most important thing in life is..."

"Well?" called the sponge from above.

"...happiness," wrote the chalk, making one exclamation mark after another and another and another.