

More than words

A man is standing in front of his house on which a sign is attached: "House". On the tree hangs a sign that says "tree", on the car one that says "car". Everything is labeled, even the cat is wearing a sign.

"That should make a few things clear," says the man in the cartoon by Gary Larson.

The man is alone in the picture, the signs are seemingly addressed only to himself. He is like Adam, the loneliest man, in that strange scene from the creation story where language is born, and perhaps literature:

Now the Lord God had formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. (Genesis 2, 19)

God created the world, but he has no words for it. He learns from Adam what the animals are called, with an almost childlike curiosity. He has made something, he points to it and wants to know what it is called. And perhaps he repeats the names with that incomparable joy with which children repeat words they have never heard before. Tiger, bear, goat ...

The language is Adam's only active contribution to the creation. With it he creates a virtual parallel world. It is significant that later, when the people in Babel threaten to become dangerous for God, he distorts their language. He strikes them with their own weapon. But still Adam is alone in the world, still nothing indicates that he will not remain alone. So why does he need a language? He cannot have named the animals in order to talk about them. The language is for him a means to appropriate the world, to create order. Thanks to language, like for Gary Larson's sign painter, a few things become clear to him. By naming the animals, Adam perceives them; by reading them, he understands them.

Like Adam, every child comprehends the world by learning to speak, by naming things, by calling things by their names.

When children begin to speak, they have long since learned to communicate their wants and needs without language. They can make their parents understand that they are thirsty or hungry, that they want to sleep or play. The first words children learn have nothing to do with their needs. They don't ask for water or food. Seemingly at random, they start repeating the

names of things. That language is also a means of expressing ones thoughts and feelings is something they learn much later, when they begin to form sentences.

On trains I often hear old couples whose conversations remind me of the ones that I had with my sons when they learned to speak. Beyond any need to communicate, they would list what was passing outside: "Look, the blue house; the cows; a fire truck; the kids going to school." And the responses, "A blue house; a fire truck; the kids going to school." The couples weren't playing "I spy", naming things only they could see, they were playing "I see something that you see, too."

We don't talk just to share thoughts and feelings. First and last, language serves us to assure ourselves of the world and of ourselves. Language sharpens our view of the world. Without language, our view of the world would be a diffuse topography of feelings.

To put the world into a form means, first of all, to put it into language. I am convinced that the first cave paintings were created long after the development of language. If you don't have a language, you don't have pictures.

*

Literary works are directions. They do not create a world, they order the world and lead us through landscapes and times, real or fictional. In uncertain terrain, they show us passable ways. Even invented landscapes, which one might assume consist only of the words that they are described with, always refer to the real world, to the author's world of experience and later to that of the reader. When I write of an unknown island on whose shore I washed up, that island is already there in your minds, even before I have told you whether it is in the Arctic Ocean or in the Pacific. The author is never alone on his desert island. The reader is always with him, following his gaze, his path, his words, or even preceding them. My God - if I have ever had one - is the reader who watches over me on all my paths. But this reader is first and foremost myself. By writing, I explain the world to myself. By writing, I accompany myself through my life. And it is not always clear who precedes, I the reader or I the author.

If I were to draw the paths I have taken in my life on a map, the result would be an inextricable network of lines. My writing is nothing more than an attempt to read some of these lines, if not their meaning, then their shape or structure.

The first and simplest way of reading the world and putting it into a form is - we have seen it - the list. Many authors - especially children's authors - seem fascinated by lists, use them in their books. I once wrote a story that consisted only of a list, the inventory of an accountant looking back on his life, that not only contained the numbers of socks and ties he possessed but also the number of times he had been unhappily in love or felt lost and lonesome.

A list can be much more than what it contains. To make a list can have many reasons. In the title story of my collection "In Strange Gardens", a list plays a crucial role. A neighbor waters Ruth's flowers during her absence. Once, when she rummages through Ruth's things with a rather bad conscience, she finds a short list:

Next to the birthday cards, there was a crumpled scrap of paper, a list of important items to remember. Carpet slippers, contact lens cleaner, nightgown, reading matter. The neighbor pocketed the piece of paper, possibly in order to throw it away, and then she left the room and left the house, and locked the door after herself.

The neighbor does not throw the list away. When it falls into her hands again later, we only learn that Ruth has been admitted to a clinic, presumably a psychiatric hospital, as she has been many times before. And only now do we learn why the neighbor kept the list:

The words reading matter had surprised her and moved her, she didn't understand why, after all, it wasn't as though she were related to Ruth or anything.

„But she likes reading so much“, she said. Her husband didn't even look up from his plate. She felt tears well up in her eyes, and she quickly stood up and carried the empty dishes into the kitchen.

The list I mentioned really existed. My girlfriend had written it before our summer vacation. I found it on a pile of paper long after we had returned home and unpacked our suitcases. And I was moved - like the neighbor - by the word reading matter.

Maybe because I realized what books really are: food for readers, something we would starve without. It's not about taking one book or another on vacation, reading one story or another, it's not about suspense, romance, self help, or whatever the headings are under which publishers group their books. Of course, every reader has preferences. But beyond all words

and stories, literature fulfills a basic need for a "secondary life," as Peter Bichsel called it: "Living in order to be able to look at life - not observe or explore, just look at."

The art of literary writing is not in word choice or sentence structure. Mastery of language must be assumed in the writer, as mastery of the instrument is in the musician. (And as there, the greatest virtuosos are not always the greatest artists).

A literary work becomes compelling through its shape. If the shape fails, then no matter how beautiful the words may be, the work does not satisfy. How often do writers lead us in endless loops through landscapes that could have been traversed by a straight path.

"What should we write about?" a young writer asked me recently. Everything, he said, had already been written. Perhaps I should have told him to start with a list, like Georges Perec, who sat in a café in Paris for three days and described only what he saw. If you want to read something you don't already know, I should have told him, buy the newspaper. We don't read literature to get news. We read literature to have it confirmed that the world is as it is, that people are as they are. As we are. That we all speak a common language, and that we can understand each other. That our life has a meaning.

Good literature is rarely original. Great literary figures are men or women without qualities: Madame Bovary, Hans Castorp, Meursault, Green Henry, Jakob von Gunten, Hemingway's Old Man, Perec's man asleep. The question of content is an aesthetic question, not a political or a moral one. There is no imaginable character who would not be suitable as the main character of great literature. Those authors who rely too much on flashy appearances often only conceal inner emptiness.

When asked why I write, I have often answered, because I like to read. The explanation seemed plausible to me: if you like listening to music, you want to play music; if you like watching soccer games, you want to play soccer; if you like reading, you'll end up writing sooner or later.

But at some point I began to doubt this answer. Of course, I could only write because I had read a lot. Through reading, I learned the technique of writing. But the drive to write doesn't come from literature, it comes from life. The roots of literature are in the unfathomable depth of reality. I write out of the desire or necessity to counter the beauty and awfulness of the

world with something.

That's why literature is always about the same questions: because we all ask ourselves the same questions. The fact that we seek answers in stories should not change the fact that stories are only the means, not the end. The story, the plot, only serves to give the work a form, to structure time and space, nothing more. It is no more important than the apples in a still life by Cézanne, than the mountain he painted more than two hundred times, not because he didn't know any other mountains, but because it didn't matter which mountain he painted.

Nothing against reality in a literary work. And nothing against good research. But what makes a story alive is not the content of facts but the emotional involvement of the author.

In his review of "Unformed Landscape", my second novel set in the far north of Norway, a journalist wrote: "Many a reader has been heard to rave about the fascinating Nordic landscapes in this book without actually finding them on the page. For Stamm does not describe such things, he evokes them."

It's true: the landscapes are not described in detail in the book. But I don't know if I evoke them. One can only evoke what is already there. But few of my readers have ever been to northern Norway, few have any idea of that landscape. What one feels when reading "Unformed Landscape" is not the topography of Lapland, it is the feelings of a person who lives in that landscape, moves in it. These feelings become the landscape again in the readers' imagination, an approximate landscape. If one were to ask them to describe it, it would probably be as difficult for them as if one were to ask them to describe their dream images. And perhaps Lapland would then suddenly become a gray suburb, a rainy Alpine valley, or a small village in the French province.

There is a minor character in "Unformed Landscape" who grows close to the hearts of many readers, whose fate preoccupies them. It is Alexander, the captain of the Verchneursk, a Russian trawler.

The Verchneursk had already been unloaded. Kathrine knew she wouldn't find anything on board, not vodka, not cigarettes, but she always boarded the ship each time it was in port, regardless. Then Alexander, the captain, would ask her into his tiny cabin, and take down the table from its two hooks on the ceiling. He sat on the bunk, and left the chair to Kathrine, and they would talk a little, even though they could hardly understand each other. Each time,

Alexander would offer her vodka, and each time she declined. She tried to explain to him that she wasn't permitted to accept any presents from him, but he just laughed, and poured for her anyway, and she left it untouched. Then Alexander would make instant coffee and tell her about his wife and his two daughters, Nina and Xenia, about Murmansk, and then he said Kathrine ought to visit him there sometime. It was a beautiful city, he said, and he showed her some postcards. The Atlantica cinema, the swimming baths, the enormous statue of the soldier to commemorate the defenders of the Soviet polar regions in the great patriotic war. Sometimes he would take out his photo album, and show her photos of the harbors he had visited, pictures of the Shetlands, the Faroes, the Lofoten Islands, and he asked Kathrine why she didn't get away from here at last.

I have counted the sentences in which Alexander appears. There are no more than twenty-five. Alexander invites Kathrine for vodka, for coffee, he gives her a loaf of bread, half a fish, shows her postcards of his hometown, pictures of his family. And finally, one night he disappears and does not reappear. We don't know much more about him, and yet many readers think they know him. They couldn't tell whether Alexander is dark-haired or blond, what kind of life he leads, what his workday is like, what he does in his leisure time. But they have met him briefly, and have taken him to their hearts, as I have taken him to mine. I didn't describe a person, but an encounter with a person, a relationship with a person, a feeling. Maybe that's why readers keep telling me they read my books in one go. Because I don't try to recreate a world, but because in my stories I depict the movement through that world. And because my descriptions are as fleeting as the observations of a hurried traveler. I do not create landscapes in my writing, I move through landscapes, and in the best case my readers move with me.

When I was presenting my books in Moscow a few years ago, a young German student and aspiring author came up to me after the event. He had read my novel "Agnes" at the university and asked me a few questions about the book. But above all he wanted to tell me that I had written a book about him and his girlfriend. His Agnes was - like him - born more than twenty years later than my character. She had spent the first years of her life in Afghanistan and studied Arabic. She led a very different life from my fictional Agnes. The two women share certain character traits but even more the strange, somewhat perplexing love of their friends. What had touched the student about my book was not my story, were not my feelings,

and certainly not Chicago, the city in which the book is set. What had touched him were his own feelings and the fact that someone before him had felt that way and written about it.

During my trip to Russia, I also went to Yekaterinburg, a city on the other side of the Urals, almost two thousand kilometers east of Moscow. For twenty-six hours, the train traveled across vast plains, through endless birch forests and swamplands. During the few stops, men and women gathered on the platform, offering berries and cucumbers and cut glass for sale, only leaving when the train moved on. Outside, tiny villages passed by, clusters of quaint-looking log cabins. It was slowly getting dark, and I wondered, as I always do at such moments, what it would be like to live here.

I imagined standing outside on one of the dirt roads. Maybe I had been gardening during the day and was on my way home, stopping briefly to check on the train. Perhaps in the lighted windows I saw the passengers, saw the dining car and a man standing in the open doorway smoking a cigarette.

It is in moments like these that my writing begins. Moments of doubt, moments in which it is no longer self-evident to me that I am who I am. Then there remains only that which connects us all, that which is between us.

I was still standing at the open door of the dining car, which was only secured with a grille. I looked out over the flat land that was slowly disappearing into the twilight. There was an almost full moon in the sky, and I took a few photos, pictures that - as it turned out later - were doubly blurred by the fading light and the movement of the train. Blurry shots in which nothing could be seen of this great country, pictures like memories.

I threw the cigarette butt away and went back to my carriage, to my compartment. Outside, it was now completely dark. I closed the shutter and lay down on the narrow bunk. Sometime during the night I awoke. The train had stopped, and I opened the shutter and looked out. We were in a train station. The platforms were brightly lit by cold light. No human being was to be seen. I deciphered the name of the city on a sign and looked up the timetable and was reassured: we were only a few minutes late. And I felt the same happiness and satisfaction that I feel, when I read good literature, where the writing almost perfectly conveys reality.