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# J.M.G. Le Clézio : In the forest of paradoxes

Nobel Lecture

December 7, 2008

Why do we write? I imagine that each of us has his or her own response to this simple question. One has predispositions, a milieu, circumstances. Shortcomings, too. If we are writing, it means that we are not acting. That we find ourselves in difficulty when we are faced with reality, and so we have chosen another way to react, another way to communicate, a certain distance, a time for reflection.

If I examine the circumstances which inspired me to write—and this is not mere self-indulgence, but a desire for accuracy—I see clearly that the starting point of it all for me was war. Not war in the sense of a specific time of major upheaval, where historical events are experienced, such as the French campaign on the battlefield at Valmy, as recounted by Goethe on the German side and my ancestor François on the side of the *armée révolutionnaire*. That must have been a moment full of exaltation and pathos. No, for me war is what civilians experience, very young children first and foremost. Not once has war ever seemed to me to be an historical moment. We were hungry, we were frightened, we were cold, and that is all. I remember seeing the troops of Field Marshal Rommel pass by under my window as they headed towards the Alps, seeking a passage to the north of Italy and Austria. I do not have a particularly vivid memory of that event. I do recall, however, that during the years which followed the war we were deprived of everything, in particular books and writing materials. For want of paper and ink, I made my first drawings and wrote my first texts on the back of the ration books, using a carpenter's blue and red pencil. This left me with a certain preference for rough paper and ordinary pencils. For want of any children's books, I read my grandmother's dictionaries. They were like a marvellous gateway, through which I embarked on a discovery of the world, to wander and daydream as I looked at the illustrated plates, and the maps, and the lists of unfamiliar words. The first book I wrote, at the age of six or seven, was entitled, moreover, *Le Globe à mariner*. Immediately afterwards came a biography of an imaginary king named Daniel III—could he have been Swedish?—and a tale told by a seagull. It was a time of reclusion. Children were scarcely allowed outdoors to play, because in the fields and gardens near my grandmother's there were land mines. I recall that one day as I was out walking by the sea I came across an enclosure surrounded by barbed wire: on the fence was a sign in French and in German that threatened intruders with a forbidding message, and a skull to make things perfectly clear.

It is easy, in such a context, to understand the urge to escape—hence, to dream, and put those dreams in writing. My maternal grandmother, moreover, was an extraordinary storyteller, and she set aside the long afternoons for the telling of stories. They were always very imaginative, and were set in a forest—perhaps it was in Africa, or in

Mauritius, the forest of Macchabée—where the main character was a monkey who had a great talent for mischief, and who always wriggled his way out of the most perilous situations. Later, I would travel to Africa and spend time there, and discover the real forest, one where there were almost no animals. But a District Officer in the village of Obudu, near the border with Cameroon, showed me how to listen for the drumming of the gorillas on a nearby hill, pounding their chests. And from that journey, and the time I spent there (in Nigeria, where my father was a bush doctor), it was not subject matter for future novels that I brought back, but a sort of second personality, a daydreamer who was fascinated with reality at the same time, and this personality has stayed with me all my life—and has constituted a contradictory dimension, a strangeness in myself that at times has been a source of suffering. Given the slowness of life, it has taken me the better part of my existence to understand the significance of this contradiction.

Books entered my life at a later period. When my father's inheritance was divided, at the time of his expulsion from the family home in Moka, in Mauritius, he managed to put together several libraries consisting of the books that remained. It was then that I understood a truth not immediately apparent to children, that books are a treasure more precious than any real property or bank account. It was in those volumes—most of them ancient, bound tomes—that I discovered the great works of world literature: *Don Quijote*, illustrated by Tony Johannot; *La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes*; the *Inglodsbys Legends*; *Gulliver's Travels*; Victor Hugo's great, inspired novels *Quatre-vingt-treize*, *Les Travailleurs de la Mer*, and *L'Homme qui rit*. Balzac's *Les Contes drôlatiques*, as well. But the books which had the greatest impact on me were the anthologies of travellers' tales, most of them devoted to India, Africa, and the Mascarene islands, or the great histories of exploration by Dumont d'Urville or the Abbé Rochon, as well as Bougainville, Cook, and of course *The Travels of Marco Polo*. In the mediocre life of a little provincial town dozing in the sun, after those years of freedom in Africa, those books gave me a taste for adventure, gave me a sense of the vastness of the real world, a means to explore it through instinct and the senses rather than through knowledge. In a way, too, those books gave me, from very early on, an awareness of the contradictory nature of a child's existence: a child will cling to a sanctuary, a place to forget violence and competitiveness, and also take pleasure in looking through the windowpane to watch the outside world go by.

Shortly before I received the—to me, astonishing—news that the Swedish Academy was awarding me this distinction, I was re-reading a little book by Stig Dagerman that I am particularly fond of: a collection of political essays entitled *Essäer och texter*. It was no mere chance that I was re-reading this bitter, abrasive book. I was preparing a trip to

Sweden to receive the prize which the Association of the Friends of Stig Dagerman had awarded to me the previous summer, to visit the places where the writer had lived as a child. I have always been particularly receptive to Dagerman's writing, to the way in which he combines a child-like tenderness with naïveté and sarcasm. And to his idealism. To the clear-sightedness with which he judges his troubled, post-war era—that of his mature years, and of my childhood. One sentence in particular caught my attention, and seemed to be addressed to me at that very moment, for I had just published a novel entitled *Ritournelle de la faim*. That sentence, or that passage rather, is as follows: “How is it possible on the one hand, for example, to behave as if nothing on earth were more important than literature, and on the other fail to see that wherever one looks, people are struggling against hunger and will necessarily consider that the most important thing is what they earn at the end of the month? Because this is where he (the writer) is confronted with a new paradox: while all he wanted was to write for those who are hungry, he now discovers that it is only those who have plenty to eat who have the leisure to take notice of his existence.” (*The Writer and Consciousness*)

This “forest of paradoxes”, as Stig Dagerman calls it, is, precisely, the realm of writing, the place from which the artist must not attempt to escape: on the contrary, he or she must “camp out” there in order to examine every detail, explore every path, name every tree. It is not always a pleasant stay. He thought he had found shelter, she was confiding in her page as if it were a close, indulgent friend; but now these writers are confronted with reality, not merely as observers, but as actors. They must choose sides, establish their distance. Cicero, Rabelais, Condorcet, Rousseau, Madame de Staël, or, far more recently, Solzhenitsyn or Hwang Sok-yong, Abdelatif Laâbi, or Milan Kundera: all were obliged to follow the path of exile. For someone like myself who has always—except during that brief war-time period—enjoyed freedom of movement, the idea that one might be forbidden to live in the place one has chosen is as inadmissible as being deprived of one's freedom.

But the privilege of freedom of movement results in the paradox. Look, for a moment, at the tree with its prickly thorns that is at the very heart of the forest where the writer lives: this man, this woman, busily writing, inventing their dreams—do they not belong to a very fortunate and exclusive *happy few*? Let us pause and imagine an extreme, terrifying situation—like the one in which the vast majority of people on our planet find themselves. A situation which, long ago, at the time of Aristotle, or Tolstoy, was shared by those who had no status—serfs, servants, villeins in Europe in the Middle Ages, or those peoples who during the Enlightenment were plundered from the coast of Africa, sold in Gorée, or El Mina, or Zanzibar. And even today, as I am speaking to you, there

are all those who do not have freedom of speech, who are on the other side of language. I am overcome by Dagerman's pessimistic thoughts, rather than by Gramsci's militancy, or Sartre's disillusioned wager. The idea that literature is the luxury of a dominant class, feeding on ideas and images that remain foreign to the vast majority: that is the source of the malaise that each of us is feeling—as I address those who read, who write. Of course one would like to spread the word to all those who have been excluded, to invite them magnanimously to the banquet of culture. Why is this so difficult? Peoples without writing, as the anthropologists like to call them, have succeeded in inventing a form of total communication, through song and myth. Why has this become impossible for our industrialized societies, in the present day? Must we reinvent culture? Must we return to an immediate, direct form of communication? It is tempting to believe that the cinema fulfils just such a role in our time, or popular music with its rhythms and rhymes, its echoes of the dance. Or jazz and, in other climes, calypso, maloya, sega.

The paradox is not a recent one. François Rabelais, the greatest writer in the French language, waged war long ago against the pedantry of the scholars at the Sorbonne by taunting them to their face with words plucked from the common tongue. Was he speaking for those who were hungry? Excess, intoxication, feasting. He put into words the extraordinary appetite of those who dined off the emaciation of peasants and workers, just long enough for a masquerade, a world turned upside down. The paradox of revolution, like the epic cavalcade of the sad-faced knight, lives within the writer's consciousness. If there is one virtue which the writer's pen must always have, it is that it must never be used to praise the powerful, even with the faintest of scribbles. And yet just because an artist observes this virtuous behaviour does not mean that he may feel purged of all suspicion. His rebellion, denial, and imprecations definitely remain to one side of the barrier, the side of the language of power. A few words, a few phrases may have escaped. But the rest? A long palimpsest, an elegant and distant time of procrastination. And there is humour, sometimes, which is not the politeness of despair, but the despairing of those who know too well their imperfections; humour is the shore where the tumultuous current of injustice has abandoned them.

Why write, then? For some time now, writers have no longer been so presumptuous as to believe that they can change the world, that they will, through their stories and novels, give birth to a better example for how life should be. Simply, they would like to bear witness. See that other tree in the forest of paradoxes. The writer would like to bear witness, when in fact, most of the time, he is nothing more than a simple voyeur.

And yet there are artists who do become witnesses: Dante in the *La Divina Commedia*, Shakespeare in *The Tempest*—and Aimé Césaire in his magnificent adaptation of that play, entitled *Une Tempête*, in which Caliban, sitting astride a barrel of gunpowder, threatens to blow himself up and take his despised masters with him. There are also those witnesses who are unimpeachable, such as Euclides da Cunha in *Os Sertões*, or Primo Levi. We see the absurdity of the world in *Der Prozess* (or in the films of Charlie Chaplin); its imperfection in Colette's *La Naissance du jour*, its phantasmagoria in the Irish ballad Joyce created in *Finnegans Wake*. Its beauty shines, brilliantly, irresistibly, in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* or in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Its wickedness in William Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, or in Lao She's *First Snow*. Its childhood fragility in Dagerman's *Ormen (The Snake)*.

The best writer as witness is the one who is a witness in spite of himself, unwillingly. The paradox is that he does not bear witness to something he has seen, or even to what he has invented. Bitterness, even despair may arise because he cannot be present at the indictment. Tolstoy may show us the suffering that Napoleon's army inflicted upon Russia, and yet nothing is changed in the course of history. Claire de Duras wrote *Ourika*, and Harriet Beecher Stowe *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but it was the enslaved peoples themselves who changed their own destiny, who rebelled and fought against injustice by creating the Maroon resistance in Brazil, in French Guiana, and in the West Indies, and the first black republic in Haiti.

To act: that is what the writer would like to be able to do, above all. To act, rather than to bear witness. To write, imagine, and dream in such a way that his words and inventions and dreams will have an impact upon reality, will change people's minds and hearts, will prepare the way for a better world. And yet, at that very moment, a voice is whispering to him that it will not be possible, that words are words that are taken away on the winds of society, and dreams are mere illusions. What right has he to wish he were better? Is it really up to the writer to try to find solutions? Is he not in the position of the gamekeeper in the play *Knock ou Le Triomphe de la médecine*, who would like to prevent an earthquake? How can the writer act, when all he knows is how to remember?

Solitude will be his lot in life. It always has been. As a child, he was a fragile, anxious, excessively receptive boy, or the girl described by Colette, who cannot help but watch as her parents tear each other apart, her big black eyes enlarged with a sort of painful attentiveness. Solitude is affectionate to writers, and it is in the company of solitude that they find the essence of happiness. It is a contradictory happiness, a mixture of pain and delight, an illusory triumph, a muted, omnipresent torment, not unlike a haunting little tune. The writer, better than anyone, knows how to cultivate the vital, poisonous plant,

the one that grows only in the soil of his own powerlessness. The writer wanted to speak for everyone, and for every era: there he is, there she is, each alone in a room, facing the too-white mirror of the blank page, beneath the lampshade distilling its secret light. Or sitting at the too-bright screen of the computer, listening to the sound of one's fingers clicking over the keys. This, then, is the writer's forest. And each writer knows every path in that forest all too well. If, now and again, something escapes, like a bird flushed by a dog at dawn, then the writer looks on, amazed—this happened merely by chance, in spite of oneself.

It is not my wish, however, to revel in negativity. Literature—and this is what I have been driving at—is not some archaic relic that ought, logically, to be replaced by the audiovisual arts, the cinema in particular. Literature is a complex, difficult path, but I hold it to be even more vital today than in the time of Byron or Victor Hugo.

There are two reasons why literature is necessary:

First of all, because literature is made up of language. The primary sense of the word: letters, that which is written. In French, the word *roman* refers to those texts in prose which for the first time after the Middle Ages used the new language spoken by the people, a Romance language. And the word for short story, *nouvelle*, also derives from this notion of novelty. At roughly the same time, in France, the word *rimeur* (from *rime*, or rhyme) fell out of use for designating poetry and poets—the new words come from the Greek verb *poiein*, to create. The writer, the poet, the novelist, are all creators. This does not mean that they invent language, it means that they use language to create beauty, ideas, images. This is why we cannot do without them. Language is the most extraordinary invention in the history of humanity, the one which came before everything, and which makes it possible to share everything. Without language there would be no science, no technology, no law, no art, no love. But without another person with whom to interact, the invention becomes virtual. It may atrophy, diminish, disappear. Writers, to a certain degree, are the guardians of language. When they write their novels, their poetry, their plays, they keep language alive. They are not merely using words—on the contrary, they are at the service of language. They celebrate it, hone it, transform it, because language lives through them and because of them, and it accompanies all the social and economic transformations of their era.

When, in the last century, racist theories were expressed, there was talk of fundamental differences between cultures. In a sort of absurd hierarchy, a correlation was drawn between the economic success of the colonial powers and their purported cultural superiority. Such theories, like a feverish, unhealthy urge, tend to resurface here and there, now and again, to justify neo-colonialism or imperialism. There are, we are told,

certain nations that lag behind, who have not acquired their rights and privileges where language is concerned, because they are economically backward or technologically outdated. But have those who prone their cultural superiority realized that all peoples, the world over, whatever their degree of development, use language? And that each of these languages has, identically, a set of logical, complex, structured, analytical features that enable it to express the world, that enable it to speak of science, or invent myths?

Now that I have defended the existence of that ambiguous and somewhat passé creature we call a writer, I would like to turn to the second reason for the necessity of literature, for this has more to do with the fine profession of publishing.

There is a great deal of talk about globalization these days. People forget that in fact the phenomenon began in Europe during the Renaissance, with the beginnings of the colonial era. Globalization is not a bad thing in and of itself. Communication has accelerated progress in medicine and in science. Perhaps the generalization of information will help to forestall conflicts. Who knows, if the Internet had existed at the time, perhaps Hitler's criminal plot would not have succeeded—ridicule might have prevented it from ever seeing the light of day.

We live in the era of the Internet and virtual communication. This is a good thing, but what would these astonishing inventions be worth, were it not for the teachings of written language and books? To provide nearly everyone on the planet with a liquid crystal display is utopian. Are we not, therefore, in the process of creating a new elite, of drawing a new line to divide the world between those who have access to communication and knowledge, and those who are left out? Great nations, great civilizations have vanished because they failed to realize that this could happen. To be sure, there are great cultures, considered to be in a minority, who have been able to resist until this day, thanks to the oral transmission of knowledge and myths. It is indispensable, and beneficial, to acknowledge the contribution of these cultures. But whether we like it or not, even if we have not yet attained the age of reality, we are no longer living in the age of myths. It is not possible to provide a foundation for equality and the respect of others unless each child receives the benefits of writing.

And now, in this era following decolonization, literature has become a way for the men and women in our time to express their identity, to claim their right to speak, and to be heard in all their diversity. Without their voices, their call, we would live in a world of silence.

Culture on a global scale concerns us all. But it is above all the responsibility of readers—of publishers, in other words. True, it is unjust that an Indian from the far



north of Canada, if he wishes to be heard, must write in the language of the conquerors—in French, or in English. True, it is an illusion to expect that the Creole language of Mauritius or the West Indies might be heard as easily around the world as the five or six languages that reign today as absolute monarchs over the media. But if, through translation, their voices can be heard, then something new is happening, a cause for optimism. Culture, as I have said, belongs to us all, to all humankind. But in order for this to be true, everyone must be given equal access to culture. The book, however old-fashioned it may be, is the ideal tool. It is practical, easy to handle, economical. It does not require any particular technological prowess, and keeps well in any climate. Its only flaw—and this is where I would like to address publishers in particular—is that in a great number of countries it is still very difficult to gain access to books. In Mauritius the price of a novel or a collection of poetry is equivalent to a sizeable portion of the family budget. In Africa, Southeast Asia, Mexico, or the South Sea Islands, books remain an inaccessible luxury. And yet remedies to this situation do exist. Joint publication with the developing countries, the establishment of funds for lending libraries and bookmobiles, and, overall, greater attention to requests from and works in so-called minority languages—which are often clearly in the majority—would enable literature to continue to be this wonderful tool for self-knowledge, for the discovery of others, and for listening to the concert of humankind, in all the rich variety of its themes and modulations.

I think I would like to say a few more words about the forest. It is no doubt for this reason that Stig Dagerman's little sentence is still echoing in my memory, and for this reason that I want to read it and re-read it, to fill myself with it. There is a note of despair in his words, and something triumphant at the same time, because it is in bitterness that we can find the grain of truth that each of us seeks. As a child, I dreamt of that forest. It frightened me and fascinated me at the same time—I suppose that Tom Thumb and Hansel must have felt that way, when they were deep in the forest, surrounded by all its dangers and its wonders. The forest is a world without landmarks. You can get lost in the thickness of trees and the impenetrable darkness. The same could be said of the desert, or the open ocean, where every dune, every hill gives way to yet another identical hill, every wave to yet another perfectly identical wave. I remember the first time I experienced just what literature could be—in Jack London's *The Call of the Wild*, to be exact, where one of the characters, lost in the snow, felt the cold gaining on him just as the circle of wolves was closing round him. He looked at his hand, which was already numb, and tried to move each finger one after the other. There was something magical in this discovery for me, as a child. It was called self-awareness.

To the forest I owe one of the greatest literary emotions of my adult life. This was about thirty years ago, in a region of Central America known as El Tapón del Darién, the Darién Gap, because that is where, in those days (and I believe the situation has not changed in the meantime), there was an interruption in the Pan-American Highway that was meant to join the two Americas from Alaska to the tip of Tierra del Fuego. In this region of the isthmus of Panama the rainforest is extremely dense, and the only means of travelling there is to go upriver by pirogue. In the forest there lives an indigenous population, divided into two groups, the Emberá and the Wounaans, both belonging to the Ge-Pano-Carib linguistic family. I had landed there by chance, and was so fascinated by this people that I stayed there several times for fairly lengthy periods, over roughly three years. During the entire time I did nothing other than wander aimlessly from one house to the next—for at the time the population refused to live in villages—and learn to live according to a rhythm that was completely different from anything I had known up to that point. Like all true forests, this forest was particularly hostile. I had to draw up a list of all the potential dangers, and of all the corresponding means of survival. I have to say that on the whole the Emberá were very patient with me. They were amused by my awkwardness, and I think that to a certain degree, I was able to repay them in entertainment what they shared with me in wisdom. I did not write a great deal. The rain forest is not really an ideal setting. Your paper gets soaked with the humidity, the heat dries out all your ball point pens. Nothing that has to work off electricity lasts for very long. I had arrived there with the conviction that writing was a privilege, and that I would always be able to resort to it in order to resolve all my existential problems. A protection, in a way; a sort of virtual window that I could roll up as I needed to shelter from the storm.

Once I had assimilated the system of primitive communism practised by the Amerindians, as well as their profound disgust for authority and their tendency towards natural anarchy, I came to see that art, as a form of individual expression, did not have any role to play in the forest. Besides, these people had nothing that resembled what we call art in our consumer society. Instead of hanging paintings on a wall, the men and women painted their bodies, and in general were loath to create anything lasting. And then I gained access to their myths. When we talk of myths, in our world of written books, it seems as if we are referring to something that is very far away, either in time, or in space. I too believed in that distance. And now suddenly the myths were there for me to hear, regularly, almost every night. Near the wood fire that people built in their houses on a hearth of three stones, amidst the dance of mosquitoes and moths, the voice of the storytellers—men and women alike—would set in motion stories, legends, tales, as if they were speaking of a daily reality. The storyteller sang in a shrill voice, striking

his breast; his face would mime the expressions and passions and fears of the characters. It might have been something from a novel, not a myth. But one night, a young woman came. Her name was Elvira. She was known throughout the entire forest of the Emberá for her storytelling skills. She was an adventuress, and lived without a man, without children—people said that she was a bit of a drunkard, a bit of a whore, but I don't believe it for a minute—and she would go from house to house to sing, in exchange for a meal or a bottle of alcohol or sometimes a few coins. Although I had no access to her tales other than through translation—the Emberá language has a literary variant that is far more complex than the everyday form—I quickly realized that she was a great artist, in the best sense of the term. The timbre of her voice, the rhythm of her hands tapping against her chest, against her heavy necklaces of silver coins, and above all the air of possession which illuminated her face and her gaze, a sort of measured, rhythmic trance, exerted a power over all those who were present. To the simple framework of her myths—the invention of tobacco, the first primeval twins, stories about gods and humans from the dawn of time—she added her own story, her life of wandering, her loves, the betrayals and suffering, the intense joy of carnal love, the sting of jealousy, her fear of growing old, of dying. She was poetry in action, ancient theatre, and the most contemporary of novels all at the same time. She was all those things with fire, with violence, she invented, in the blackness of the forest, amidst the surrounding chorus of insects and toads and the whirlwind of bats, a sensation which cannot be called anything other than beauty. As if in her song she carried the true power of nature, and this was surely the greatest paradox: that this isolated place, this forest, as far away as could be imagined from the sophistication of literature, was the place where art had found its strongest, most authentic expression.

Then I left that region, and I never saw Elvira again, or any of the storytellers of the forest of Darién. But I was left with far more than nostalgia—with the certainty that literature could exist, even when it was worn away by convention and compromise, even if writers were incapable of changing the world. Something great and powerful, which surpassed them, which on occasion could enliven and transfigure them, and restore the sense of harmony with nature. Something new and very ancient at the same time, impalpable as the wind, ethereal as the clouds, infinite as the sea. It is this something which vibrates in the poetry of Jalal ad-Din Rumi, for example, or in the visionary architecture of Emanuel Swedenborg. The shiver one feels on reading the most beautiful texts of humankind, such as the speech that Chief Stealth gave in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the President of the United States upon conceding his land: “We may be brothers after all...”

Something simple, and true, which exists in language alone. A charm, sometimes a ruse, a grating dance, or long spells of silence. The language of mockery, of interjections, of curses, and then, immediately afterwards, the language of paradise.

It is to her, to Elvira, that I address this tribute—and to her that I dedicate the Prize which the Swedish Academy is awarding me. To her and to all those writers with whom—or sometimes against whom—I have lived. To the Africans: Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ahmadou Kourouma, Mongo Beti, to Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, to Thomas Mofolo's *Chaka*. To the great Mauritian author Malcolm de Chazal, who wrote, among other things, *Judas*. To the Hindi-language Mauritian novelist Abhimanyu Unnuth, for *Lal passina (Sweating Blood)* to the Urdu novelist Qurratulain Hyder for her epic novel *Ag ka Darya (River of Fire)*. To the defiant Danyèl Waro of La Réunion, for his maloya songs; to the Kanak poetess Déwé Gorodey, who defied the colonial powers all the way to prison; to the rebellious Abdourahman Waberi. To Juan Rulfo and *Pedro Paramo*, and his short stories *El llano en llamas*, and the simple and tragic photographs he took of rural Mexico. To John Reed for *Insurgent Mexico*; to Jean Meyer who was the spokesman for Aurelio Acevedo and the Cristeros insurgents of central Mexico. To Luis González, author of *Pueblo en vilo*. To John Nichols, who wrote about the bitter land of *The Milagro Beanfield War*; to Henry Roth, my neighbour on New York Street in Albuquerque, New Mexico, for *Call it Sleep*. To Jean-Paul Sartre, for the tears contained in his play *Morts sans sépulture*. To Wilfred Owen, the poet who died on the banks of the Marne in 1914. To J.D. Salinger, because he succeeded in putting us in the shoes of a young fourteen-year-old boy named Holden Caulfield. To the writers of the first nations in America – Sherman Alexie the Sioux, Scott Momaday the Navajo for *The Names*. To Rita Mestokosho, an Innu poet from Mingan, Quebec, who lends her voice to trees and animals. To José Maria Arguedas, Octavio Paz, Miguel Angel Asturias. To the poets of the oases of Oualata and Chinguetti. For their great imagination, to Alphonse Allais and Raymond Queneau. To Georges Perec for *Quel petit vélo à guidon chromé au fond de la cour?* To the West Indian authors Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, to René Depestre from Haiti, to André Schwartz-Bart for *Le Dernier des justes*. To the Mexican poet Homero Aridjis who allows us to imagine the life of a leatherback turtle, and who evokes the rivers flowing orange with Monarch butterflies along the streets of his village, Contepec. To Vénus Koury Ghata who speaks of Lebanon as of a tragic, invincible lover. To Khalil Gibran. To Rimbaud. To Emile Nelligan. To Réjean Ducharme, for life.

To the unknown child I met one day, on the banks of the river Tuirá, in the forest of Darién. At night, sitting on the floor in a shop, lit by the flame of a kerosene lamp, he is

reading a book and writing, hunched forward, not paying the slightest attention to anything around him, oblivious of the discomfort or noise or promiscuity of the harsh, violent life there just next to him. That child sitting cross-legged on the floor of that shop, in the heart of the forest, reading all alone in the lamplight, is not there by chance. He resembles like a brother that other child I spoke about at the beginning of these pages, who was trying to write with a carpenter's pencil on the back of ration books, in the dark years immediately after the war. The child reminds us of the two great urgent tasks of human history, tasks we are far, alas, from having fulfilled. The eradication of hunger, and the elimination of illiteracy.

For all his pessimism, Stig Dagerman's phrase about the fundamental paradox of the writer, unsatisfied because he cannot communicate with those who are hungry—whether for nourishment or for knowledge—touches on the greatest truth. Literacy and the struggle against hunger are connected, closely interdependent. One cannot succeed without the other. Both of them require, indeed urge, us to act. So that in this third millennium, which has only just begun, no child on our shared planet, regardless of gender or language or religion, shall be abandoned to hunger or ignorance, or turned away from the feast. This child carries within him the future of our human race. In the words of the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, a very long time ago, the kingdom belongs to a child.

J.M.G. Le Clézio, Brittany, 4 November 2008

Translated by Alison Anderson