



passa porta

Boualem Sansal

What Men Dream Of

or

The Odyssey of the Imagination

Introductory speech for the Passa Porta Festival 2013 – Imagine!
In Passa Porta, International House of Literature, 20 March 2013

If there is one thing that men know it is this: they are mortal, and they know their death will be painful for them and for those close to them. And they know too this list of those things – illness, accident, disaster, assassination or something else – will catch them unawares or at the end of some long agony, rip them from their lives and in their place set a special void, that of death, made up of faded memories, irrevocable forgettings and futile regrets.

The fear of death is something that constantly haunts man. To which must be added the fears of life, tenacious as the flies we do our best to shoo by doing yoga or jogging, by stuffing ourselves with pills, by doping ourselves, by developing obsessive rituals or by keeping up a whirl of activity, living for the headlong rush.

And this is the point, because he is tormented by the thought of death, because he is exhausted by the harshness of life, man dreams. There can be no other reason, a happy and fulfilled man does not dream, he sleeps. It is the wretched man who dreams, to rid himself of his fears, to compensate; he dreams of a world where death does not exist, or if it does it is not terrifying, in certain dreams perfumed with incense it can seem appealing, something to be wished for forthwith since if it is seen from the

threshold to a higher world, a paradoxical world born of death in which life is eternal and immune to suffering. To paraphrase the beautiful title of a fine novel by my friend Mathias Enard *Speak to them of battles, of kings and of elephants*, one might say of those men who indulge in this exorcism by dreaming: "Speak to them of religions, of cloistered lives, of fairytales."

But the dream itself is a suffering. However beautiful, however enthralling it might be from moment to moment, we must awake from it, though it is hard, and return to reality, to its threats, its fears. Dreams work like a drug, the relief is temporary, you constantly need a higher dose, over time it fosters an addiction, damages the life we hoped to heal through escapism and illusion, and kills even hope.

It is an elixir to be taken in moderation. A man who dreams is a man who takes great risks, and all in vain since the dream, like the lift that takes him up and down, cannot fail to bring him back to reality which cannot but seem more bitter.

Perhaps you will agree with me that many of our existential problems are born of this habit we have of seeking refuge in dreams, where we are quickly assailed by snake-oil merchants peddling happiness. History has had its fair share of infamous rabble-rousers, fire-eaters and intoxicating slogans capable of sweeping along whole nations. The fairground barkers may have eased their fears, may even have put fire in their bellies, but only in order to turn them into devastating zombies who have brought misery and death on a scale never before achieved. We have seen them at work, these dreams and "isms", these great masturbations that herald a brighter future: yesterday it was Stalinism, Maoism, fascism, Nazism, today it is Islamism that runs the show, it spreads across the planet like a cancer, it has found way to transform, to metastasize, it creates worshippers of death who in turn create others who worship death whom they recruit from among those they wish to eliminate and so on – it is a rolling snowball, an avalanche, they all mete out death and all dream of meeting death themselves so long as it is spectacular. A candidate for God's chosen martyrs does not die under the wheels of a truck, or by falling down stairs, that would be ridiculous – there must be a crash, an explosion, there must be hectolitres of blood not to mention a lot of posthumous media hype. And all of this, the countless victims and the absurd martyr, is posited on the promise that the courageous assassins will go directly to paradise where each will be given 72 hours as payment – I almost said cash on the nail – and can choose to bathe in rivers of honey or rivers of wine. There are no more pernicious dreams than dreams of paradise; they repudiate life, turn it into some outrageous obstacle on the path to paradise. Along

that primrose path, there is no shortage of fools, cowards, murderers and youthful innocents willing to be massacred.

It is not just Islamism that peddles unwholesome dreams, there are many other things, chief among them globalisation which levels everything downward, whose marketing panders to our basest instincts, our most pathetic desires in order to turn us into shiny consumers, into gunslinging heroes of conspicuous consumption, the fastest draws in the West, into swaggering show-offs at once fulfilled and never satisfied, the rest of the time it holds us spellbound, prostrate and fanatical before our TVs – invariably the newest, slimline flatscreen model - which by dint of brainwashing has become our true family, our only horizon. We should admit it, we are passive in the face of this religion of consumption at all costs. And why? Because even as it destroys us we develop a sort of Stockholm syndrome which makes us love those who mistreat us. This is the nature of the animal, it loves the hand that beats it, because it is the hand of authority and authority reassures, protects. Read and reread Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine*, which magnificently dissects the mechanism by which dreams of happiness and infinite wealth are implanted in the heads of peoples so that, happy and relaxed, they can be led to the slaughterhouse to be painlessly killed, butchered, cut up, scraped to the bone and sold off for a few pennies. You'll see, it's grandiose, it's Dantesque, it's deliciously dark; it is a glimpse behind the scenes of the world, into the wings where the secret history – what am I saying? – where the true history is written, behind the reassuring photoshopped images of modern life the fate of humanity is being played out. What am I saying? It has already been played out – whole nations, whole countries that once were prosperous have disappeared from the news. Globalization requires panoramas that are sleek and serene. Who talks of Greece these days? Who talks of Iraq, about Somalia, about Tibet? Who knows whether there are any Somalis, Tibetans, Chechens, Kurds, Kabyles are left on earth? Who has the proof? Who still remembers the Arab spring? And yet it was only yesterday, we mournfully discussed the massacres in Libya, in Syria, the deaths in Egypt, in Tunisia, in Algeria. And Europe. Which was so beautiful, so intelligent, so rich – what has become of it? We no longer hear from Europe – we see its ministers racing down some corridor or other, the latest mobile phone pressed to one ear, and always impeccably dressed, but what Europe itself? What has become of it? Did it die, did it divorce, what do I know? And you know it should not be forgotten that compassion has an expiration date after which the victims of globalization and tossed into the street, the poor, the old, the orphans all disappear before our eyes, they will be hounded from pillar to post or thrown into a grinder and used to make pâté or crackers like in the film

Soylent Green, fertiliser for gardens or – and this is new, it's the latest thing – road surfacing materials. It might sound exaggerated, but this is just the beginning, wholesale extermination with no grace period will come when everything has run out, water, bread, oil. What yesterday constituted centuries worth of reserves is not reckoned in years and soon we will scarcely have the time to count the last droplets, the last crumbs. And remember, when people are being slaughtered in the millions, there will always be someone with a bright idea of how to make money from the remains; the Nazis thought about it, they implemented it, with great ingenuity - corpses have industrial uses and are economically profitable. It reminds me of another striking phrase that encapsulates our era, it is by Heinrich Heine: "Where they burn books, they will ultimately burn people too."

But let us stop there, you know all this and you can hardly sleep because of it, it is the dark side of life; let us come to what we believe to be the antidote to dreams, the lightning rod to calamity, something which Passa Porta had the brilliant idea to publicly honour this year, what I call *Imagination*, the higher faculty that makes it possible for us to turn our intelligence to make our intelligence work beyond its capacity, beyond the limits imposed on it by contingency and propel ourselves into the future, not simply to visit , but to prepare it to receive us and to prepare ourselves to actually move into it, to live in it this time. This is the principle of a successful transition, we must let go something of the old in order to grasp the new: we only have two hands.

To imagine is not to dream, imagination is rebellion, transgression, ambition, it is a voluntary act that goes beyond our fears to face their causes. It does not smash the thermometer to bring down the fever, it probes the nature of the illness. The history of dreaming is an uninterrupted perdition which produced thousands of dictators and millions of victims, gurus and visionaries en masse capable of the vilest acts; the history of the imagination is a awe-inspiring odyssey, it is made up of the free, courageous, enlightened men and women who made it possible for humanity to move forward. They dared to imagine something that in their time was unthinkable, impossible, prohibited; they were snubbed, imprisoned, tortured, exiled, murdered, but they did not back down. What they imagined were not phantasmagorias like the clergy and the feudal lords serve to us as dreams, but revolutionary theories, new technologies and new arts. And new realities, because to imagine is also to create. Galileo, Lavoisier, Einstein, to mention only three giants who illuminated three very different epochs of humanity, these were not dreamers, they accumulated persuasive clues from here and there and by an extraordinary mental gymnastic, making use of pure logic, or *reductio ad absurdum* if need be and

a certain poeticism verging on the mystic, they imagined the reality that might exist behind appearances and they built up theories and constructed the tools necessary to reveal this hidden reality. Consider the symbolic significance of Galileo's astronomical telescope, it was a literal the of the act of imagination: the one makes it possible to envisage great distances with the eye, the other does so with the mind which is a more powerful eye and which, all joking aside, makes it possible to see around corners.

In matters of group cohesiveness, exceptional men and women imagined the revolutionary, extraordinarily complex and consequently fragile and delicate framework composed of democracy and secularism which means the today millions of people can live together in mutual understanding and with respect to each other's freedoms. It is a something that requires improvement, but let us not quibble: in a world of brutes, a gram of kindness is a heap of kindness. It was something that could scarcely be dreamed about in their day. As it is still today in many countries where violence and poverty are the only situation, the only prospect for whole populations. In such places, dreams are common currency, to imagine is a dangerous thing in many countries and so dreams are encouraged, they make it easier to forget, to distract attention, they bring some small relief, which is better than nothing, but where imagination manages to thrive, eyes open wide, hearts beat faster, the mind is stimulated and it is at this point that revolution begins; something we witnessed during the Arab Spring which gave us such hope, but alas the weight of old shrivelled dreams reeking of incense and mildew is still heavy in these countries, much heavier than we imagined as we applauded the young revolutionaries in jeans and trainers storming the dictator's stronghold. We had forgotten the reactionary heartland of these countries and the magical world in which they are mired, the being that it is the Islamists, whose intentions are obscure, who have taken power, have been elected making them legitimate even in our eyes, we who, with every ounce of strength, renounce intolerance, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, denial of liberty and moral indoctrination. We feared then when they were still in opposition, still working clandestinely; now they are in power and have control the trappings of the State as well as those of religion which they manipulate so effortlessly. The imagination of the young revolutionaries which shook the old sclerotic Arab world has come up against a series of obstacles: that of dictatorship, which had more than one shell in its tanks; those of religion and tradition which had more than one trap in their woodshed, and that of self-interest which, when all is said and done, persuaded the West – i.e. America and Europe – to protect the oil monarchies in the Gulf from a plebeian revolution, which monarchies are working

tirelessly for the success of Islamism, and which also – though this is of secondary importance – invest massively in Europe and the United States with the genuinely disinterested goal of shoring up their faltering economies. Secular democratic libertarian republics around the palaces of the sultans and their oil wells was unthinkable, it is unsightly, and it displeases Allah.

Here, at this point, in the matter of the Arab Spring which caused the deaths of tens of thousands and immeasurable damage, we can say that imagination lost a serious point against dreams; truth be told it never had a chance, imagination was championed by young, penniless revolutionaries while dreaming was massively sponsored by the petrodollars of the king of Saudi Arabia, the Emir of Qatar and the powerful Islamic Republic of Iran.

There can be no doubt that in the longer term imagination always wins out. It wins out because dreaming lulls men to sleep, it weakens and eventually it snuffs out though and destroys it, whereas imagination awakens, it makes men bolder, it accrues knowledge. Everything imagination has conceived over the course of centuries and millennia, man has achieved. Because they imagined it, they willed it and because they willed it, they achieved it: they pushed back every boundary, crossed the oceans, conquered every land, tamed the wildest terrains to the ends of the earth, they took up every challenge, they vanquished disease and time, or at least they multiplied the healthy life expectancy of man by two, by three, by four and one day, when they have merged man and machine, something on which they are already hard at work, they will live for as long as they choose, they have learned to create life in laboratories, they know how to conserve it using cryogenics only to revive it later, they put astronauts on the moon, landed intelligent robots on other planets and even now a spacecraft carrying coded messages destined for possible alien life is drifting beyond the solar system towards the stars. All these things we gradually conceived and then achieved since that miraculous moment in the dawn of humanity when homo erectus, our ancestor, began to make tool and weapons in order to rise above his station. They were derisory tools and weapons made of wood, of stone, of bone, but they were sufficient to trigger an intellectual revolution which nothing could stop.

And all this, you will notice, they did for no recompense. When Hypatia and Galileo studied the secrets of the universe, when Lavoisier strove to understand the phenomenon of combustion, when Einstein sought to understand the nature of light and of gravity, they did so simply to satisfy their curiosity, a curiosity of such phenomenal power that it gave them no rest; they had no idea what humanity might

do with their discoveries. Perhaps there a distinction to be drawn here: man and humanity are two different things, governed by different laws, and we do not yet know why at how. Perhaps quite simply because the container and the contents do not need to be of the same nature to go together.

Imagination has truly been the engine of life. This is a second conclusion. Without it, homo erectus would have vanished from the face of the earth, he was too weak to withstand the savage world which had an lead of hundreds of millions of years on him. At best, he might have lived for centuries as a frightened animal that goes to ground at the slightest warning sign. Instead of this, his limited intelligence open the doors of the imagination which, through its revolutionary power, opened the foors to the future and, in very little time from a historical perspective, it made him master of the world and now he paws the ground, eager to conquer the universe. Some people, astrophysicists, have reached the very limits of the universe, now they study the Big Bang, a point which is everywhere and nowhere from which 13 billion years ago the universe was born: space, time, matter and energy, all inextricably bound together, plus a couple of other ingredients about which we know nothing and which we provisionally call antimatter and dark matter, and also the mysterious and moving thing floating in limbo which is the mind, which would be the mind. Of whom, of what we do not know. But we are getting closer. Thanks to the Hubble space telescope, scientists have managed to photograph the universe as it was 400-500 million years after the Big Bang. It is a strange, genuinely troubling photograph, hazy like some great mystery, but a living mystery; mathematicians have seen in it the face of God. Men and women of imagination have fully acknowledged their humanity. They have traced a path back to the beginnings. How different from the image which religions and dreamers of paradise have given us of God and our relationship with Him.

This is perhaps the moment to venture a third conclusion. Imagination has a sense, contrary to what one might think it does not fly off in any old direction, it seems to carve out a path as though leading man to a particular point. A point we have called *Apex*. Let us note that man has never imagined all that he might be able to achieve in the course of a human lifetime, as though something, perhaps the *mind* that animates the universe, wanted to limit his ambition. The story of Prometheus stealing divine knowledge and fire to give them to mankind which he had just created, an act of theft for which Zeus banished him, seems to have been written to encourage us to be prudent. We are still in our infancy, wisdom must come with time in the effective dose: too much knowledge too soon is as disastrous as too little too

late, or even none at all. That said, this is no bar to the genius, who is allowed to move faster than we.

Homo erectus did not start out imagining sophisticated tools, he imagined things that were within his grasp, things he imagination could realise with the means at hand: a lane, a flint, a bow, a means of making fire. Imagination is a building process, it builds on storey upon another, beginning on the ground floor. Since there is a point of departure there is an end point, this is the principle of all stories; in fact one might say that there is only a beginning because we need an end, that curious moment when everything is fulfilled. It is not man who imagines, but imagination which drives man, leads him from one stage to the next toward the end, the *Apex*, the counterpart to the Big Bang where everything returns to the unity of the point of departure. The biblical expression "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" is apposite in this case, it sends us back to the universal process which makes, unmakes and remakes the world, always exactly as it was since, in a certain sense "nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed". It is a universal law. And this affords imagination another perspective which could be a third conclusion: Imagination might be the memory of what existed in a previous cycle of the universe. If we follow this logic, that could mean that things exist of themselves, we do not have to imagine them, we simply have to remember that they exist. In the boundlessness of the universe and time, the probability of the existence of any given combination always equals ONE, in the infinite there is only certainty, on such a scale everything will eventually happen, everything has already happened, everything is constantly there. "God does not play dice", Einstein said. It is because mankind's memory is weak and uncertain that he must imagine what has always existed in essence and which is there before his eyes, half-hidden by the dust of ignorance and oblivion.

This is what man should do: open his eyes and his mind.

For if he fails to imagine and have faith in life, he will find himself dreaming and preparing for death.

Translated by Frank Wynne