

DRAWN BY
RAYCHO
STA-
NEL

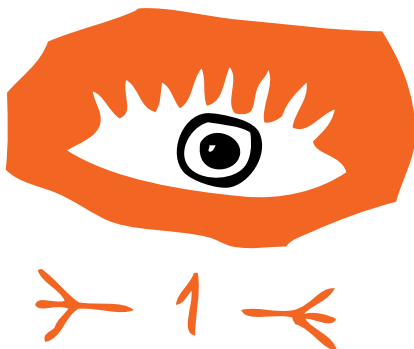
WRITING
INTO THE
UNKNOWN

••• RANA DASGUPTA •••

• A TALK DELIVERED IN •
• SOZOPOL AND SOFIA IN •
••• MAY 2011 •••

I feel a mysterious kind of belonging to this country, Bulgaria, which is not my own. The reason for this is that I wrote a novel set here. Before I wrote it I knew almost nothing about this place: I obeyed only an instinctive attraction built up through such things as music and newspapers. So it seems appropriate to talk here about the - possibly strange - decision to devote years of my life to writing about a far-off place with which I had no connection or even familiarity.

We know that the advice to young writers is so often: Write what you know. I want to suggest here that there are good reasons for contemporary writers to consider writing about the things about which they have no idea. Reality, after all, consists mainly of what we do not know, and this is perhaps excessively apparent today. Many of us have a certain kind of highly specialised knowledge which both connects us to the world and divides us from it. The model I am going to ask you to think about here is one in which the writer moves between the zones of known and unknown. In this respect he or she adopts both of Walter Benjamin's models of the writer, described thus in his essay, "The Storyteller."



[Among storytellers] there are two groups which, to be sure, overlap in many ways. And the figure of the storyteller gets its full corporeality only for the one who can picture them both. "When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell about," goes the *German* saying, and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar. But they enjoy no less listening to the man who has stayed at home, making an honest living, and who knows the local tales and traditions. If one wants to picture these two groups through their archaic representatives, one is embodied in the resident tiller of the soil, and the other in the trading seaman. Indeed, each sphere of life has, as it were, produced its own tribe of storytellers. Each of these tribes preserves some of its characteristics centuries later. Thus, among nineteenth-century *German* storytellers, writers like Hebel and Gotthelf stem from the first tribe, writers like Sealsfield and Gerstacker



from the second. With these tribes, however, as stated above, it is only a matter of basic types. The actual extension of the realm of storytelling in its full historical breadth is inconceivable without the most intimate interpenetration of these two archaic types. Such an interpenetration was achieved particularly by the Middle Ages in their trade structure. The resident master craftsman and the travelling journeymen worked together in the same rooms; and every master had been a travelling journeyman before he settled down in his home town or somewhere else. If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-travelled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.



The way these two archaic types interpenetrate in my work is this: the essential question arises from my own place, my own need. But the landscape and history are often from somewhere else.

Why would one choose to do this? Why take the foolish step of writing from ignorance instead of knowledge?

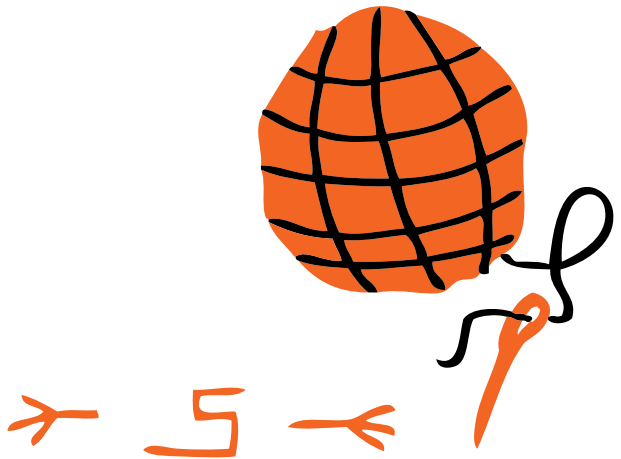
My answer to these questions is a personal one. It is not a prescription for how one should write. Nevertheless, in my own writing, ignorance has not been merely incidental. It has provided for me a new structure of relationships between the writer and the twenty-first century reality, firstly, and between the writer and his or her readers.



1.

The first reason why I am attracted to writing from a position of ignorance is that it instantly deprives me of the power of the expert, which is a power I find corrupting and suspect.

Expert culture which arises from the professionalization and specialisation of all human activity. Only experts are allowed to speak. Only professional musicians can play music. The production of culture and knowledge, basic human activities, become denied to the majority in such a culture. Once, houses were full of such production. Now, increasingly, they are not. This I regard as a massive spiritual diminution.




Experts derive their authority from knowing more than everyone else. It is difficult to challenge them because they inhabit fortresses of information, procedures and jargon. They speak from a position of unassailable knowledge and though they may appear suspect to us it is difficult for us to say why.



It is partly as a response to this that I have been attracted to the idea of writing from a position of total ignorance. To being suspect from the very beginning. When you write about your own life, your own experience no one can challenge you: you are the expert. When you write about other people's lives you are completely vulnerable. This vulnerability makes me equal to everyone else. It is an advertisement for the democratic and joyful embrace of the world rather than the erection of towers.





In my writing I know less than my readers. My writing displays not that I know something that no one else knows but that I have a will to knowledge that everyone else has. To me this is a way of reclaiming the universality of culture - culture that is produced, and not merely consumed, by everyone. It advertises a living relationship to knowledge rather than one that is authoritarian and dead.



2.

The second point I want to make here is that ignorance is a much better account of our relationship to our twenty-first century world than knowledge. Ignorance is truer than knowledge. It carries the frisson, the danger, the edge of reality.

This has something to do with the globalisation which has changed the nature of the familiar. Of that which we thought we knew. It has rendered the world strangely distant and uncanny.

Of course it has always been the case that most facts about the world remain unknown to most people. What has changed in our era is that the vast unknown has drawn close and become intimate.





Most of us now know little about the social and economic relations from which our food comes, our clothes or most of our possessions. At the heart of our own existences is the unknown, and this structures much of our contemporary affective relationship to the world.

In this context it seems to me to be pointless to insist merely on what one knows. The immense unknown - the void of ignorance has always seemed to me to be a proper starting point for writing. The leap into the unknown carries with it the energy of reality in a way that the reproduction of the known cannot.





But I propose this not simply as a mimetic device. It is born out of a faith that by leaping into the unknown one might produce something radically new, something which could not otherwise exist.

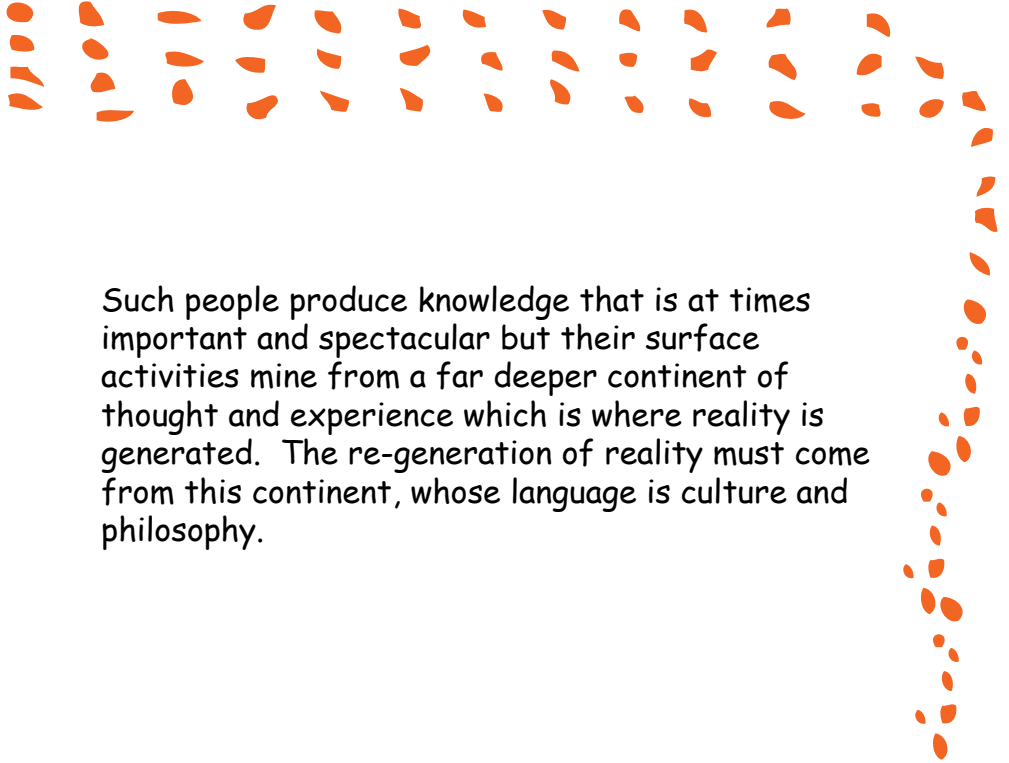
We live in a moment of genuine intellectual and spiritual crisis when previous forms of knowledge have become exhausted and my own hope for the novel is that it can become a laboratory for new thought.



There is almost no area of life where the ideas we have received from the past are not either discredited or regrettably impossible. We are in need not of gentle micro-adjustments to these ideas. We require fundamentally new ways of seeing ourselves and our relationships to each other and the world.

Though this sounds like what we hear from politicians and businessmen who wish to re-order society in order to profit better from the global economy - or to shield themselves from its more painful excesses - it is not the same thing at all.





Such people produce knowledge that is at times important and spectacular but their surface activities mine from a far deeper continent of thought and experience which is where reality is generated. The re-generation of reality must come from this continent, whose language is culture and philosophy.





THIS TALK WAS MADE
POSSIBLE
BY THE ELIZABETH KOSTOVA FOUNDATION
SPECIAL THANKS TO BORIS DELIRAEV FOR
HIS SUPPORT AND
FRIENDSHIP [R.S.]