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People, Fairy Tales, and Utopias

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My favorite fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm is a very short story called "Frau Trude." A girl, whose name we do not learn, tells her parents about her desire to visit Frau Trude's house. Everything in this house is supposedly so strange and wondrous...ah, so it's not a house, but an art collection? A museum, or perhaps a laboratory? The girl's parents strictly forbid her to go there, suspecting that Frau Trude might be up to unholy things and a visit to her could mean falling into terrible danger. And what happens? The girl does not obey, of course. She enters Frau Trude's house.

...and when she arrived there, Frau Trude asked: "Why are you so pale?" "Oh," she answered, her body trembling, "I saw something that frightened me." "What did you see?" "I saw a black man on your steps." "That was my charcoal burner." "Then I saw a green man." "That was my huntsman." "Then I saw a blood-red man." "That was my butcher." „Oh, Frau Trude, I was terrified when I looked out the window and saw not you, but the devil with a head of fire." "Oh ho," she said, "then you saw the witch in her proper outfit. I have been waiting and yearning for you for a long time, and now you shall give me light." Then she transformed the girl into a block of wood, threw it on the fire, seated herself beside it, and, warming herself, said: "Such a bright light indeed!"

In childhood, we become readers through fairy tales. We remember these fairy tales for the rest of our lives. We may forget the name of the protagonist of an award-winning novel, but we will know the name of a wooden man or a talking bear until the day we die. Literature is made of texts that are capable of remaining unforgotten. Something that is not only read, but reread again and again.

It always feels as if the modern reader is living in the world of news. The news seems relentless like traffic. But if we look carefully, one day we suddenly find ourselves at a deserted crossroads. The crossroads of fairy tale, fantasy, and utopia.

Fantasy is a strange genre. At first glance, it's a fairy tale, but in reality, it's only the mummy of a fairy tale. Because real fantasy can never be expected or predicted. Fantasy is a fairy tale that has been stripped of its guts, its organic, primordial power, its living morality, its flesh and blood; in fantasy, these viscera have been replaced by soothing ointments. This is probably why fantasy never really manages to scare us. The template-like mainstream fantasy eliminates fear as an option for us, thereby depriving people of one of the most important mechanisms for recognizing danger and gathering experience. Fantasy convinces us that everything will be fine, no matter what might happen, and that it will happen effortlessly on our part. Getting us a conserved but certain happy ending is the mission of those heroes in possession of a magic weapon.

At the turn of the last century, fantasy dominated world literature and culture, shaping the tastes and worldview of the people of the new era. Perhaps fantasy is the last type of literature that still influences society. Today's adults aged twenty to forty-five are people who grew up with fantasy. Movies and books, games and series. Princes and dragons, decorated sorcerers and décolletéd fairies. The challenges facing the modern world are in many ways the result of this education, this dormant charm, this delightful enchantment.

In order to survive, literature seeks out the safest and most certain way into our hearts – and in doing so, it takes a detour that bypasses our world of suffering, eager to find eternal utopia.

Fantasy is based on a harsh hierarchy. The fates of its heroes always lead to a return to the golden age, to a reset of the status quo, a reclaiming of possessions, in general: returning, rebuilding, reconstructing, retrospecting. The mission of fantasy heroes is to restore a destroyed hierarchy. Fantasy is always monarchistic, monochrome, manically focused on the fulfillment of the mission. The monopoly on decision-making always belongs to the nobles. The protagonists can have any adventures they want – their goal is and remains to forestall any form of modernization.

I try to imagine the old European fairy tale “Frau Trude” as a fantasy text. My little fairy tale resists. Nevertheless, it is possible to rewrite it so that it conforms to the rules of the popular genre. The first operation that must be performed is a sex change. We have to change

the gender of the unfortunate protagonist. The most a girl can expect is to be the hero's companion, a clever and overly emotional prisoner of puberty. So, instead of the girl, we have a courageous boy who resolutely steps into Frau Trude's house – and when the witch wants to turn him into a block of wood, he exposes the sorceress in flagrante delicto and chops off her head. It's soon revealed that he is no miscreant but a very young magician king who has come to this wretched town to destroy evil and cleanse the land of witchcraft. So the boy continues on to chop up the Black Man, the Green Man, and the Red Man, one after the other, then marries the girl and becomes lord of the land – and the whole thing starts all over again.

The problem is that nobody really dies in fantasy. In fantasy, death does not exist, although it is an integral category of existence. No genre offers such an ideal world view in which death is suspended. Sooner or later, every hero is ready to get up and continue the fight. People who have grown up with fantasy and lack critical thinking transfer this immortality to the real world. But, if it is impossible to die, then human life is worthless despite the humanistic fanfare and drama.

We can also imagine the same fairy tale as a utopia. A utopia in which the inhabitants of the town discover that the girl has disappeared, whereupon they all gather at Frau Trude's house, hang her from an apple tree, and unanimously vote that the following is forbidden from now on: doing things at home that no one can understand, going to strange places, wearing a fiery mop of hair. It is also prohibited for strangers to settle in the city. It is generally forbidden to investigate

evil. Instead, one must act as though evil does not exist: a kind of “cancel culture.” According to the new law, it is now forbidden, once and for all, to ask the eternal question: What lies in this mysterious house where the windows glow so mysteriously, so enticingly, and so suspiciously every night?

But isn't that the most important task of literature? To go where no one has gone before, to go where it is dark and cruel, to go where it is forbidden, to go where you might be consumed by the flame of ambition, by the fire of discovery, where you might become an accomplice to transformation? To set forth and seek your own, unmistakable voice that might just become your death shriek? To take responsibility for yourself and carry it forward with a deaf ear to reason – reason which, as Nabokov wrote in his famous essay, the artist should pierce through the heart? To go forth one day and learn to fear – as prescribed by another Grimm fairy tale.

The feudal fantasy world has nothing to do with democracy and human rights; it is not interested in such things. If one is a goblin or a unicorn or a dwarf, one remains this way forever and ever.

Fantasy is a demonstrative denial of history. An unwillingness to know history, a refusal to learn a lesson from history. Why do we need to know anything about the Middle Ages in Europe if only the family tree of the fictional Titans is worthy of attention? In the modern world, people know much more about the geopolitics of the elves than, for example, about the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, one of the most important states of medieval Europe. Many of today's

Europeans are unable to name all of the EU member countries, not to mention where these countries are located; they talk about defending their borders, but they are only vaguely aware of which countries and nations are across the border. Many modern Europeans know far more about goblins and fairies than they do about the Crusades, the Hundred Years' War, the Holodomor in Ukraine, or the Great Famine in Ireland, even though each of these events can teach us many, many things.

More and more people show up in this world calling themselves politicians and promising to solve all our problems. Today, these are mostly people influenced by fantasy. They act as if they will live forever. And that's true – some of them are seriously thinking about cryonics in order to be resurrected like fantasy heroes and change the future from the inside out. They have studied at the best universities yet at the same time are so proud of their ignorance of history, of their own intellectual incompetence. To bring us back to a golden age, to the glorious past – that is what they are fighting for. To the golden age that never was. To turn us back into subjects of a strict and wise king. To hand our right to determine the future over to tyrants – those tyrants with the most advanced technology.

Westerners today are increasingly reluctant to follow political news so as to save themselves from stress, helplessness, and the inability to change anything. Everyone is fed up with a world full of threats and violence. People are fleeing into a fantasy world in which nothing depends on them, in which everything always ends well. This frees up space for public opinion to be manipulated. Rich populists and latent fascists, gossip-obsessed fanatics and hypocritical

xenophobes are coming to power. They bring with them their versions of utopian happiness, as old as this world, but painted with the colors of the future by AI.

Utopia is speaking to us again today, it's saying that an ideal world is possible, you just have to remove those who disrupt our general happiness. Utopian thinking prevails again; it is being promoted everywhere, and with masterful marketing. The imperial, fascist utopia of Putin's Russia. The European utopia in which there was no room for Ukraine and Belarus for a long time, but in which there is now enough space for Orban's Hungary and Fico's Slovakia. The American utopia of Trump, the personified national megalomania that today threatens not only the USA, but the whole world. The left-wing utopia of universal equality, which, looking back on world history, has always led to mass murder and bloody catastrophes. The utopia of universal liberalism. The literary utopia in which the book is the crown of creation. The utopia of politically correct culture. The religious utopia of oil despotism. Every utopia is another failed attempt to explain the world.

Even language can become a utopia. The protagonist of my novel "Europe's Dogs," Oleg Olegovich, creates his own language, Balbuta, and that too is a utopia, the linguistic utopia of freedom. This language is not only free of hierarchies and hatred, of patriarchy and discrimination, but also free of people. People are not important for the utopia. Only the human resource that is allocated for the realization of the utopia is important. For example, peace with Putin and his empire means that millions of Ukrainians fall into an imperial

slavery, and it doesn't matter that they don't want this and choose to fall in battle rather than be incorporated by Putin. But millions of people can easily gorge on the utopia of such peace without choking. This utopia becomes a new, modern fantasy in which some are born to be slaves of the "Great Russian World" and the others can observe in peace from their high towers. A great predestination of political fantasy, an ominous predestination.

Utopia always needs fairy tales in order to be transformed into propaganda.

But people need fairy tales in order to stay human.

It's only fairy tales that actually speak to us about people. About what it is like to be human in the world of nature, ideas, and machines. Only fairy tales can warn us about the new catastrophes. Only fairy tales can teach us something without entangling us in the idealism of the new dictatorships. In contrast to utopias, fairy tales always live in the past, the present, and the future. Fairy tales: they are the purest literature. Fairy tales and poetry: the highest level of language.

I was born and grew up in the midst of a great utopia. In the Soviet Union, in Belarus, which was hardly known in the West at the time, because the goal of its utopia was its disappearance. In the city of Minsk, where the Belarusian language almost went extinct because the Soviet utopia demanded it. Utopia tried to turn me into a utopian being: an anomaly of a Soviet man who speaks Russian, has no nationality, believes in the victory of communism and is ready to give

his life for this great utopia, for its great achievements – the Gulag, Gagarin, the atomic bomb, weaponized psychiatry, the occupation of other countries – and its pathological lies that have been elevated to the level of religion. For wealthy, gerontophilic party rule. Like millions of other people, from childhood onwards I was surrounded by propaganda tales about the new saints like Lenin and pioneer heroes, stories about the cunning KGB and red kamikazes, about good commissars and evil Western spies. And when folk tales were read to us, they were mostly Russian stories about mighty Russian warriors – and despicable foreigners. About the great “Russian spirit” and the Russian fool. About Russia’s intellectual superiority over the rational and soulless West.

But the end of the Soviet utopia was already near. Perestroika was an attempt to modernize utopia and give it new strength. Utopia cannot use people for its foundation, just as an empire cannot become democratic. And this was precisely the main mistake of the West in the 1990s: the Russian Empire was allowed to survive and rise again. Western politicians firmly believed that the Russian Empire could become a democracy while simultaneously remaining a prison for its people. Groups of people that no one in the West wanted to hear about, all those Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chechens, Yakuts, Tatars...to the West, Russia seemed homogeneous and monolithic.

Gorbachev’s perestroika in the 1980s abolished censorship. We discovered banned books for ourselves and read them as eagerly as if they could be taken away from us again tomorrow. These books by Western authors who until recently had been banned turned my

world upside down and shaped values that are still fundamental to me today. These books turned me into a European and led me to dream of a free European Belarus. Joyce and Kafka, Nabokov and Orwell, Gombrowicz and Mrozek, Virginia Woolf, Jelinek and Sylvia Plath, Natalie Sarraute and Vaclav Havel, and many other banned and undesirable authors taught me to think. We discovered Belarusian literature that no one had told us about. Repressed, physically destroyed by the Bolsheviki and forgotten in the name of the Russian-Soviet-imperial utopia...

Very soon, I found myself in another utopia: the utopia of Lukashenka's state, itself wedged within a dead shard of the Soviet utopia. The dictator declared so-called "stability" to be its foundation. Thus, this petty, uneducated utopian gave a name in his own language to the system he himself had created, he who began his international career by publicly praising Hitler for uniting the nation and his commitment to order in an interview with the German newspaper *Handelsblatt*. Lukashenka's utopia is an attempt to stop and banish time. To prevent Belarus from participating in European history, to artificially rip it out of the historical process. To stop the hands of the clock and turn them back by force.

Tyrants fear time above all. They fear the future because it is not under their control. The future always means the death of the tyrant. Millions of people have become victims of the great criminal Lukashenka's little utopia. Thousands and thousands of victims of violence, thousands of political prisoners, hundreds of thousands of political emigrants, Belarusians killed and murdered in prisons, the

destroyed fate of an entire nation – this is the price we are paying for that shard of a utopia that, like in a fairy tale, once pierced the heart of Belarus and turned it into a shameful laughingstock and outcast, and later into a co-aggressor in an imperialist war.

Like all utopians, Lukashenka suffers from delusions of grandeur. Today, he is also banning books. Not only books about history, journalism, and scientific research. Today, he is banning fairy tales.

After all, behind every literary work created by human imagination and the power of language lies an ancient fairy tale. Every novel is a modern fairy tale – a noble deception that we may believe or not, but always while recognizing the author's right to invent people and worlds for us. When we open a book, we make a pact with the author. "We will try to believe you," we whisper. Even when we know that what you speak of never actually happened. We'll try, but we won't guarantee that we'll read it to the end. We are like children from prehistoric times who listened to the nearby howling of the wolves, the rain, and the whistling of the wind in a cave by the fire. Why has it always been so important to us – and why do we still read and write fairy tales as adults?

People love fairy tales, even if they are afraid to admit it. They love them – and sometimes they ban them by legal means. They burn them, destroy them, hide them, put repulsive labels on them. This is exactly what happened to my books in Belarus. On April 8, 2021, the new edition of my novel "Europe's Dogs" was detained and confiscated at the Lithuanian-Belarusian border. The novel had been

classified as extremist literature and was the first work of fiction in the history of Belarus to be officially banned by the state by court order and placed on the list of extremist materials.

Yes, in my novel I write about the year 2049. The Russian Empire has long since annexed Belarus and its neighboring states and declared war on the free world. After the war with Russia, there is no longer a united Europe. The fetishization of borders became the beginning of European disintegration. I wrote this novel in 2016-2017. It is about the power of language and the language of power, about Europe as a Belarusian dream and about Belarus as a European island. Yes, this novel is my great satire on the Russian and Belarusian utopia and my sorrowful hymn to literature. But it is only a fairy tale. A fairy tale that should not frighten grown-up statesmen who fear only one thing: to be punished for their crimes one day. Just a fairy tale...

Soon the Belarusian court deemed another one of my books as extremist and banned that one too – “The Last Book of Mr. A.” It is – surprise – a modern fairy tale. Now all of my books are banned in Belarus. The state is trying to cut me off from my Belarusian readers. But it forgets that the Internet still works. It forgets that Belarus lost over 300,000 people after 2020, including not only publishers, authors, and literary critics, but also readers. A large community of readers. Having a banned book at home is a matter of honor for Belarusians today.

Today, so many books in the “fiction” category are banned in Belarus and Russia that the question inevitably arises: What is so dangerous

about these works full of imaginary characters and conflicts? Fiction, parables, fairy tales, inventions, pure fantasies, made-up stories about things that never existed? They create a completely uncontrolled space of perception, a space for independent thinking. An authoritarian state cannot resist fairy tales, because only those who can read find themselves again on the other side of the power of imagination. Language and literature, fairy tales and fantasy are a world in which you can only find your way if you appreciate “Alice in Wonderland.”

As of today, Svetlana Alexievich is the only Belarusian winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her remarkable non-fiction studies on the Red Man, the Soviet empire, the Chernobyl disaster, and women in war are based on the testimonies of living people. Her books are an attempt to give thousands of people a voice so that the whole world can learn about their experiences. The awarding of the Nobel Prize to Svetlana Alexievich was a recognition of the dominant role of reportage, of non-fiction in the modern world. Why do we need a fairy tale if we want to know the truth? We choose fantasy if we want to leave this world – and journalism if we want to stay.

But disasters and tragedies continue to occur. No truth has helped people understand why they die en masse in the name of big ideas and personal obsessions of tyrants – and why tyrants continue to find millions of followers. No naked truth can stop wars and terror. Truth without fairy tales is just information that can be manipulated endlessly. Although we read more and more facts about the horrors of totalitarian regimes and the new fascism in the news and books,

we still end up resorting to fairy tales to explain the world. Kafka and Orwell, Ionesco and Bradbury are now read as if their great novels were written only yesterday.

Literature is not a good painkiller, but it does give pain meaning.

I am standing here before you, in Graal-Müritz, where the terminally ill visionary Franz Kafka met his last love a hundred years ago, and I think that for me, all of Kafka's great texts are brilliant fairy tales written by a living person. They are texts that could not be written by any machine. "The Trial" and "The Castle," "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony" are cautionary tales, fairy tales of places where others dared not go. And the fact that many of Kafka's works have survived in the same form in which they were published by Max Brod is also proof of their fairytale character. The fairy tale is constantly being expanded and improved, retold and changed – this is how it is passed on to other generations.

"If I am condemned, then I am not only condemned until death, but also condemned to defend myself to the end," Kafka once wrote. Literature, fairy tales, fantasy and fiction are our attempts to protect ourselves in a world of utopias and trivial clichés. The last hope of the powerless is the invention of a world in which language can finally tell us the truth.

Fantasy against utopia, utopia against utopia, ideology against ideology, right against left. Naive Western fantasy against chauvinistic Russian fantasy. Neo-Nazism, xenophobia. The vile old,

obsolete anti-Semitism that is now flaring up again and smoldering and finding ever new followers – because the people who profess it know nothing about the world in which they live. They do not want to know its history because they are used to the idea that the world must have noble kings and must be rejected by all peoples who in turn must be destroyed and whose cities must be razed to the ground. The “demigod” Putin, who flies on an eagle in his dreams and imagines himself to be a hero from fantasy films – and the dull-witted sorcerer Lukashenka, who, during a drought, announces to the whole country in all seriousness: “You wanted rain? I gave you rain.” The magician Trump, who believes in his superhuman ability to end the war in one day. The lie is repeated year after year until millions begin to believe it. Fiction reigns everywhere, and no one knows what it will become tomorrow: a fairy tale, a fantasy, a new utopia or propaganda madness.

Only when we truly fear ourselves and that which we have done, only then do we have a chance of survival.

In the waning years of the Soviet Union, stories from urban children’s folklore were popular with us schoolchildren. For example, the story of the secret organization “Death to Soviet Children.” Its members are said to have driven around the city in cars with tinted windows, kidnapping children and torturing them in their dark cellars. It was funny and scary for us back then...many years later, as adults in 2020, we watched in horror in Minsk as minibuses with tinted windows drove through the city, from which unknown masked people suddenly jumped out and abducted people in the middle of the street.

There are always scary stories, you just have to write them properly and read them carefully.

It is now time to defend the fairy tale. It is a great and beautiful European qualm that once produced great culture and great disasters. It was Europe, with its great fairy tales, that first raised the idea of mass dehumanization and put it into practice – but Europe was also the first to begin to understand its extent and causes. For so long, the European fairy tale created new meanings and understanding for the whole world – and today it is more important than ever for Europeans themselves. For it is precisely meaning that is missing where two empires – the Soviet and the American – now leave behind emptiness and disappointment in their utopias.

The goal of persecution is persecution. The goal of torture is torture. The goal of power is power. This is what the utopia described in the great fairy tale “1984” teaches us. And they – I call them “they,” as in the book – they continue to persecute and torture, seizing power again and again.

So what is the aim of the fairy tale?

I don't know. But I do know that we can force them to miss us as a target.