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Marina Warner

Communities of Fate: Magical Writing and Contemporary Fabulism

Abstract: Prophecies or curses often open a myth or fairy tale, and the story subsequently unfolds in accordance with what they have announced. Classical tragic myth, for example about Oedipus or Dido, takes place in this form of predestined time and includes such speech acts; the plots of fairy tales, especially the stories of *The Thousand and One Nights*, also frequently turn on spells and oracles. This fatalism, as it has been called, has been generally criticized and often associated with passivity and superstition, both perceived as "oriental." Can these narrative devices be looked at in a different light? And do the stories themselves act as magical writing, with purposes of preventing harm and averting danger? Writers of contemporary "world literature" are increasingly turning to myth and fable because the forms offer them ways of commenting, Cassandra-like, on the fate of their countries and communities.

Keywords: prolepsis, prophecies, narrative, oracles

1 Prophetic plots

When the prophet Jeremiah cries woe, channelling the fury of the Almighty, he intends to put a stop to the behaviour he denounces: "Therefore will I discover thy skirts upon thy face, that thy shame might appear. I have seen thine adulteries, and thy neighings, the lewdness of thy whoredom, and thine abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe unto thee, Jerusalem! wilt thou not be made clean? When shall it once be?" (Jer. 13.26–27).[1] This biblical author has given his name to a form of anathemata: the Jeremiad. Such a rhetorical mode shapes stories that look ahead to apocalyptic horizons where catastrophe – inferno, pandemonium – will take place but also, as in the closing book of the Bible, Parousia or glory. It has counterparts in other rhetorical utterances, which enunciate and denounce visions of the future from a hypothetical position in the past and so appear to be

1 I would like to thank most warmly the committee of the ICLA, especially Sowon Park and Lucia Boldrini, for inviting me to give this lecture in Vienna in 2016, and also for the introduction given on that occasion by Sowon Park. My profound thanks also to Antonia Karaisl von Karais for her assistance.

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https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110645033-002

gifted with astonishing and uncanny foresight. These include prophecy, warnings, threats, lamentations, blessings, riddles – forms of speech which have designs on what is to come. As different strategic instruments in storytelling, they represent narrative's desire – not very secret desire – to claim to possess knowledge and to hold potential power over the future. A myth or fairy tale, especially the stories of the *Arabian Nights*, often opens with an oracle or a curse, and the story subsequently unfolds in accordance with what has been foretold. Classical tragic myth, for example about Oedipus or Dido, takes place in this perspective of predestined fate, and includes such speech acts.

Fable, parable, and allegory are returning to surprising prominence in contemporary fiction, seeming to suit the purposes of some writers today, novelists and fabulists who are writing from a perspective of "as if." They are posing the prophet's root question, "When shall it once be?", rather than taking up the vantage point that claims "and so it was." Gérard Genette points out the paradox that, while "it seems evident that the narrating can only be subsequent to what it tells, [...] this obviousness has been belied for many centuries by the existence of 'predictive' narrative in its various forms (prophetic, apocalyptic, oracular, astrological, chiromantic, cartomantic, oneiromantic, etc. whose origin is lost in the darkness of time" (Genette 1980, 216). A novel can be, as in the title of one of Gabriel García Márquez's fictions, *A Chronicle of a Death Foretold.* Does this narrative approach act as a form of magical writing, an attempt to prevent harm and avert danger? Does an oracle that turns out to be truth-telling in a play or chronicle convey a warning to us who are there to receive it? That if we pay attention to the story we might foresee the outcome, and that it might then be averted – not in the story, which must obey its own fatality, but in real life? The caution can be taken as a shield, technically as an apotropaic device to ward off precisely the repetition of the oracle. The end foreseen can be – in experience outside the text – an end forestalled.

The role of the prophet Tiresias, foreseeing and foresuffering all, exerts a very strong appeal to writers in our turbulent times, and make-believe play and oracular modes of invention and prediction are acting as catalysts to a marked resurgence of Greek tragedies in different contemporary media, including literature, as well as in the ever-growing interest in the fairy tale.[2] Oracular narrative itself can become, I suggest, a form of attempted self-protection, a form of prophylaxis to ward off the horrible future dangers the story relates. A narrative form of make-believe, severed from its historical context of faith or superstition, offers a

2 Since I delivered this lecture in the summer of 2016, there have been new productions of *Medea*, including Rachel Cusk's re-visioned translation for the Almeida production, London, in 2016, and novels by Colm Tóibín, Khamila Shamsie, and David Gann.

way to play-act an alternative outcome or to avert disaster by enacting it, by casting a spell in a performance of sympathetic mimesis. It involves performative speech acts that intend to press language into service in order to guarantee certain consequences in that envisaged future time: that stories can constitute forms of entreaty against bad things happening and curses on potential assailants and enemies, analogous to acts of self-protection such as touching wood and crossing fingers. The telling of these possible fates – for good and ill – arises from the drive of literature and art to illuminate and protect, by remembering, by exposing what has happened, and by reproducing what might happen, in order to conjure it into being – for the telling of it to bring about good, or to avert harm.

The writers I shall allude to here – and return to in the final section – are intensely engaged in visionary truth-telling through figural patterning; they include the Egyptians Radwa Ashour and Gamal al-Ghitani, the Moroccan Bensalem Himmich, the Angolan José Eduardo Agualusa, the Congolese Alain Mabanckou, and the Hungarian László Krasznahorkai. Their fiction is distinctive, but their novels are couched in a revived symbolic language that draws on signs and metaphors and modes of expression from the repertory of prophecy; they illuminate us, the readers, in ways that look to the future, warning and alerting and forecasting. This prophetic strain involves performative speech acts that deploy language to guarantee certain consequences in an envisaged future time; the author, through a narrator, takes a view of the story being told from a point of view of hopeful design; the narratives that unfold turn into forms of entreaty in an attempt – not always conscious – to affect reality and outcomes. These generic trends are taking hold in contemporary fiction, especially as it is staged in public, through spoken-word events and broadcasting, and hybrid formats involving music, dance, and visual elements (Warner 2019).

Prophetic plotting belongs in literatures of destiny and scripture that often address a given group of people – "communities of fate," to quote the comparatist Bruce Robbins in a fine article on "Prolepsis and Catastrophe" (Robbins, forthcoming). He asks if storytelling and story-making today can engage with contemporary experiences and the fates of so many displaced and endangered people. He writes that "this desire for justice is also normal within a global tradition of storytelling that's much larger than realism: that narrative as such poses the broader question of what circle of readers can recognize themselves at any given moment as a political collectivity or community of fate, whether in any given narrative enough guests have been invited" (Robbins, forthcoming). The idea of "communities of fate" defines a possibility of imaginative coexistence, a way of dwelling in fractured space and interrupted time. Robbins continues:

> But I would also like to think that there exists a narrative, or a possibility of narrative, within "world literature", a narrative in which the emergence of the category of "world literature" would constitute a significant event. Contemplating a seemingly endless series of atrocities receding into the depths of time, atrocities that no longer seem easily divided between modern and ancient, it may seem that meaningful history has become impossible and that literature itself, taken as existing outside of time, is the best refuge from the centuries and centuries and centuries of meaninglessness. (Robbins, forthcoming)

Once you tune in to the presence of oracular stories, they appear everywhere, staking a claim to the possibility that someone in a story can possess knowledge of what is to happen – and that claim may not be confined to the pages of the book in question or the drama unfolding on stage. They are the dwelling places, the native habitat, of forms of speech filled with purposes such as cursing and blessing, supplication and praise; their characteristic tenses are the future and the future perfect, their moods subjunctive, imperative, and jussive, as in the closing word of prayer, "Amen," which means "May it be so" or "Let it be so." The supernatural forces in mythic and fairy-tale narratives, personified as gods, fairies, or jinn, seemed more and more to embody the power that the stories themselves possess to determine destiny – not only the destiny of the characters who are subject to magic inside the story, but our fate, too, the fate of the story's receivers. The language in which the stories are told has an effect. "For we are wagering here that thinking never has done with the conjuring impulse," declares Jacques Derrida (1994, 165).

"Prolepsis" is the literary term for flashforward, and "analepsis" for flashback, or what Nabokov calls "backcast," to make a pair with "forecast." Both can be dramatized through the mind or speech of a character in the story or conveyed by the narrator's voice, which then forms a compact with the readers, imparting knowledge to them. Such narrative revelations of what is to come, telling the truth before it takes place, can be tragic, as in Greek drama or *Macbeth*, or providential, as in the Bible and the Qur'an. In the first, tragic mode, the subjects about whom an oracle speaks or the people to whom the oracle is addressed either do not hear what it is saying or refuse to accept it. Or believe it too literally because they are arrogant and defiant – they suffer from hubris. In the second, providential branch of prophetic story, events unfold as significant elements in a divine pattern or plan.[3] Fairy tales and folk tales can belong to both: the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights* are filled with marvellous doom-laden stories that are plotted to bring about, ineluctably, a curse everyone in the tale is striving to

3 "There are two basic types of anachrony. An analepsis, or textual point of retrospection, reaches back to a time anterior to that being narrated […]. A prolepsis […] flashes ahead to events yet to occur in the story sequence" (Cohan and Shires 1988, 84–85).

avoid – as in the Tale of the Second Dervish or the Borgesian fable "The Appointment at Samarra" (Warner 2011, 395–396; 148–149). But providence, while it brings death and ruin to some, brings glory to others, and promises salvation, escape, transformation. It projects eschatology onto a horizon of hope – soteriology. Providential fulfilments also provide the dynamic of fairy tales and their promise of happiness: the curse of death on Sleeping Beauty is lifted by the good fairy and eventually, after a hundred years, she will wake up, whole and unmarred. The injustice done to Doctor Douban by the Greek King Yunan will not be repeated by the Demon to the Fisherman, because the Demon has been warned of the consequences by the story of the Doctor's brilliant revenge (Warner 2011, 191–194).

Both kinds of foresight – tragic and providential – promise meaningfulness in the random scatter of events in time. They make a claim on the future by recounting events unfolding in the past. This is one reason for their reinvigoration today within a secular horizon by writers addressing the turbulence and disorder that is intensifying all over the world. In different ways, these writers are couching contemporary fiction in a revived symbolic language. Such fabulist forms of storytelling – in print fiction and other media – are re-tuning and re-voicing ways of speaking in figures and images in order to express that conscience of which Frank Kermode spoke in his seminal study *The Sense of an Ending* (l967): "modern eschatology – the vision of last things – has substituted conscience, or something subtler, for historical prophecy" (Kermode 1967, 26). He grasped how fiction and eschatology, the story of the past and the apprehension of the future, are tightly intertwined.

Ancient prophetic forms have counterparts in secular literary fiction today: the author, as the organizing agent of the story's unfolding, may step in and comment on what is to come, and the effect of the intervention destabilizes the reader's relation to the temporality of the tale, taking us out of the action and setting us down in another moment. In this case, the prolepsis pushes the narrative away from the reader, back in time from a vantage point in the future. In terms of grammar and syntax, the subjunctive, jussive, the interrogatory, and the imperative belong, according to Genette's useful distinction, to diegetic narrative, involving interpellations and exclamations, dialogue and speech, frequently using the vocative and different voices in counterpoint, as opposed to mimetic storytelling (Genette l980, 228). With regard to tenses, prophetic writing naturally speaks in the future, but many of its most fruitful exponents in contemporary fiction adopt the future perfect, or *futur antérieur*, to relate something that has not yet happened as if it has. This compression of looking forward and looking back, switching back and forth between different temporalities, is technically called analeptic prolepsis, and it memorably sets the tone of clairvoyant marvelousness in the opening sentence of Gabriel García Márquez's *A Hundred Years of Solitude*:

“Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendia was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice” (Márquez 1970, 1).

Ali Smith, in her novel *How to Be Both,* mostly sticks fast to the first-person internal consciousness of her protagonist, the girl-in-disguise and artist Francesco del Cossa, so that when she does step out of the timeframe into the future, the shock is shiveringly palpable and pleasurable:

> Funny to think of it now, that bleak evening: cause the biggest patrons of my short life *were* after all to be the Garganelli family, and the reason I couldn’t find the legging-stuff was that my friend Barto had rolled it in his hand and put it in his pocket and taken it as a souvenir, as he told me years later sitting on the stone step by my feet while I worked on the decorations for the tomb of his father in their chapel (Smith 2015, 95; emphasis in original).

Looping back and forth in time, Francesco’s voice enters the pages of the novel from the afterlife and so is able to speak of his own future death as having taken place.

Such stories, in which someone can see into the future, are cautionary, and serve to express the story’s own knowledge of its outcome; they rejoice in the knowledge of hindsight, since what we are reading or seeing on stage has already happened. Such foreknowledge can also comfort the reader or audience, as it narrows the horizon of the unknowable and appears to impose order on disorder and attribute a design – the pattern of art – to random chance.

2 Figural forecasting

Edward Said, in his introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, comments on one of the most venerable languages of comparative literature: figural exegesis. He focuses on the contrast between Odysseus and Abraham, as set up by Auerbach:

> The former is immediately present and requires no interpretation, no recourse either to allegory or to complicated explanations. Diametrically opposed is the figure of Abraham, who incarnates “doctrine” and “promise” and is steeped in them […]. For that very reason, they [providential protagonists] are fraught with background and are mysterious, containing a second, concealed meaning. And this second meaning can only be recovered by a very particular act of interpretation […] figural interpretation (Said 2013, xx).

The apparent meaning conceals another, as in that famous French warning on level crossings, “Un train peut en cacher un autre” [One train can hide another]. Isaac, about to be sacrificed by his father, comes to stand for Jesus, who died to

save humankind.[4] Similarly, the prophet Jonah, swallowed by the whale and regurgitated safe and sound on dry land after several days, comes to foreshadow, typologically, the resurrection of Jesus from the tomb, as shown for example in one of the powerful drawings from the twelfth-century manuscript of Herrad of Hohenbourg's *Hortus Deliciarum* (Hohenbourg 1979, 2: 94, plate 42). Encrypting meaning in this way can produce arbitrary effects, and biblical incidents can yield unexpected prophecies: Judith, who cuts off the head of Holofernes after having played the coquette with him (Jdt. 12–13), becomes a forerunner of the Virgin Mary who overcame the Devil. Even more bizarrely, the bloodthirsty figure of Jael, who hammered a tent peg into the head of another enemy, the Canaanite leader Sisera, also came to prefigure both the victory of Mary over Satan and of Humilitas over Superbia (Judg. 4.17–22; Bailey 2010, fig. 15.1). We are not asked to enter the moral maze of Judith's or Jael's actions or ponder Abraham's inner workings. What matters is the fulfilment of the divine plan, concealed inside the cruel story of consenting parricide and tricksterish seductive female tyrannicides.

Figura signifies a pattern within a text, a kind of figure in the carpet that is not immediately apprehensible, but structurally present in a form that enriches and directs the significance of the whole (Zakai and Weinstein 2012). The figure forms in the present moment of the text under one's eyes, but the latent meanings emerge both in the past and look forward to the future: the narrowly averted sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the death of Jesus, for example. "How much more fulfilling is the new idea that pre-Christian times can be read as a shadowy figure of what actually was to come?" writes Said (Said 2013, xxi).

The most crucial figural narrative device, alongside foreshadowing or prefigurement, is recapitulation: both of them need not be consciously deployed by the writers, but readers decode them from the narrative and then shape and rearrange the original design to fit the latent meaning. Prefigurement and recapitulation underpin the structure of providence and the scheme of salvation. In the scholastic interpretation of Scripture, everything foreshadows everything, no stitch is dropped in the fabric, and each one will be fulfilled: this overarching pattern, oracular in intention, architectural in form, endows imagery with doubled voices, speaking in chords resonating across time: the past becomes prologue.

A prophetic story thus does not necessarily include manifest fortune-telling or prediction or oracles; fulfilment may take place without the story's knowledge of its own significance. Providential structures do not always command cause and effect. In these forms of *inadvertently coded* prolepsis, the prophecy is not

4 See, for example, the *Biblia pauperum* showing Abraham and Isaac, Christ on the Cross, and the Brazen Serpent on the same page (John Rylands Library, R4 588 [Block-Book Collection], 25).

enunciated as such but has to await its decipherers, who will be later readers/redactors/translators. It is the exegete or reader who must discover the oracle in the narrative, who acts as a seer: the invitation to read figurally effectively hands over to writers a field of possibility, for they can rely on a circle of readers who, expecting them to be writing hermeneutically, will decipher the hidden figures in the carpet of their narratives. A strong difference thus distinguishes conscious and unconscious prolepsis; the latter device is undergoing reinvigoration, too, by readers of modern and contemporary fiction.

The unintended prescience of literary imagination has come to play a vital part in current cultural values. In relation to certain books, truth-telling takes place independently of the intention of the work's creator or its former readers: the text comes to seem prophetic – inadvertently. The promise of figurative suggestion underlies William Burroughs's advocacy of a similar palimpsestic process, his cut-up technique. As Burroughs remarked: "When you cut into the present the future leaks out" (Burroughs 1960–1976). Many compelling writers exercise their hold on us because they appear to have seen farther and deeper than their forebears or contemporaries: the very short animal fable "Jackals and Arabs," written by Kafka in 1919, tells of an endless desert war, an unbreakable cycle of carnage driven by gleeful antagonism, mutual stubborn incomprehension, and an immutable commitment to continued hostility. Kafka condenses this apocalyptic epic into a fragment, and brings into play a symbol that, like Bluebeard's key or the mirror of the Snow Queen in Andersen's fairy tale, condenses into a banal and domestic instrument a world of danger: a pair of small rusty scissors that has been travelling through the desert for ever, waiting to be used to kill. "Marvellous creatures, aren't they? And how they hate us!" are the closing lines of this lacerating fable (Kafka 1988, 411). During the COVID-19 pandemic, many early accounts of plague have come to seem prescient, but none more so than Albert Camus's *La Peste*, first published in 1947; rooted in the experience of the Occupation of France, its closing warning about the eternal, endemic bacillus of Fascism reads today as uncannily prophetic.

I do not want to suggest that writers *are* prophets, either according to Romantic (Shelleyan) ideas of the poet's calling or according to readings that cast Kafka as a visionary who foresaw the apocalypse of the twentieth century. And yet.

Forms that lend themselves to figural readings even when no such purpose animates them intentionally include fairy tales and myths; by contrast, a collection of Aesopian animal fables, such as *Kalilah wa Dimnah*, often possesses a conscious didactic intention. These ancient narratives, especially when loaded with worldly-wise, admonitory content, have been assigned to the children's section, and treated condescendingly as an unsophisticated and simplistic primitive literature before the development of the novel. The deep involvement with fabulism of

writers like Kafka, Borges, H. D., and Camus – I could go on – gives the lie to this over-glib viewpoint. The large fabulist family of literary modes offers a language of the imagination that crosses borders and barriers, a most useful quality in an era of mass displacements and transfers of population. Animal fables, parables, travellers' tales, fairy tales, proverbs – all are natural migrants, in constant metamorphosis. The transposition of forms allows for circulation of literature in translation, because the forms are highly portable, recognizable – a kind of musical repertory of tunes. By means of these forms, writers can open another significant gap in expectations between readers and actors in the narrative. A gap into which irony can pour, and seethe and scald, as at the conclusion of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, which parodies the happy ending of a domestic fairy tale: as the monstrous bug – Gregor – has been swept away, the family regroups with new hope, and young Greta comes into the bloom of her nubile eligibility.

3 Speaking fair

The prophetic mode not only tells stories of justice being done and happier outcomes achieved; it also mobilizes forms of speaking fair – foul language's opposite. Countering Jeremiads and curses, different forms of performative speech – elegy, blessing, charm – seek to soothe, cure, and shape possible futures along different lines.

At the end of *King Lear*, the repentant Lear paints for Cordelia a proleptic picture of their future idyll:

> We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage;
> When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
> And ask of thee forgiveness. So we'll live,
> And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
> At gilded butterflies [...]
> And take upon 's the mystery of things
> As if we were God's spies
> (*King Lear*, 5.2.3131–3140).

The religious compass points are not given; no reference is made to Druids or other supernatural powers. In Lear's wistful picture, he imagines living in harmony with Cordelia. His vision of mutual blessing presents a counterpoise, unarticulated but powerfully present, to the storm of curses he has vented earlier in the play, first on Cordelia herself in the opening scene, and later, even more intemperately, on his other daughters. His blast of Goneril's womb sends shivers

of fear run through us, as we feel the blows of his words: “Th’ untented woundings of a father’s curse / Pierce every sense about thee” (*King Lear*, 1.4.297–298).

When Cordelia is later found hanged and her body brought on stage and laid before her father, Lear’s lament rises and falls while a turmoil of action swirls around him; his words move from grief-stricken recognition of her death to a series of exclamations, protests, refusals, rhetorical questions, ejaculations, commands – a whole gamut of what Beckett calls “vociferations,” the howls of the wounded and disempowered creature before the horror of loss and death (Beckett l977, 45). (This bleak conclusion, abolishing hope, notoriously proved too much for some early producers, and the tragedy was rewritten as fairy tale – with the resurrection of Cordelia, and the father and daughter embarked on a harmonious life together.)

When Lear, earlier in the scene, imagines a time when Cordelia asks for his blessing and he will ask her to forgive him, he is shading the act into another, turning blessing into pardon, with which it is associated but not identical. His expression chimes with the aim of old tales about the mystery of things, like the tales of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which Shahrazad is telling to save her life and the lives of other women whom the Sultan, her husband, has vowed to kill.

The practice of blessing the living and the dead corresponds to the drive of literature and art to illuminate and protect, by remembering, by exposing what has happened and by reproducing what might happen, in order to conjure it – for the telling of it to bring it about good or to forestall harm. It is homeopathy in the form of words, and you do not have to have faith or belong to a church to believe in such verbal agency: this is one of the many areas where magical thinking survives and cannot be extinguished.

4 Contemporary fabulists

The fiction being written by contemporary authors in various languages, which I read *in extenso* for the Man Booker International in 2015,[5] revealed to me the strong return of fabulism: many novels that successfully reach English publication in translation adopt traditional forms of narrative and rhetorical methods – visionary apocalypse, curse, blessing, psalm and prayer, animal fable, allegory, figural palimpsest, and fairy tale – forms which belong, *grosso modo*, to a broad genre of magical realism. But their fantastic quality is not the dominant reason

5 I was chair of the judges, who included Elleke Boehmer, Wen-chin Ouyang, Nadeem Aslam, and Edwin Frank.

for their rise in usefulness as literary devices. The forms themselves lend such fictions mobility across cultural barriers of language, for philosophical as well as aesthetic reasons. They offer a kind of Esperanto of figures of speech. Global mobility and migration have also spurred on this development because such venerable storytelling vehicles have proved their immense popularity and portability, as Abdelfattah Kilito has written about in a luminous essay ("Métaphore") on the travelling tale and the nomadic ode or ballad (Kilito 2012, n. pag.). The issue of linguistic translation still remains fundamental, but generic translatability helps.

Fables, one of the most ancient forms of story, are portable as a genre, recognizable regardless of language or national origin, and their continuity over time can contribute to clearing the counter-space of literature as sanctuary, one that defies enclosure and partition. For example, José Eduardo Agualusa, who is from Angola, lives partly in Lisbon, and writes in Portuguese, creates exuberant and playful fictions, filled with a rich mingling of local folklore and music, colonial archival material, and religious fantasy, with which he re-visions the received history of his birthplace. In an interview, Agualusa pointed out: "We know almost nothing about our pasts." The interviewer then put a question that is key to contemporary world literature: "Do you think a made-up past can come to define someone's future, too?" Agualusa replied: "Yes, no doubt about it: by making up a past you're able to alter your future" (Polzonoff 2007).

Agualusa can be placed in the tradition of imaginative fiction stemming from Miguel Ángel Asturias, Mario Vargas Lhosa, and Jorge Luis Borges. He is a writer who, as Borges writes in one of his famous stories, likes to make reality choose to give in to the creations of his mind.

In *The Book of Chameleons,* Agualusa also plays with allusions to genres such as melodrama and film noir, as his exuberant doctor-protagonist provides distressed clients with fresh pasts and fully detailed new character profiles – for a new life in a new future – and in his recent *A General History of Oblivion*, he again shows an irrepressible capacity to forge retrospective histories which change the perspective on the present – and the future.

When Agualusa projected himself into a witty, sensitive, and wonderfully entertaining animal narrator in *The Book of Chameleons*, he was taking up a new voice in a very old inheritance: the talking animal. This ancient tradition has also been reinvigorated by Alain Mabanckou, in the *Memoirs of a Porcupine*, a ferocious satire of the politics of tyranny; he adopts here the ancient form of the animal fable to speak his mind (Mabanckou 2012). His narrator, the porcupine of the title, is making his confession at the end of a long life of violence; he has been a hit man who has done faithful service to his master as a killer and a body double, and he is looking back ruefully on his terrible crimes and painting a vivid portrait of despotism in the Republic of Congo. Mabanckou is a versatile writer (and a

much funnier writer than the biblical prophets), but his message in this book has a similar apocalyptic colour. But he sees his role as a witness to the variety of African voices and presences in his new existence as a writer on the world stage, be it in London, Paris, or the US – and as he carries out his mission of truth-telling, he can be tender and hilarious, celebratory and lyrical.

At a simply logistical level, the time lag between the composition of the books and their appearance in translation means that the events they encrypt have become known – even well known – to readers, so that we, looking back, are impressed by the insight and courage of the writers involved and their frequent political outspokenness. It is perhaps a melancholy fact about commercial translation that we readers are not always ready to receive a work of imaginative representation until the circumstances are such that the situation the writer evokes has become familiar. In this respect as well, Tiresias is like Cassandra, a prophet who speaks to his or her own time and is not heard.

After the portability of traditional story forms, such as animal fables, a second reason for the rise in figural storytelling is the need to conceal meaning from censorship, or worse, imprisonment or even death. The palimpsestic method of scriptural figuration, hiding one story under another, demands that readers engage in an active form of reading, listening for double entendres, attending to the crossword-puzzle clues; such encryption often becomes useful – even necessary – when the writer is living under a regime where certain forms of expression are not allowed. It is interesting to see how the challenge of writing subversive literature is then met by strategic uses of the imagination, by working with images, situations, characters, dialogue, in which only some people can be counted on to recognize their contrapuntal significance.

The Egyptian novelist Gamal al-Ghitani, who died in 2015, produced one of the most masterly and gripping novels of the Egyptian new literature. In *Zayni Barakat*, first published in instalments in the Egyptian literary magazine *Rose al-Yusif* in l970 and only translated into English eighteen years later, he uses the figural mode of analeptic prophecy (Al-Ghitani 2006). Ghitani was a carpet-weaver and designer before his gifts as a writer were noticed and nurtured by Naguib Mahfouz, who remained a close friend and patron and associate, and the exchange between the skills of oriental weaving and intertextual narrative as practised in *Zayni Barakat* is aesthetically most eloquent. Ghitani breaks taboos, adopts various disguises, and extrapolates boldly from historical sources, evoking Zayni Barakat, a well-documented market inspector, tax gatherer, and financial controller of early sixteenth-century Cairo during an epoch of intense turbulence, as the Mameluks' power was being overthrown by the Ottomans. Drawing on sheaves of research documents voiced by different narrators, filling his fiction with thickly descriptive archival detail, medievalizing lexicon and phrases, Ghitani

brings the seductive and terrifying protagonist to vivid life: this complex, unscrupulous, and glamorous man effectively ran medieval Cairo, ruling with terror through a vast network of spies. Ghitani performs a virtuoso sleight of hand as the reader begins to realize that the complex and ruthless protagonist is none other than President Nasser. It is as if Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell were masking the present-day power-players of Whitehall. The novel appeared to all intents and purposes a historical novel of vigour and excitement, but any reader – except perhaps the censors – could see it attacked the ambiguities of current Egyptian leadership, both the rule of Gamel Abdel Nasser and of his successor, President Sadat, who was in power when Ghitani published his creation in book form – in Damascus, for safety's sake. As the scholar Sabry Hafez comments in a review, "the use of the historical mask in *Zayni Barakat* is not synonymous with writing historical works that shed light on the present. He only uses the mask of historicity to invite us to penetrate the present reality more effectively and to distance the situation from readers so that they can rethink it for themselves" (Hafez 1989, 307).

It is a political satire of great pungency, deceptively camouflaged as a stirring bundle of historical records retrieved from the archives. Hindsight becomes a sleight of hand for foresight.

Similarly, in an elliptical and multi-layered novella, *Siraaj: An Arab Tale* – first published in 1992, and translated by Barbara Romaine in 2007 – the Egyptian novelist Radwa Ashour, who died in 2014, refashions a seafaring tale in the tradition of the *Arabian Nights*, and sets it in the British imperial era, on an imaginary island flourishing on the trade in slaves and spices and pearls (Ashour 2007). *Siraaj* means "lamp," and in its narrow space, this fiction dramatizes no less than two uprisings, one based on the historic revolt against the British in the 1880s in Alexandria, and the other on an imagined rebellion in a Gulf state, as serfs and slaves fight against the unenlightened tyranny of both British rulers and their client despots. Unlike her contemporaries, Ghitani and Bensalem Himmich, Ashour draws tender relations between her characters – between the young Sindbad-like hero, his mother, and his surrogate father, Ammar, a former, much-exploited personal slave of the Sultan. Into her highly wrought prose she weaves imagery and motifs from folk material – not only from popular tales, but also proverbs, songs, and poems. Furthermore, whereas in the novel by Ghitani, his choice of the palimpsestic method involves layers of one temporal era over another, Radwa Ashour, by revisioning a traditional figure from the anonymous legacy of circulating Arabic wonder tales, gives us another perspective from which to look at the use of ironic foreknowledge in fiction on the global stage. Her retrospective, historical setting masks an incisive confrontation with Arab social history as well as geopolitics, taking on with great

honesty conditions in the region in the nineties when the book was written, and showing acutely prescient sensors of what has been overwhelming it since.

The Moroccan author Bensalem Himmich hardly conceals the historical parallels, but rather mobilizes them to question, in a spirit of Jeremiah-like grief and rage, the violence and abuses of power in the present era and dramatized precursors to the current conflicts. *A Muslim Suicide*, the third of a trilogy, unfolds the persecuted life of the Sufi master and doctor Ibn Sa'bin; through the ferocious vicissitudes he suffered, Himmich reflects on the catastrophes that overtook the society of the western Mediterranean when the puritanical and warlike Almoravids swept away the enlightened rulers of Andalusia (Himmich 2011).[6]

Thirdly, the use of performative speech, such as curses and entreaty, accompanies the increased commitment to prophetic fiction. The Man Booker International Prize 2015 (the last year it was given for a writer's work rather than for one translated title) was awarded to László Krasznahorkai, certainly the most evidently messianic and apocalyptic of contemporary writers who have made the difficult transition from a minority language to an international readership. He emerged as the winner for his many qualities – passion, intensity, sheer stylistic virtuosity, and originality of approach to his chosen themes – sustained over a long writing career. It must also be added that he has been remarkably well served by his translators, Georges Szirtes and Ottilie Mulzet, both of them poets.

The earlier novels, *Satantango* and *The Melancholy of Resistance*, satirize the yearning for a messiah through a series of lacerating portraits of self-styled saviours (Krasznahorkai 2014, 2015). To pretend to have an answer can only be the claim of a charlatan, or worse: there is something Conradian about the terrifying deliverer who appears in *Satantango* to lead the hopeless, drunken villagers out of their desperate degradation on a failed collective farm. But in both these novels, there is a figure who acts as an observer, a kind of witness – outside the action, yet implicated in the events as they unfold – catastrophically. In the opening section of his masterpiece, *Seiobo There Below*, translated in 2012, this figure of the watcher takes form as a heron: the bird standing in a river, vigilant, reflective, a sign of the role of the writer in the sequence of chapters to come, each one of which recounts an epiphany of the divine mediated through an aesthetic creation (the Alhambra, an icon by Andrei Roublev, a Noh play) (Krasznahorkai 2013). At times the experience is too powerful for the one who undergoes it: he – always a he – is blasted by the encounter with the divine quiddity of art.

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6 The first two novels in the trilogy are *The Polymath*, about Ibn Khaldun (Himmich 2004); and *The Theocrat*, about the visionary Fatimid caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Illah, ruler of Egypt during the tenth century (Himmich 2005).

Here László Krasznahorkai, in spite of his professed fidelity to Kafka and to rancid irony, acts as a seer, the writer through various protagonists pressing forward a visionary ideal of transcendence through art in the midst of fury and waste – he is still struggling to sing in the dark times and to pick out of the mess something with meaning for a repaired future and to bring forth – a word he likes – beauty.

After l989 Krasznahorkai was able to travel far from his southern Hungarian birthplace of Gulya, and he first chose Mongolia and then developed a profound rapport with China and Japan. He also stays at home, and in every setting – whether familiar and unfamiliar to him – he summons conditions with his intensely absorptive encyclopedic detail, and wraps his subjects around in writhing sentences, the very structure and punctuation and rhythm weaving a tightly patterned net of words. His assiduity can tip into the comic, as he comes from every angle at the sensibility and sense of his characters' individual responses, coiling them in hypnotic, writhing prose like a beautiful and sublime but terrifying squid.

Since then, English readers have now been given his travel essay-memoir-meditation on travels in China, *Destruction and Sorrow under the Heavens* (originally 2004, but translated into English in 2016), and a triptych of stories which return to horrific, lacerating apocalypse: "The Last Wolf," "Herman the Game Warden," and "The Death of a Craft" (Krasznahorkai 2016). The title of the third story, "The Death of a Craft," could be read in reverse: the craft of a death. Krasznahorkai is a writer for whom Kafka is a conscious exemplar, yet these recent animal fables, implacable in their inventories and contextual detail, exceed the ancestor in their furious misanthropy. Krasznahorkai also wrestles with his own consciousness of his prophetic tendencies, in more conscious ways than Kafka, whose prophetic illuminations are to a great extent the product of readers' hindsight. In these three grim, dark tales, this Hungarian fabulist of nightmares elaborates in obsessive inventorying and detail the processes which Herman, presented as the last huntsman of a dying art, sets in motion to control the teeming wild creatures of a forest: the pits and traps, nets and weapons. The writing adopts a bleak, affectless distance, but the story's fury explodes from under the factual encyclopedic tally, echoing the carnage and bloodlust in Flaubert's tale "Saint Julien L'Hospitalier." However, Flaubert is directly confronting Catholic hagiography and plunging himself as deeply as he can go into its dark and fantastic moral toils, whereas Krasznahorkai has no firm ontological referent but a vacancy of meaning: his fable of a man massacring nature with all the ingenuity of an artist communicates an eschatology without a heaven for anyone. Is it is a parable of communist or fascist efficiency? An allegory of denatured skill and human overreaching? "The Last Wolf" enacts its own subject matter, being composed of a single sentence running over seventy-seven remorseless pages,

allowing the reader no escape from the cunning and ever-tightening knots of the narrator's crafted tale.

In a very different register, the Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich also voices a language of scriptural performative power. She composes sombre and historical documentary studies, akin in their symphonic structure to the great requiems of music, in which her subjects remember their hopes and dreams, disasters and sufferings. Alexievich, who in 2015 was awarded the Nobel Prize and is one of the first journalists/essayists in that pantheon, gathers testimonies from her native Belarus, as well as Ukraine and Russia; her magnificent epics also recall the choruses and towering messenger-speeches of Greek tragedy. She takes on the task of retrieving the past, writing as an open-eyed, aghast archivist of horrors, and at the same time bringer of hope and redress – the words building blessing on the suffering and the dead. *Second Hand Time* was recently translated into English by Bela Shayevich, and it explores the experiences of many varied individuals since the Soviet Revolution and its ending. Before that, she composed a harrowing and intensely profound tribute to the people of Chernobyl. These works are oratorios: multiple and various voices overheard, perseveringly attended to by the self-effacing author. It is significant that while in English the Chernobyl book is called *Chernobyl Prayer*, in French is has been more sensitively translated as *La Supplication*, "the entreaty" (Alexievich 2016a, 2016b). Svetlana Alexievich occupies the role of an everywoman Cassandra, a figure of prophecy and priesthood – and both shade into the role of a suppliant, pleading to be spared the events she foresees.

The visions that Svetlana Alexievich conveys are analeptical – backcasts – yet written with a forward propulsion, the proleptic energy of entreaty, prayer, in the hope of averting further, future danger and damage; when she comes to us with her subjects as suppliants before the tribunal of history, their natural habitat is the language of hope in the midst of despair. She has declared that she will now write only about love; she has had enough of horror.[7]

5 Conclusion

"Stories are a form of action," wrote Hannah Arendt in her l956 book *The Human Condition*, "the way we insert ourselves into the human world" (Arendt l958, 25), and, she went on, "the ability to produce stories is the way we become historical"

7 Svetlana Alexievich, personal communication during interview with Marina Warner, Royal Festival Hall, London, May 2016.

(Arendt 1958, 5).[8] The revival of fabulism in a prophetic mode issues a challenge to the future, acting in accordance with magical thinking as it attempts to make oracular narrative itself a form of anticipatory self-protection. However, in practical terms, the time lag between the composition of many such authors' works and their appearance in translation means that the events they imagine have come about and become known – even well known – to readers (Krasznahorkai's disintegrating communist society was committed to paper by him before the event).

There are evident dangers of false messianism in any apocalyptic trend, but rather than denounce the role that several writers are taking on, it seems to me that they are looking towards a more expectant and defiant horizon, that of world literature as a zone of collective emancipation, carried on the ethereal pathways of the Internet as well as the material printed page. The French comparatist Pascale Casanova has written about literatures as the ground of communities across barriers of language, ethnicity, and geography in our times of disruption and destruction; a polity of shared imaginings, a collectivity of stories, given and passed on. She calls this the World Republic of Letters (Casanova 2007), and she redefines the nation-state in relation to cultural capital, arguing that national literatures have always existed in international relationship with one another, and that this state of affairs demonstrates the necessity of communicating beyond national borders – to become visible to others and develop a sense of self. More recently, she modified her original contrast between dominant and dominated literatures to propose instead that "the most important opposition is between combative literature and pacified or non-engaged ones" (Casanova 2011, 133).[9]

Imagining future outcomes is one way for stories to intervene in history and experience: sometimes to warn, at other times to hope, sometimes to prevent developments – or attempt to. Prolepsis in imaginative works of literature becomes a powerful form of "as if," since prophecies in ancient literature are ineluctably fulfilled; revisiting them acts to remind us of those tragic fates and asks us not to repeat the circumstances which led to them. Bruce Robbins takes this thought into fully *engagé* territory when he writes, with great urgency and eloquence:

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8 Joan Scott quoted these words when she was speaking at a symposium for Natalie Zemon Davis, and it gives me great satisfaction to continue weaving connections with these much-loved and -admired forerunners here, as connecting to the past seems to me to be a way of being at home – in a country of words.

9 "As long as ago as 1986, Fredric Jameson wrote: 'I would propose that all third world texts are allegorical, and allegorical in a very specific mode: they should be read as national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, above all when their forms have come from representational mechanisms that are eminently western, such as the novel'" (Casanova 2011, 133).

> The present is always different [from the past], because one can act in and on the present as one cannot act on even an identical situation (if such a thing exists) in the past. A secular version of fate is a political community that, like the nation-state, at least has a possibility of controlling what its members do and suffer and adding to those who can count as members. If the moral confusion of deep time is condensed […] into the form of prolepsis, a grammatical uncertainty giving form to a social uncertainty, it does not follow that we fulfil our moral responsibilities merely by reading strenuous fiction. Literature, whether strenuous or not, is valuable not because it can substitute for collective agents like the nation-state – it cannot – but because it can motivate us to build and inhabit collective agents, whether national or (increasingly, hopefully) transnational. Some years later, we may in this way be able to remember that, faced with the demands of our moment, we at least did what we could (Robbins, forthcoming).

Listening to the voices of the makers of stories, in which the writers struggle with the languages of injustice and intolerance so that they might be seen for what they are, tuning in to the imagination and memories of our forerunners, weaving counter-myths – these are, it seems to me, acts of stewardship at the heart of culture. We live in the stories we pass on and the stories we invent and how they report on experience; one of the territories that needs to be reoccupied is narrative. While enlightened and post-Enlightenment anxiety about myths was justified, in that indeed myths are instruments of ideology and have often been told by the powerful to consolidate their power, now is the time to regain that territory and weave alternative versions, counter-narratives. Books, the bearers of stories, and writers and storytellers, the *hakawati* and the *raawati* (the storytellers in the Arabic tradition), the griots and griottes of West Africa, the rhapsodes, the skalds and the bards – in short, the bearers of words, the interpreters and the scryers of signs, who speak the languages of literature and invite others to understand their communications, through images and forms, patterns and devices, can move to build a "country of words" (Darwish 2003, 11), even when the barriers are going up to prevent access and destroy sanctuaries and bridges.

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