

Speech of award winner A.L. Kennedy

Awarding of the Heine Prize 2016 on December 11th

- Check against delivery -

I would like to thank the judges of the Heine Preis for allowing me to receive this honour, to be thought of as a good writer by people of intellectual rigour and good judgment is always a kind surprise. To be thought of as in any way worthy of a prize which also seeks to celebrate the promise of humanity and the role of writing within the ongoing project which is human civilisation is very moving. To be associated with the spirit of Heine's writing, his compassion, his imagination, his daring, his mourning and his outrage - this is beyond what I would have hoped for myself, or my work.

So thank you all.

But, as you know, the arts today cannot simply be about maybe some happy press releases and a congenial event where we congratulate each other on knowing about values. We are all aware that the values which keep us all safe, promise us the best possible opportunities to fulfill our humanity and to see and cherish what is human in others - those values are currently being forgotten, derided, or quietly buried alive.

As Germany clings to the lessons it learned about cultural toxicity long ago, I speak to you as a citizen of the UK, a country where books do not have to be burned - epidemic library closures and a massively compressed literary culture quietly prevent books ever being read or even born. Mine is a country which would rather leave traumatised and undefended children in the Calais mud, or now who knows where, than offer them the welcome we once extended to the kinder transports and to 100's of thousands of refugees before and after World War II. This is a country where the availability of the arts has narrowed shockingly in the last decades and where community arts are especially under threat. This is a country - a wealthy country - where around 130,000 of our own children are homeless. This is a country which tortures in black sites abroad and police stations at home, which incarcerates citizens without trial. This is a country with a wrecked education system for the masses based on monetisation and testing and an emotionally traumatising and entitling education

for the elite. This is a country where there is less and less mass media arts coverage. This is a country where the public discourse is a hell's broth of gossip, malign invention, racism, rabble-rousing hatred and smut. This is a country where civil servants despair, where politicians base decisions on faith and feeling which does not include faith in our species or fellow feeling, where any attempt to rise above the gutter is reframed as smugness, or otherworldly insanity. This is a country where - as the UN recently pointed out, our government's treatment of the disabled contravenes their human rights and where there is no need for an equivalent of Aktion T4 to organise the extinction of human beings with disabilities. We have simply withdrawn all their means of support, subjected them to official harassment and mass-media demonisation and waited for them to die in their tens of thousands - of stress, starvation, or else driven to suicide by their pain and despair. Make no mistake; we have been lost for some time - long before Brexit advertised that fact to the world. There is no morning when I could not wake up and say, like Max Liebermann - who once illustrated an edition of *Der Rabbi Von Bacherach* - "Ich kann gar nicht soviel fressen, wie ich kotzen mochte."

And this lack of art and this lack of humanity - they are connected. You know it, I know it, we have known it all along, but we have allowed the dominant discourse to forget. But as Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education." The practice of arts, contact with the arts, is our lifelong education - right here - it prepares us to choose wisely. It exercises our imagination, the force that allows us to visualise any change, all consequences, to empathise with each other. Without it, hope is a form of delusion. Art is at the heart of democracy. If we doubt ourselves, if we feel we may simply be making ourselves feel important because we are artists, then we can look to science, we can read about situational pressure and its massive power - what is culture but situational pressure. We can read about empathy, about compassion - how diminish it and how to enlarge it - by doing what art does. We can study history, we can learn all over again the beautiful and terrible truth of Heine's words from the play *Almansor*, "Das war ein Vorspiel nur, dort wo man Bucher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen." We can look at the work of Raphael Lemkin, the man who invented the term Genocide before that crime had a name and who studied many culture's

progressions into genocide - and see that the vorschpiel is always the same - first the art is murdered, then the people. Always. Always.

And speaking now for myself - I'm 51 years old and my life as a writer has failed. For something like 35 years I have produced work and I have loved the process of that and I have earned my living - I have been paid to dream aloud, there could be no better life for me - and I have a nice home and I've won some prizes and I have - from time to time - worked with writers in prisons, or community centres, or hospitals, worked with new writers, with children, written in the media - and I have learned from that, but I haven't talked enough about what I have learned. I have seen art light up lives, because that is what art does. But I haven't done enough. I haven't told enough people how precious that is, I haven't fought to make a space within which that could be heard. Like many of us, perhaps, in comfortable, apparently stable democracies I have forgotten that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance and I have mistaken lazy silence, cowardice, for truly loving tolerance. Love tells the whole truth - when something is wrong there is no long in being silent and nodding as if it were right. And I haven't said - at the start of every workshop - we will now make a part of culture - the thing which tells us to be cruel or to be kind, alone or united, ignorant and frightened, or endlessly learning and brave. And this matters - always - so we will now break our hearts to be extraordinary because anything else, anything imperfect, anything simply self-obsessed, weak and "conceptual" diminishes the place of art amongst us, wastes perhaps the only chance that art will have to improve and awaken and even save a life. This is life and death.

Whenever we see reality TV shows that diminish humanity, articles that lie in a way fiction wouldn't dare to, words used to rob them of their sense, or cynical website pieces that feed off outrage, while creating more, I haven't said often enough - There cannot ever be a place for this amongst us. It is not elitist to want the best for our fellow-man - it is insulting to stand by while other human beings are fed manure, are shown, over and over, only how low humanity can go. It cannot be that only our cars and electrical goods are aspirational. It must be that our dramas, or novels, songs, photographs, paintings, cartoons, poems, ballets, operas and all the rest are extraordinary, diverse, unexpected and things of life. If we have no money, then we have no money - art can be cheap without being bad, toxic, hateful. This is a necessary truth.

And I owe my career, my artisan's satisfaction and any morality I might lay claim to as a person to art, to writing, to - for example - a single scene in a drama that haunted me in my childhood and has ever since. In the drama a man who was not a torturer, but who was weak, stood in a torture chamber and was handed a pair of pliers - and there was the torture victim and there was the torturer and there were the pliers and there was the unspoken assurance that if the weak man did not torture he would be tortured and there was the pause. And that drama, by German screenwriter Lukas Heller who was born in Kiel in 1930 - asked me and still asks me - and what would you do? How weak are you? How best can you control your weakness and your desire for self-preservation - how do you prevent your fall and keep yourself and others truly safe?

And the how is what art always tells us - amongst everything else that it shows us and tells us. And it makes me think of lines from Heine's poem - *Allnachtlich im Traume* - which is large enough to be about more than one kind of love...

Du sagst mir heimlich ein leises Wort,
Und gibst mir den Strau von Zypressen.
Ich wache auf, und der Strau ist fort,
Und das Wort hab ich vergessen.

As writers and artists we keep hold of the cypress that reminds us we all die and that we should be merciful and we serve the dreams that come to us to be expressed. We make them articulate and let them join the larger dreams that others make for us, the dreams that form our culture. Our culture makes the reality we inhabit. As artists, as writers, we are paid to dream awake and that is very nice for us. As human beings, which is more important, we have a duty never to forget those secret words we hear in darkness and to guard each other from the worst of who we can be, the worst of worlds that we can make and to do better. And we can love that, we can love that loudly. I would thank Heine and the Heine Preis for being part of what I love.