

ANNOUNCER. PERSONAL VIEW. John Wain's third talk is an open letter to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, whose Nobel Prize Lecture was read by Paul Schofield earlier this evening. John Wain.

WAIN: Dear Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Your speech in acceptance of the Nobel Prize for Literature was what you knew it would be – an event of importance to every thoughtful person in every country. You saw it, quite rightly, as an opportunity to make a statement which you addressed to 'the writers of the whole world'. Already that statement has been translated into many languages and has been heard and read by many people. Here in England, a translation of it was read on the radio, only an hour or two ago, by Paul Schofield, one of our finest actors. Coming on the air so soon afterwards, what could I, a writer, do but try to make some sort of response to what you said. Knowing as I do that there's very little chance of your hearing us, I must still launch my voice out over the air-waves; because, after all, it is possible for ideas to get through in the end if one has the patience to wait. The most rigorous censorship, the most sophisticated techniques of jamming, can't stop an idea from getting into general circulation and once it's in the bloodstream of humanity, that great heartbeat will drive it on through the arteries, through the veins, through the very capillaries until it penetrates everywhere. If I wrote you a personal letter it would be intercepted; if I tried to address you in a pamphlet it would be seized at the frontier; if I wanted to arrange an interview with you through the Soviet Writers' Union it would be blocked because the Writers' Union doesn't exist to fight for the rights of authors but merely to channel down to them the

decisions taken at the top and that is why you are not a member of it because you refused to sing in the choir. But you addressed yourself to the writers of the world and it's a duty and a privilege for your fellow writers in every country to give some sort of sign that they have heard you and contribute what thoughts and comments and footnotes to your statement they feel able to contribute.

First let me say, then, that I'm in no mood to contradict anything you said, indeed I find myself in deep agreement with all your main points. You see literature primarily as a means of communication between man and man, society and society, generation and generation. In it the essential experience of an individual or of a nation can be encapsulated and handed on with its essence unspoilt. So that we can avoid the misery and frustration of beating our hands against a glass, making the same mistakes over and over again. We can learn from others all the more so because reading imaginative literature isn't the same thing as reading a page of statistics. It recreated the essentials of the experience it deals with so that, as you say, by reading 'we absorb the pain of what happened'. And come close to having the same experience ourselves by the power of imagination. Now that, of course, is the great service that you have performed for us in the West: you've described for us the agony and tension and travail of being an imaginative and original man in a society where these things are forbidden. When you paid tribute in your speech to all the gifted and creative people who never emerged from the silence of the prison-camps, who were stifled before they had a chance to leave behind any concrete evidence of their gift, we shared your feelings, we paid that tribute with you to our brothers and sisters who have left behind no names by which we can call them.

Living in a society that imposes silence, that builds walls and employs guards to shoot people who try to climb over them and see what's on the other side, you are naturally disposed to make communication a prime object. To talk to somebody else,

just to talk, to say something and get an answer, this is terribly important after spending fifty years in a place where talking is forbidden; where the only voice heard in public is the voice of the ruling party, endlessly serving up its own propaganda. Just to talk, just to make one's voice heard involves so great an effort and so great a heroism that the problem of what to say must seem to you almost trivial in comparison. After the years of hectoring and interference, after the endless insistence on being the mouthpiece of the ruling party, approving and cheering and exhorting as that party dictates, never criticising, never contradicting, never remembering anything that the party wants forgotten and perhaps above all never just turning aside and inventing something of your own. After all this, when you have the chance to speak and the courage to take that chance it must seem to you that what to say is by comparison a simple decision. Just say anything that comes naturally – it's bound to be something that they wouldn't like and as such the mere saying of it will let in a gasp of fresh air.

To put it another way, to a man in your situation the issues are bound to seem more simple and more heroic than they can seem to us in our situation. You tell us, and rightly, that the greatest service writers can do for humanity is to defeat the lie. Violence, which has so much power in the world, you remind us, can't exist in a vacuum, it needs the support of lies, not just a lie here and there but a whole system of them. And by refusing to support the lie-system writers can undercut violence and save the world. I'm simplifying pretty dramatically but that, I think, is the gist of what you were saying.

Well, we hear you, and with your help and the help of a few of your supremely brave and supremely gifted fellow Russians we understand your problem. Would you like to understand our problem? We recognise the forces you have to struggle against; would you like to hear about the forces that we have to struggle against?

The fact that has to be faced is that neither your society nor ours has, as a society, any use for the imaginative artist, writer or otherwise. Both you and we depend totally on the support of individuals scattered here and there through the mass. We draw our strength from the fact that we get through to this person and that person and their response to our work forms a bond between them, an invisible and intangible bond which, nevertheless, holds them together and also supports us and keeps us working. Imagine a train standing at a station, its carriages filling up with people. One person gets in who knows your work well, reads and re-reads it eagerly, takes it deep into his consciousness. At the far end of the compartment, or perhaps in the next seat, is someone else who also devours your work. They don't know each other, these two, they exchange no words, they remain unaware of each other's existence but, nevertheless, there is a tough, resilient, invisible thread running between them and it's the sum total of these threads that holds you up. The society, as such, has other aims and other preoccupations. It's working against what we're trying to achieve; in your society by direct displeasure, by discouragement and punishment; in ours by a constant pressure of trivialisation and by ceaselessly drawing the attention of the people to objectives in which we can set no value, states of mind in which we can have no share.

The ruling power in your society forbids free public discussion, stifles the give-and-take of ideas in which new attitudes can breed in peace, condemns the individual to an intolerable silence and loneliness. It must be very difficult to think out one's problems in an unbreakable silence. But neither, I can assure you, is it easy to think them out amid a deafening uproar.

Your society says to the writer: Do this, or else. Our society says to him: Do anything you like, but don't expect us to slow down long enough to take much notice. On your side ceaseless interference and pressure from men who have no love of literature and don't see the point of it except as a species of State

propaganda; on our side the indifference of people so absorbed in the pursuit of material ends that nothing will attract their attention amid the roar of the market place, unless it were to be the self-advertising of the writer who's prepared to outroar the very hucksters and barkers.

I notice, by the way, that in your speech you make a brief reference in passing to Western society and you remark that it's so tempest-tossed that it seems to be on the point of collapse. I agree. But then it always has been on the point of collapse. Western society is a money-society and a money-society is unstable by definition. One can only hope that this perpetual instability is, nevertheless, preferable – slightly – to the ghastly stability of a slave-state. All the same no sensitive person can enjoy living in the kind of society we have. It seems to me, Solzhenitsyn, that both halves of the world lie under a curse, an evil enchantment. In your half the curse of political tyranny; in our half, the curse of money. It's money that fills the shops with every kind of cheap trash because it's always easier to turn a quick profit by producing flashy junk than by making a good and useful product. It's money that produces on the one hand shortages in things that we really need like houses to live in and on the other a colossal overplus of gadgets and gimmicks that we don't need at all. It's money that calls into being factory after factory, each one making its own giant contribution to noise and dirt, to cram the department stores with obsolescent rubbish. It's money that covers every bookstall with a rash of mind-poisoning sensationalism; it's money that chains millions of people to the television set every night, subjecting what's left of their minds to an endless drip-feed of triviality. Because we're all born into a society that preaches money at us all the time, the mass of our population are processed into money-worshippers long before they've grown up enough to think for themselves and the result is a sickness and a greed that comes out in different ways according to the individual temperament. One man publishes pornography, another buys up land that's desperately

needed and then sits on it till he can make a million pounds, another beats an old lady over the head with an iron bar for the sake of the fifty pence that's in her handbag, but basically it's all the same activity. We all live by selling things to one another and since most of the things offered for sale are basically indistinguishable we rely more and more heavily on the ad. man who is to our society what the political commissar is to yours – the person who lays down the line and sees to it that you keep facing in right direction and keep running. The only difference is that whereas your population are subject to a constant campaign of bullying and coercion, ours are subject to a vast, never-ending swindle. Advertising has tickled their glands so deftly that they sweat and salivate at the thought of the 'good things of life' – a new car every few years, a six lane motorway to drive it along, ocelot skin covers on the seats, taped music in lifts, pre-cooked, pre-packed, pre-frozen and pre-digested and pre-ruined food, watch straps six inches wide studded with imitation rhinestones, package holidays to what used to be beautiful islands in the Mediterranean which are now asphalted over and plasticked up. All resulting in a world of more and more in which there's actually less and less of the things that we really need.

Yes, we're aware, keenly enough, of what money does to our society – the havoc it wreaks, the relationships it stultifies or embitters, the mess it makes of our land and our lives. It's like an evil enchantment that we can't shake off. A lot of us long very much to shake it off and if we're young or simple-minded or in the case of our Maoist revolutionaries, young and simple-minded, we often look wistfully at your half of the world where money is hardly ever spoken of and wish that we could be like you. No matter how cruel or unjust a society might be, if it calls itself 'socialist' and claims to have outlawed the 'capitalist' and the money-maker generally, it can count automatically on the allegiance of large numbers of decent and idealistic people, especially young people who feel themselves trapped in a money-

society. What these gentle dreamers fail to take into account is that money in itself is a neutral thing, an instrument rather than an agent. The real enemy is the human appetite for power and possessions, the impulse to snatch for material rewards and elbow everybody else out of the way. Every human being has a large slice of this predatory instinct and in any society the decent people are the ones who manage to hold it down, to put other objectives first. In a money-society, it's money that puts you on top of the heap. In a totalitarian society, it's political influence. But in either case the villain is the man who's determined to get to the top of the heap and stay there no matter whose face he has to tread on in the process – he's the man that the rest of us need to watch and to restrain where we can. In our world such a man will use money as a means of grabbing what he wants, so that his first objective will be to get rich. In your world his first objective will be to identify as closely as possible with the ruling power, to rise as high as possible in its service, no matter what hideous things it orders him to do; and then, when he has crawled through blood and dirt for years until his bosses trust him implicitly he'll find himself at last standing close enough to them to stab them in the back so that he can be the boss. Personally I don't like the one type any better than the other. I'd like to get rid of the millionaire and the big capitalist but if we do it at the cost of letting in the secret police and the terror, who's going to be any better off? Except, of course, for the types that can't wait for a secret police to be set up in this country so that they can join it. Every political party that has a revolutionary programme attracts these types and however good they are at spouting high-minded clap-trap, you soon learn to recognise them.

So what's the issue? What am I saying? Well, I'm trying to take you up in total good faith on this point of unification of the writers of the world trying to speak with one voice, on behalf of humanity and, if necessary, in defiance of the men who have their hands on power. And to my mind this implies a recognition of the fact that life for the writer is and must be a struggle

everywhere but that the nature of the struggle is always different in different places. I believe that a serious writer is always to some extent wrestling with the problems of the society he finds himself living in; but his first task must usually be to define those problems and this calls for subtlety and penetration. The obvious problems, the ones that make the headlines in the newspapers, may not be the ones that lie at the root. In your society power and influence are centralised in a huge, faceless bureaucracy which is incapable of seeing anything except in terms of its own advantage; no patriotism, no service to the State, nor service to humanity, counts for anything in its eyes by comparison with its own aggrandisement. You, yourself, after serving bravely through the War, were arrested in East Prussia by two policemen who had been sent all the way from Moscow to take you back all the way to be locked in a cell. Yes, we know that story: how these two able-bodied men who ought to have been in the army were given a car and petrol to travel all the distance to arrest one brave and patriotic soldier who had written to a brother-officer with some remarks critical of the government; and how, when these two Herberts finally got to Moscow, they were too dim-witted to find their way to the Lubyanka prison and you to tell them which road to take. That's the kind of society you have to stand out against. With us, it's different. If you say things they don't care to hear, they won't knock on your door at 2 a.m. and take you off to the cells. They'll just drown you with things the public in general find more amusing, more in keeping with that endless circus-show that they've been conditioned to want twenty-four hours of the day. We have a more comfortable life than you do but if one's main object is to write well, it isn't really any easier. So be patient with us. As one of our greatest poets put it:

We have lit upon the gentle, sensitive mind
And lost the old nonchalance of the hand;
Whether we have chosen chisel, pan or brush,
We are but critics, or but half create,
Timid, entangled, empty and abashed.

And the way things are going with us, most of us are not likely to rise above this state. But we are with you as you speak your bold heroic simplicities. If we don't echo them in quite the same terms, that's because simplicities don't quite meet our case. Where you resist a tyranny, we wallow in a confusion. Where you are like Beowulf fighting Grendel, we are like Peer Gynt fighting the Boyg. But the fight is on, and we promise you one thing: we won't give up, any more than you will.

ANNOUNCER: That was John Wain. The last of his PERSONAL VIEW talks will be on Saturday evening the 28th October at 8.25.