



# from Nobel Lecture

## Alexander Solzhenitsyn

Translated by F. D. Reeve

**I** am, however, encouraged by a keen sense of WORLD LITERATURE as the one great heart that beats for the cares and misfortunes of our world, even though each corner sees and experiences them in a different way.

In past times, also, besides age-old national literatures there existed a concept of world literature as the link between the summits of national literatures and as the aggregate<sup>1</sup> of reciprocal literary influences. But there was a time lag; readers and writers came to know foreign writers only belatedly, sometimes centuries later, so that mutual influences were delayed and the network of national literary high points was visible not to contemporaries but to later generations.

Today, between writers of one country and the readers and writers of another, there is an almost instantaneous reciprocity as I myself know. My books, unpublished, alas, in my own country, despite hasty and often bad translations have quickly found a responsive world readership. Critical analysis of them has been

undertaken by such leading Western writers as Heinrich Böll.<sup>2</sup> During all these recent years, when both my work and my freedom did not collapse, when against the laws of gravity they held on seemingly in thin air, seemingly ON NOTHING, on the invisible, mute surface tension of sympathetic people, with warm gratitude I learned, to my complete surprise, of the support of the world's writing fraternity. On my fiftieth birthday I was astounded to receive greetings from well-known European writers. No pressure put on me now passed unnoticed. During the dangerous weeks when I was being expelled from the Writers' Union,<sup>3</sup> THE PROTECTIVE WALL put forward by the prominent writers of the world saved me from worse persecution.

2. **Heinrich Böll** (hīn riH böll): German novelist (1917–1985) and winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.

3. **the Writers Union**: Official Soviet writers' organization.

### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**reciprocity** (res' ə präs' ə tē) *n.*: Mutual action; dependence

1. **aggregate** (ag' re git) *adj.*: Group of things gathered together and considered a whole.



and Norwegian writers and artists hospitably prepared shelter for me in the event that I was exiled from my country. Finally, my being nominated for a Nobel Prize was originated not in the land where I live and write but by François Mauriac<sup>4</sup> and his colleagues. Afterward, national writers' organizations expressed unanimous support for me.

As I have understood it and experienced it myself, world literature is no longer an abstraction or a generalized concept

#### ◆ Literary Focus

What point does Solzhenitsyn want readers to support or accept?

invented by literary critics, but a common body and common spirit, a living, heartfelt unity reflecting the growing spiritual unity of mankind. State borders

still turn crimson, heated red-hot by electric fences and machine-gun fire; some ministries of internal affairs still suppose that literature is "an internal affair" of the countries under their jurisdiction; and newspaper headlines still herald, "They have no right to interfere in our internal affairs!" Meanwhile, no such thing as INTERNAL AFFAIRS remains on our crowded Earth. Mankind's salvation lies exclusively in everyone's making everything his business, in the people of the East being anything but indifferent to what is thought in the West, and in the people of the West being anything

4. **François Mauriac** (frān swā' mō ryāk'): French novelist and essayist (1885–1970).

#### ◆ Build Vocabulary

**assimilate** (ə sim' ə lāt') *v.*: To absorb into a greater body

**inexorably** (in eks' ə rə blē) *adv.*: Certainly

**oratory** (ōr' ə tōr' ē) *n.*: Skill in public speaking

▲ **Critical Viewing** These stamps from various countries honor writers. What do they suggest about the importance of writers? [Draw Conclusions]

but indifferent to what happens in the East. Literature, one of the most sensitive and responsive tools of human existence, has been the first to pick up, adopt, and assimilate this sense of the growing unity of mankind. I therefore confidently turn to the world literature of the present, to hundreds of friends whom I have not met face to face and perhaps never will see.

My friends! Let us try to be helpful, if we are worth anything. In our own countries, torn by differences among parties, movements, castes, and groups, who for ages past has been not the dividing but the uniting force? This, essentially, is the position of writers, spokesmen of a national language, of the chief tie binding the nation, the very soil which the people inhabit, and, in fortunate circumstances, the nation's spirit too.

I think that world literature has the power in these frightening times to help mankind see itself accurately despite what is advocated by partisans<sup>5</sup> and by parties. It has the power to transmit the condensed experience of one region to another, so that different scales of values are combined, and so that one people accurately and concisely knows the true history of another with a power of recognition and acute awareness as if it had lived through that history itself—and could thus be spared repeating old mistakes. At the same time, perhaps we ourselves may succeed in developing our own

5. **partisans** (pärt' ə zenz): Unreasoning; emotional supporters of a party or viewpoint.

WORLDWIDE VIEW, like any man, with the center of the eye seeing what is nearby but the periphery<sup>6</sup> of vision taking in what is happening in the rest of the world. We will make correlations<sup>7</sup> and maintain worldwide standards.

Who, if not writers, are to condemn their own unsuccessful governments (in some states this is the easiest way to make a living; everyone who is not too lazy does it) as well as society itself, whether for its cowardly humiliation or for its self-satisfied weakness, or the light-headed escapades of the young, or the youthful pirates brandishing knives?

We will be told: What can literature do against the pitiless onslaught of naked violence? Let us not forget that violence does not and cannot flourish by itself; it is inevitably intertwined with LYING. Between them there is the closest, the most profound and natural bond: nothing screens violence except lies, and the only way lies can hold out is by violence. Whoever has once announced violence as his METHOD must inexorably choose lying as his PRINCIPLE. At birth, violence behaves openly and even proudly. But as soon as it becomes stronger and firmly established, it senses the thinning of the air around it and cannot go on without befogging itself in lies, coating itself with lying's sugary oratory. It does not always

or necessarily go straight for the gullet; usually it demands of its victims only allegiance to the lie, only complicity in the lie.

The simple act of an ordinary courageous man is not to take part, not to support lies! Let *that* come into the world and even reign over it, but not through me. Writers and artists can do more; they can VANQUISH LIES! In the struggle against lies, art has always won and always will. Conspicuously, incontestably for everyone. Lies can stand up against much in the world, but not against art.

Once lies have been dispelled, the repulsive nakedness of violence will be exposed—and hollow violence will collapse.

That, my friends, is why I think we can help the world in its red-hot hour: not by the naysaying of having no armaments, not by abandoning oneself to the carefree life, but by going into battle!

In Russian, proverbs about TRUTH are favorites. They persistently express the considerable, bitter, grim experience of the people, often astonishingly:

ONE WORD OF TRUTH OUTWEIGHS THE WORLD.

On such a seemingly fantastic violation of the law of the conservation of mass and energy<sup>8</sup> are based both my own activities and my appeal to the writers of the whole world.

6. **periphery** (pə rīf ə rē) *n.*: Boundary; perimeter.

7. **correlations** (kōr ə lā' shənz) *n.*: Relationships; connections.

8. **the law of conservation of mass and energy**: This law states that in any physical or chemical change, neither mass nor energy can be lost.

## Guide for Responding

### ◆ Literature and Your Life

**Reader's Response** Tell how a work of literature has helped you to understand the values and traditions of different people.

**Thematic Focus** How can reflecting on other people's experiences help you understand yourself?

#### Check Your Comprehension

1. To what does the "one great heart" refer?
2. What does Solzhenitsyn believe writers and artists can do?

### ◆ Critical Thinking

#### INTERPRET

1. What connection does Solzhenitsyn see between lies and violence? **[Analyze]**
2. What is the meaning of the Russian proverb that Solzhenitsyn quotes? **[Interpret]**

#### APPLY

3. How well do you think Solzhenitsyn supports his statement that "no such thing as INTERNAL AFFAIRS remains on our crowded Earth"? **[Judge]**
4. Explain why you agree or disagree with the statement "Lies can stand up against much in the world, but not against art." **[Assess]**